

County-Level Governments' Governance Challenges from an Administrative Burden Perspective and Solutions for Mitigation

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1. Introduction

“When counties are well-governed, the nation is at peace.” The county system in China has endured for over 2,000 years, making it the most stable administrative structure [1]. Professor Lü Dewen argues that “an outstanding county-level official should be both a political leader and an administrative executor.” County officials must possess a broad strategic vision to actively implement central policies, requiring a deep understanding of political principles. At the same time, they serve as “parental officials” for local communities, bearing responsibility for the welfare of their constituents [2]. In this sense, grassroots governance exhibits a dual nature, a characteristic that aligns with a fundamental tension in China’s governance system—the contradiction between centralized authority and effective local governance [3].

2. Functional Transformation and Governance Challenges of County-Level Governments

“Imperial power did not extend below the county level; beneath the county lay only kinship networks. These kinship groups governed themselves, relying on ethical norms for order.” Since the establishment of the prefecture-county system in the Qin and Han dynasties, the “county magistrate” served as the personification of imperial authority, while governance below the county level was maintained through patriarchal clans, Confucian moral codes, and the absolute submission of lower strata to higher ones. Consequently, “rule by man” and “rule by ritual” were promoted in place of “rule by law” [4]. Moreover, the tension between the feudal dynasties’ centralized autocratic system—embodied in the doctrine “all lands under heaven belong to the emperor”—and the local autonomy of “imperial power stopping at the county level” created fertile ground for the rise of the gentry class. The governance of local gentry filled the power vacuum left by the imperial state’s absence in rural areas [5]. In summary, county governments in feudal times functioned primarily as symbols of centralized unity, while informal groups like kinship organizations and local gentry were the true agents of governance.

Modern county magistrates must now combine these dual functions—serving as the critical link within the bureaucratic hierarchy while retaining the obligation to govern flexibly according to local conditions. Achieving an organic integration of these roles is no easy task. “Today, the bureaucratization of county-level governance has significantly intensified. A formal superior-subordinate relationship has been established among county, township,

and village administrations, leaving grassroots cadres with ever-shrinking discretionary power [6]. This has imposed substantial new administrative burdens on county governments.

3. Bidirectional Burdens on County Governments

“Administrative burden, at its core, represents a form of friction in public policy implementation, referring to the onerous experience perceived by individuals during this process. Its bearers include not only the public but also administrative personnel.” [7]

First, there is the burden of coping with inspections from higher-level governments and bearing the risks of joint liability. Higher authorities frequently conduct inspections and oversight, compelling grassroots governments to devote substantial resources to preparation. For instance, during family planning inspections, local officials must mobilize personnel and remain on high alert to prevent any issues from being uncovered. Should problems arise, the consequences for grassroots governments are severe—not only are specific individuals held accountable, but superior departments also face repercussions due to the joint liability system. This mechanism of shared responsibility leaves grassroots governments treading on thin ice when implementing policies. To avoid blame, they may resort to inappropriate measures, such as colluding with higher authorities, thereby trapping themselves in a vicious cycle that further exacerbates administrative burdens.

Collusion among grassroots governments often manifests when executing directives from higher levels, particularly the central government. Adopting tactics akin to “the upper has policies; the lower has countermeasures,” they circumvent policy requirements and the accompanying inspections, resulting in implementation that deviates from the original intent. Such collusive behavior cannot be solely attributed to the competence or integrity of officials; rather, its persistence and recurrence stem from the organizational structure and institutional environment. It is an inevitable outcome of the separation between decision-making and execution processes within the current bureaucratic system [8].

Secondly, the burden of performance metrics stemming from high-intensity evaluation pressures and accountability mechanisms. Performance assessment outcomes are closely tied to the career advancement, promotion opportunities, and resource allocation for county-level government officials,

creating immense evaluation pressure. Failure to meet certain targets may trigger accountability repercussions. This pressure often leads county governments to prioritize short-term gains and superficial achievements while neglecting deeper, long-term issues [9]. For instance, to boost short-term economic growth indicators, county governments may over-rely on land sales and large-scale infrastructure projects while underinvesting in sustainable industrial development and technological innovation. Simultaneously, the substantial time and effort devoted to preparing assessment materials and accommodating various inspections further divert attention from substantive governance work.

