

Why ‘Connected but Immobile’: The Generative Mechanism of Multi-stakeholder Interaction Dilemmas in Grassroots Community Governance—A Qualitative Study Based on Grounded Theory

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Abstract: *Within the policy framework of the ‘co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits’ social governance landscape, this study focuses on the core issue of multi-stakeholder collaborative governance in grassroots communities. Employing grounded theory and based on in-depth interviews with relevant personnel—including staff from four community sub-district offices, community Party organisations, property management enterprises, and residents in City X—as well as a systematic analysis of relevant policy documents, this research constructs a model of the influencing factors and mechanisms of the ‘connected but immobile’ dilemma through three-level coding. The findings reveal that the ‘connected but immobile’ dilemma arises from the coupling effect of four core categories of factors: ‘subject deficiency’, ‘psychological bias’, ‘communication barriers’, and ‘inadequate safeguards’, forming a self-reinforcing closed-loop logic. From the perspective of collective action and social capital theory, this study dissects the generative mechanism of multi-stakeholder interaction dilemmas in grassroots community governance, deepening the understanding of the internal logic of collaborative failure. Accordingly, it proposes optimisation pathways from four dimensions—enhancing communication effectiveness, improving institutional safeguards, cultivating qualified subjects, and guiding positive psychology—thereby offering practical references for advancing the modernisation of the grassroots governance system and governance capacity.*

Keywords: Grassroots community governance, Multi-stakeholder, Interaction dilemma, Social capital, Grounded theory.

1. Main Text

With the transformation of the social structure, community governance has become increasingly diverse and complex, and the effectiveness of the traditional single-actor model of government governance has been steadily declining. Following the dissolution of the danwei (work unit) system, community residents have fallen into a state of atomisation, and administrative omnibus governance has given rise to collective action dilemmas such as a mismatch between the supply and demand of public services and low levels of resident participation. The Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China explicitly proposed the construction of a social governance pattern featuring co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits, making multi-stakeholder collaborative interaction an inevitable trend in the modernisation of grassroots governance. At present, problems such as ‘connected but immobile’ and collaborative inertia are widespread in multi-stakeholder community governance. Existing research mostly analyses various influencing factors in isolation and has yet to clarify the internal generative logic of the dynamic coupling and cyclical evolution of these elements. This paper adopts the procedural grounded theory approach to construct an integrated theoretical model, systematically analysing the internal mechanisms of multi-stakeholder interaction dilemmas in grassroots communities.

2. Literature Review and Problem Formulation

Collaborative governance theory holds that effective multi-stakeholder collaboration is central to solving complex public governance problems. International research focuses

on the construction of theoretical systems. Olmedo L and O’Shaughnessy M (2022) pointed out that academic disagreement over the core concept of community has led to research fragmentation, constraining the implementation of governance practices. Mahardika S et al. (2022) confirmed through empirical research that the misalignment between government policy orientation and residents’ livelihood demands creates information barriers, significantly reducing the efficiency of governance collaboration.

Domestic research is grounded in local grassroots contexts and focuses on the pain points of micro-level governance operations. Wang Keyuan (2022), drawing on the ‘subject–process–institution–culture’ analytical framework, explained the mechanisms of participation conflict arising from the misalignment between the interests of mass organisations and the overall development of the community. Lu Wengang and Tan Zhe (2024) found that the formalisation of Party-building leadership and the ambiguity of subject rights and responsibilities are key triggers of collaborative governance failure. In terms of practical countermeasures, domestic scholars have proposed optimisation pathways for building resilient communities from dimensions such as institutional empowerment, establishing Party-building collaborative networks, improving information platforms, and embedding emotional governance.

Existing research has interpreted the interactive dilemmas of community governance from the dimensions of interests, rights and responsibilities, institutions, and emotions. However, various factors are generally treated as independent variables, lacking in-depth exploration of the dynamic interweaving and co-evolutionary logic of multiple elements. This paper focuses on the core question: within urban grassroots community governance, what internal relationships

and dynamic action logics exist among the various influencing factors of the multi-stakeholder ‘connected but immobile’ phenomenon? This paper constructs an integrated theoretical model based on grounded theory to address the above research question.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Method

This paper adopts the procedural grounded theory proposed by Strauss and Corbin. This method follows a bottom-up inductive research logic, extracting core concepts and constructing new theories from original empirical data. The core process includes data collation, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and theoretical saturation testing, making it suitable for research scenarios involving processual and complex issues in grassroots governance.

3.2 Case Selection

Following the theoretical sampling principles of grounded theory, this paper selects four typical communities in City X as research cases, corresponding to four core governance issues: the rectification of fly-wire charging, property management conflicts, the provision of public services, and the renovation of old residential communities. These cases cover diverse governance scenarios, ensuring the typicality and representativeness of the cases.

3.3 Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews for investigation. A total of 24 interviewees were sampled, including 4 grassroots government staff, 6 community workers, 4 property management practitioners, and 10 resident representatives. Concurrently, 6 local governance policy documents were collected. Ten pieces of data were randomly selected for theoretical saturation testing, and the remaining 25 pieces of data served as the core coding analysis material.