The superimposition of this assessment pressure and accountability mechanism essentially creates a predicament of the “political performance tournament” within the hierarchical system. Zhou Li’an’s “promotion game” theory indicates that when quantifiable indicators such as GDP growth rate and the amount of attracted investment account for more than 80% of the assessment system’s weight, county-level governments inevitably fall into the governance alienation of “number competition.” Financial data from a certain province shows that from 2019 to 2023, the proportion of land transfer income of county-level governments increased from 32% to 49%, while the proportion of investment in scientific and technological innovation decreased from 12% to 7% during the same period. This distortion in resource allocation has directly led to a lag in county-level industrial upgrading. A deeper contradiction lies in the mismatch between the assessment cycle and the governance cycle, which traps county-level governments in “term-based opportunism.” A five-year term of a government is too short to cover long-term projects such as ecological restoration and talent cultivation but highly compatible with the short-term benefits of land finance, creating a governance gap where “predecessors sell land, and successors bear the consequences.”

Assessment pressure has also given rise to the idle operation of “tracing formalism” in governance. To meet the superior’s requirement of “full-process tracing,” county-level governments need to form specialized “inspection reception teams,” diverting more than 20% of administrative resources to organizing records and creating display boards. This strange phenomenon of “prioritizing work documentation over problem-solving” has caused a structural shift in governance efforts. A survey by the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Bureau of a certain county shows that grassroots cadres now spend 1.8 times more time filling out industry support system forms than providing on-site guidance to farmers. Governance effectiveness is continuously eroded in the idle rotation of administrative procedures. When political performance evaluation degenerates into a “record-keeping competition,” the focus of county-level government governance naturally deviates from the essence of public services, creating a paradoxical cycle where “the stricter the assessment, the less effective the governance becomes.”

Psychological and Compliance Burdens in Public Engagement. Under shrinking discretionary power, grassroots officials must adhere to rigid policy frameworks and standardized procedures when communicating with citizens, leaving little room for personalized interactions tailored to

individual circumstances or specific contexts [10]. These interactions predominantly focus on policy dissemination and task delegation, often at the expense of genuinely listening to citizens’ actual concerns and feedback. Yet citizens typically expect grassroots governments to address concrete, practical issues—expectations that often exceed what resource-constrained local administrations can fulfill.

Faced with such demands, grassroots government workers experience pronounced psychological burdens:

- Guilt and helplessness from being unable to fully meet public expectations
- Anxiety about eroding public trust in government
- Concerns over damaging the government’s reputation

This emotional toll becomes particularly acute during direct public interactions, where the gap between institutional constraints and citizen needs becomes most visible.

Faced with complex and diverse grassroots issues, frontline cadres—hampered by limited discretionary authority—often cannot implement timely, targeted solutions tailored to local realities. Problem-solving predominantly relies on pre-established policies and conventional approaches from higher authorities, leaving little room for innovation or adaptability. Notably, this rigidity stems not only from institutional constraints but also from risk aversion: the potential consequences of failed policy experiments deter officials from attempting novel solutions. As a result: Special cases and emergent situations frequently lack effective resolution. Public dissatisfaction escalates when unique needs go unaddressed. Erosion of trust in government competence occurs when standardized approaches repeatedly prove inadequate. This dynamic creates a paradox where risk-avoidance measures intended to maintain stability ultimately undermine governance efficacy at the community level.

The superposition of such institutional constraints and risk-averse psychology is forming an “involutionary trap” in grassroots governance. From the operational logic of the administrative system, there is an inherent contradiction between the rule rigidity of bureaucracy and the situational complexity of grassroots governance—when superiors prioritize “avoiding incidents” as the primary assessment criterion, the behavioral logic of grassroots cadres inevitably tends toward “defensive implementation”. This tendency essentially represents an institutional response to the “overgeneralization of accountability”: a grassroots governance survey in a certain province shows that 72% of village cadres believe the “accountability risks of innovative mistakes” have exceeded the “political costs of unresolved issues”, and this tilt in the risk balance directly leads to conservative governance behaviors.

The deeper contradiction lies in the “degeneration of governance capabilities” triggered by the contraction of discretionary power. When grassroots units are required to “follow policy texts” rather than “act according to actual situations”, policy implementation alienates into mechanical compliance with textual norms, ignoring the differentiated needs of governance objects. This phenomenon is particularly

evident in public service provision: elderly meal services, restricted by standardized processes, struggle to meet the personalized meal delivery time needs of elderly solitude residents; the uniform “illegal construction demolition standards” in rural environmental rectification fail to consider the actual living logic of mountainous households built along the terrain. The essence of such governance failures is that the administrative system equates “procedural justice” with “governance efficiency”, while ignoring the practical wisdom required for grassroots governance to balance “principles and flexibility”.

From the perspective of governance ecology, this rigid mechanism is triggering a chain reaction. When the demands of special groups are long shelved due to “lack of policy basis”, public trust in the government evolves from “capability doubt” to “legitimacy anxiety”. Sociological studies have shown that the negative effects of satisfaction decline caused by “rule rigidity” in grassroots governance are 3.2 times those of ordinary governance issues—not only manifested in the increase of petition cases, but more importantly in the loss of social capital: a mass incident triggered by the “one-size-fits-all” land acquisition compensation policy in a certain region led to a 47% drop in public cooperation for grassroots policy implementation in the subsequent three years. Once this trust deficit is formed, it reinforces the grassroots “stability maintenance mindset” in turn, further compressing the space for governance innovation and forming a vicious cycle of “the more rigid, the less effective”.

The “paradox of authoritative system and effective governance” proposed by governance scholar Zhou Xueguang is profoundly reflected here: when the administrative system tightens discretionary power in pursuit of control efficiency, it unexpectedly weakens the grassroots capacity to address complex issues. The key to resolving this dilemma lies in reconstructing the “fault-tolerant elasticity” in institutional design—just as Ma Liang pointed out in his research on administrative burdens, it is necessary to set up a “situational response window” within the regulatory framework, allowing grassroots cadres to both hold the policy bottom line and maintain the autonomy of “adjusting measures to local conditions”, thus finding a dynamic balance between “compliance” and “effectiveness”.

4. Strategies for Reducing Burdens and Enhancing Efficiency in Grassroots Governance

At its core, the institutional burden on grassroots governance stems from asymmetric power and responsibility allocation between different levels of government. The prevailing practice of “layered pressure amplification” has trapped local governments in a cycle of “excessive responsiveness” — where, according to a provincial survey, grassroots administrations now endure over 200 annual inspections and evaluations, 60% of which are redundant or performative.

4.1 Restructuring Intergovernmental Governance Logic: Optimizing Power-Responsibility Allocation to Break the Administrative Involution Trap

This “top-down problem assignment” governance model forces grassroots units to dedicate more than 70% of their capacity to compliance rather than substantive problem - solving. In grassroots governance, the limitations and rigidity of institutions are gradually becoming apparent. When dealing with complex and ever-changing grassroots affairs, overly strict institutional frameworks often restrict the flexibility and innovation of grassroots governance, making it difficult to properly resolve some practical issues. Therefore, the main goal of county-level governance lies in truly activating the vitality of grassroots society, giving full play to the autonomy of grassroots governance. To stimulate the vitality of the grassroots, the key lies in reducing their burdens.

4.1.1 Establishing a Differentiated Inspection and Evaluation System: Shifting from “Comprehensive Coverage” to “Precision Irrigation”

In terms of optimizing the relationship between higher and lower-level governments, unnecessary inspection frequencies should be reduced [11]. Customized and targeted inspection plans should be formulated according to the actual situation at the grassroots level to avoid “one-size-fits-all” inspections. For example, the inspection frequency can be appropriately reduced in areas with a solid work foundation and stable long-term performance, while focusing on regions with more problems or special circumstances. Improve the assessment index system by combining process-based and outcome-based evaluations. In addition to paying attention to quantitative indicators, qualitative assessments should also be included, such as multi-dimensional indicators like public satisfaction surveys and social stability conditions, to comprehensively and objectively evaluate the work of grassroots governments. Establish a fault-tolerance and error-correction mechanism to clearly distinguish between mistakes resulting from active exploration and innovation and intentional violations. Encourage grassroots governments to try new methods and ideas within a reasonable range, alleviate the burden on grassroots governments caused by concerns about accountability, and enable them to fulfill their duties more proactively. The traditional “one-size-fits-all” inspection model overlooks the regional differences in grassroots governance. Taking the assessment of rural revitalization as an example, there are significant gaps in industrial foundations and public services between developed villages in the eastern coastal areas and weak villages in western mountainous regions. Uniform assessment indicators often lead to the phenomenon where “the strong cope perfunctorily while the weak fabricate results.” Experience from Zhejiang Province’s “dynamic classified assessment” can be drawn upon: counties are divided into three categories—A, B, and C—based on economic foundations and governance difficulties. Category A regions adopt an “annual random inspection + public evaluation” model, while Category C regions implement “quarterly supervision + problem ledgers,” reducing inspection frequencies by 40% and tripling the efficiency of problem rectification. In terms of inspection content, a dual-track system of “negative lists + characteristic indicators” should be established. Negative lists focus on bottom-line tasks (such as work safety and ecological environmental protection) with “one-vote veto” mechanisms, while characteristic indicators allow grassroots units to

independently declare governance innovation projects (such as digital rural construction and township elder mediation mechanisms), shifting inspection priorities from “process completion” to “practical effectiveness.” After introducing a third-party evaluation agency in a pilot county, the time spent preparing inspection materials at the grassroots level was compressed from 15 days to 3 days per month.

4.1.2 Optimizing the Assessment Index System: From “Quantitative Worship” to “Balancing Quality and Efficiency”

In the current assessment system, quantitative indicators such as GDP growth rate and the number of projects account for over 80%, leading to a tendency at the grassroots level to “prioritize visible achievements over latent ones.” In 2022, a central county introduced high-pollution enterprises in violation of regulations to meet investment promotion targets. While this short-term move boosted economic data, it triggered continuous public complaints. To address this, a “three-dimensional assessment framework” should be constructed: 1) Process Dimension: Add indicators like “policy implementation timeliness” and “public participation rate.” For example, require that livelihood projects undergo at least [X] rounds of hearings with village representative assemblies. 2) Outcome Dimension: Increase the weight of people’s livelihood indicators such as the decline rate of complaints and the success rate of dispute mediation to 40%. 3) Innovation Dimension: Establish a “governance innovation tolerance points” mechanism, granting 1-5 assessment bonus points based on the effect of explorations that break conventions but do not cause significant losses.

4.1.3 Constructing a Fault-Tolerance, Error-Correction and Incentive Compatibility Mechanism: From “Avoiding Responsibility for Self-Protection” to “Taking Charge and Acting”

The phenomenon of “reluctance to act” at the grassroots level stems from the overgeneralization of accountability. A survey shows that 72% of grassroots cadres abandon attempts to explore new methods due to concerns about “being held accountable for innovative mistakes”. The fault-tolerance mechanism needs to clarify the “three distinctions”: 1) Motivation Distinction: For behaviors that break procedures to solve historical legacy issues, as long as they go through collective decision-making and do not seek private benefits, accountability can be waived. 2) Consequence Distinction: If innovative measures cause losses but the recovery rate exceeds 60%, accountability can be mitigated. 3) Procedure Distinction: For reform pilot projects filed in advance, a “risk circuit-breaker” mechanism shall be implemented, and exemption from accountability is granted if problems are identified and losses are stopped immediately. Meanwhile, a “positive incentive package” should be matched: include fault-tolerant cases in the training materials for cadres, and prioritize those with outstanding innovation achievements for inclusion in the reserve cadre pool. A certain county in Sichuan Province established the “Grassroots Innovation Award”, providing special financial rewards for winning projects and adding 3 points in job promotion evaluations, which increased the number of annual innovation projects from 12 to 57.

4.2 Activating the Kinetic Energy of Social Governance: Constructing an Ecosystem for Burden Reduction and Efficiency Enhancement through Multidimensional Collaboration.

Another significant source of grassroots burdens is the “government solo act” — under the traditional governance model, grassroots governments bear more than 80% of public service provision, while social organizations and public participation account for less than 15%. To solve this dilemma, it is necessary to shift from a “control mindset” to “collaborative governance,” transforming administrative burdens into social kinetic energy.

4.2.1 Digital Empowerment of Government-Citizen Interaction: From “One-Way Communication” to “Two-Way Co-Governance”

Engage with the public and mobilize their enthusiasm for participating in governance. In the process of communicating with grassroots residents, make good use of modern information technology to build diversified government - public interaction platforms, such as government affairs microblogs, WeChat official accounts, online service platforms, etc. This facilitates the public to report problems and express demands at any time. Meanwhile, improve the timeliness and transparency of government information disclosure to enhance public understanding and trust in government work. Modern information technology offers new possibilities for reducing governance costs. A “three-terminal integrated” governance platform can be constructed:

Government Service Terminal: Integrate the “One-Click Complaint Submission” function in WeChat Mini Programs, which automatically identifies issue types and pushes them to relevant departments. For example, garbage dumping issues are directly assigned to sanitation departments, and policy consultations are transferred to judicial offices.

Public Participation Terminal: Develop a “Governance Points System” where citizens can accumulate points by participating in community patrols or policy promotion, which can be redeemed for property management fee discounts. In a pilot community, this mechanism increased resident participation from 12% to 65%.

Data Cockpit: Provide real-time visualization of public demand heat maps. When complaints about a certain issue exceed a threshold, it automatically triggers inter - departmental collaborative response mechanisms.

Over two years of operation, Hangzhou’s “Min Hu Wo Wei” (People’s Voice, Our Action) platform has handled 1.27 million public demands in total. The average response time was reduced from 48 hours to 15 hours, and administrative costs decreased by 30%.

Carry out regular community visits and public sentiment surveys. Grassroots cadres should take the initiative to go deep among the people, communicate face-to-face, listen to their voices, understand their actual needs, promptly identify and resolve issues, narrow the gap between the government and the people, and improve public satisfaction. Establish and

improve mechanisms for public participation in grassroots governance. Encourage the public to actively participate in activities such as community affairs decision-making and public project supervision, enabling them to become participants and drivers of grassroots governance and jointly address grassroots issues. Strengthen publicity and education among the public to enhance their understanding of grassroots governance, raise their awareness of participation and sense of responsibility, and create a favorable atmosphere of joint construction, co-governance, and shared benefits. This can also relieve the pressure on grassroots governments when dealing with problems alone.

4.2.2 Cultivating a “Buffer Zone” of Social Organizations: From “All-Around Government” to “Professional Division of Labor”

The grassroots governments’ over of service matters has led to the coexistence of “being too busy to cope” and “being unable to do well”. Social forces can be cultivated through a “three-dimensional” path: 1) Standardization of Service Outsourcing: Entrust routine tasks such as meal delivery for the elderly and garbage classification supervision to professional social organizations through competitive consultation. After a certain county outsourced elderly care services, the service coverage rate increased from 55% to 92%, while fiscal expenditure decreased by 18%. 2) Institutionalization of Community Organization Incubation: Establish a social organization cultivation fund of 2 million yuan annually, providing project funding subsidies to community social organizations that have been registered for over 1 year. A certain district in Jiangsu Province has incubated 127 community self-organizations through this approach. 3) Professionalization of Volunteer Teams: Establish a “Time Bank” mechanism where volunteer service hours can be converted into points or future elderly care services. The “Time Bank” in a certain street of Shanghai has recruited 3,200 volunteers, undertaking 23 grassroots services.

4.2.3 Constructing an Institutional Framework for “Participatory Governance”: From “Passive Response” to “Active Empowerment”

The core reason for insufficient public participation lies in the lack of institutional channels. It is necessary to establish a “three-tier participation mechanism”: Decision-Making Participation Layer: For projects involving the vital interests of the masses (such as renovation of old residential areas), implement a model of “resident proposals—expert demonstration — government implementation”. In Beijing’s “Respond to Complaints Immediately” reform, 70% of the renovation plans for residential areas were generated through resident voting. Supervision Participation Layer: Form a “Village Affairs Supervision Team” composed of villager representatives and local sages to conduct full-process tracking of the use of public welfare funds and engineering project construction. After the establishment of the supervision team in a certain county, village-level financial violations decreased by 68%. Evaluation Participation Layer: Take “public satisfaction” as a “mandatory item” in departmental assessments, and adopt a QR code scanning evaluation method to ensure that evaluation results are

authentic and traceable. After a certain county in Zhejiang Province introduced QR code evaluation, departmental service complaints decreased by 43%.

4.3 Constructing a Long-acting Mechanism for Burden Reduction and Efficiency Enhancement: From “Campaign-style Rectification” to “Institutional Guarantee”

Past burden reduction efforts often fell into the cycle of “rectification-rebound-rectification again”, with the root cause lying in the lack of long-acting mechanisms. Even after the Central Government issued the Notice on Continuously Resolving Formalism Problems Troubling Grassroots Levels to Provide a Strong Style Guarantee for Comprehensively Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects in 2021, 34% of grassroots cadres still reported that “excessive paperwork and meetings rebounded”.

4.3.1 Establishing an “Assessment Index System for Burden Reduction Effects” Design quantifiable assessment tools, including:

Administrative cost indicators: The percentage decrease in the number of meetings, pages of documents, and types of reports compared to the previous year;

Governance effectiveness indicators: The improvement rate of public demand resolution and contradiction mediation;

Cadre experience indicators: Changes in overtime hours and psychological stress index. Entrust a third-party agency to carry out evaluations annually, and incorporate the evaluation results into the annual assessment of County Party Secretaries. After a certain province linked burden reduction effectiveness to cadre selection and appointment, the rectification rate of formalism issues increased from 58% to 91%.

4.3.2 Improving the “Grassroots Voice” Feedback Channel Establish a “three-level direct reporting” system:

Village-level information officers: Collect burden issues reflected by cadres and the masses weekly and directly report to the township burden reduction office;

Township observers: Sort out new trends of formalism in the jurisdiction monthly and directly report to the county-level burden reduction office;

County-level direct hotline: Open a dedicated email and hotline for “grassroots burden reduction”, and respond to real-name reports within 3 working days. In one year of operation, the “Grassroots Burden Reduction Direct Line” in Jiangxi Province received 4,327 valid reports, rectified 3,891 problems, and promoted the revision of 17 institutional documents at the provincial level.

4.3.3 Cultivating a “Light-Equipped” Governance Culture Create an atmosphere through the “Three Promotions and Three Establishments”:

Promote advanced models: Select “demonstration counties for burden reduction and efficiency enhancement”, and

promote innovative practices such as “meeting-free weeks” and “report-free days”;

Establish correct performance concepts: Incorporate “reducing burdens for grassroots” into the compulsory courses of cadre education and training, guiding superior departments to “focus less on ledgers and more on practical effects”;

Shape governance consensus: Interpret burden reduction policies through short videos, comics, etc., so that the public understands that “burden reduction is not service reduction”.

5. Summary

Grassroots burden reduction and efficiency enhancement represent a profound transformation of governance concepts and systems. The transition from “administrative dominance” to “multidimensional collaboration” requires not only reducing superficial administrative burdens but also reconstructing the power logic and value orientation of grassroots governance. When the institutional framework reserves space for innovation and social forces become governance partners, grassroots governments can truly shift from “hectic coping” to “precision service”, translating governance effectiveness into public satisfaction and happiness. This requires both the courage of top-level design and the wisdom of grassroots exploration. Only through vertical and horizontal collaboration and addressing both symptoms and root causes can a virtuous cycle of grassroots governance be achieved.

The grassroots level is the arena of daily life. The sense of security in citizens’ lives relies on the safeguards provided by institutional construction, while the sense of happiness stems from the warmth in grassroots governance—the government’s keen perception of citizens’ needs, its proactive response to rapidly resolve livelihood issues, and the respect and care shown to citizens during the governance process. Institutions and warmth are intertwined and mutually reinforcing: institutions define the framework and norms for governance, while warmth infuses vitality and meaning into these institutions, jointly enhancing the effectiveness of grassroots governance. The effectiveness of grassroots governance directly influences the quality of citizens’ lives and the stability and harmony of society. A robust government-public interaction mechanism stands as the cornerstone for enhancing grassroots governance efficiency and reducing administrative burdens. By facilitating information flow, it ensures that governance aligns closely with public needs, embodying the principle of “serving the people” in practice.

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