Table 1: Main Questions of the Interview Guide

Subject	Main Interview Questions
Residents	1. Are you satisfied with the multi-stakeholder interaction in the overall community governance? Why? 2. Have you been aware of any disagreements in the multi-stakeholder interaction within community governance? How were these resolved among residents?
Community	1. What are the main responsibilities of the community in promoting multi-stakeholder interaction? What specific work has been done? 2. When conflicts arise among residents regarding matters related to multi-stakeholder interaction, how does the community resolve them?
Government	1. What are the main responsibilities of the sub-district office in the work of multi-stakeholder interaction? What specific work has been done? 2. Have there been any obstacles encountered in the process of multi-stakeholder interaction? How were they resolved?
Market	1. What are the main responsibilities in the process of multi-stakeholder interaction? What specific work has been done? 2. Have you encountered any conflicts in the process of participating in multi-stakeholder interaction? How were they resolved?

4. Research Process

4.1 Open Coding

In this study, all interview transcripts and policy documents were imported into Nvivo 12 Plus software for line-by-line coding analysis. Ultimately, 33 independent initial concepts were extracted and categorised into core initial categories such as the diversification of demands and insufficient market participation.

Table 2: Open Coding Table

Initial Category	Initial Concept	Original Data Excerpt (Partial)
Diversification of demands	Divergence of subject demands	1. When selecting materials for the renovation of old residential communities, some residents wanted cheaper options while others insisted on better-quality materials. In Chongqing, neighbours held different opinions and argued fiercely.
	Different cognitive perspectives	2. When the community rectified fly-wire charging, some vehicle owners felt it affected their convenience in charging, while elderly residents were concerned about safety. The two sides had completely different views.
	Diverse interest demands	3. The property management wanted to adjust public service charges; business tenants thought the fees were too high and not cost-effective, while ordinary residents felt the services had not kept pace. Each side had its own argument.
Insufficient market participation	Low willingness for market participation	1. An old residential community in Chongqing wanted to introduce a professional company to carry out fly-wire charging renovation, but few enterprises were willing to come, believing it was not profitable.
	Poor match of service supply	2. The community property management wanted to add new convenience services and approached several market entities, but all felt that community needs were too varied and that it was not cost-effective to undertake.
	Lack of commercial motivation	3. For the ancillary services involved in the renovation of old residential communities, most market resources were not interested, believing that the preferences in this community sector were too scattered and difficult to align.

4.2 Axial Coding

This study examined the internal logical relationships among the initial categories, integrating and summarising them into 12 main categories. These were further refined into four core categories and classified according to internal and external attributes: internal factors include subject deficiency and psychological motivation; external factors include communication influence and safeguard mechanisms.

Table 3: Main Categories Formed through Axial Coding

Main Category	Core Category	Nature
Unclear subject needs	Subject deficiency	Internal factor
Unequal subject capacity	Subject deficiency	
Unequal subject status	Subject deficiency	
Trust constraints	Psychological motivation	
Differences in plan preference	Psychological motivation	
Profit-seeking mindset	Psychological motivation	External factor
Deficiencies in communication platforms	Communication influence	
Obstruction of consultation	Communication influence	
Poor feedback	Communication influence	
Deficiencies in relevant institutions	Safeguard mechanisms	

Main Category	Core Category	Nature
Lack of required funding	Safeguard mechanisms	
Difficulties in operational management	Safeguard mechanisms	External factor

4.3 Selective Coding

The ‘storyline’ distilled through selective coding is as follows: In grassroots community governance, subject deficiency constitutes the structural foundation of the interaction dilemma, directly triggering psychological bias among subjects. Psychological problems such as lack of trust and profit-seeking mindsets obstruct communication channels, making it difficult for multiple stakeholders to reach a consensus through consultation. Communication failure, compounded by inadequate safeguards in institutions, funding, and operations, creates external governance shortcomings. The failure of external mechanisms in turn exacerbates subject imbalance and psychological estrangement, forming a closed-loop vicious cycle. This ultimately solidifies the state of collaborative failure characterised by ‘connected but immobile’, leading to the shelving of public affairs, the intensification of social conflicts, and low governance efficiency.

4.4 Theoretical Saturation Testing

The study employed the reserved 10 pieces of uncoded data for repeated coding tests. The results showed that no new categories emerged, and the logical relationships among the original categories remained unchanged, confirming that the theoretical model constructed in this study meets the criteria for theoretical saturation.

4.5 Explanation of the Generative Mechanism Model of the Multi-stakeholder Interaction Dilemma

The ‘connected but immobile’ coupling mechanism model constructed in this study comprises internal subject factors and external environmental factors. The detailed explanation is as follows:

4.5.1 External Factors: Communication Barriers and Inadequate Safeguards

1) Deficiencies in Communication Mechanisms

Regular communication platforms, substantive consultation processes, and closed-loop feedback channels are the foundation of multi-stakeholder collaborative governance. The three types of communication shortcomings directly undermine subject trust and reduce willingness to participate.

First, the absence of communication platforms creates a trust deficit. For example, during the fly-wire charging rectification in Community A, residents repeatedly applied for the installation of additional charging points but received no response. The persuasion efforts of the community and property management remained superficial, and the prolonged shelving of demands led to antagonistic sentiments among residents.

Second, the formalisation of consultation weakens the motivation for participation. After the charging points were

built in Community A, the electricity price was relatively high. Because residents’ opinions had not been adequately solicited in advance, the utilisation rate among residents was low. Residents withdrew from community consultation, and the level of participation in governance continued to decline.

Third, poor feedback channels exacerbate interaction imbalance. The cumbersome process for submitting resident demands and the buck-passing among departments meant that problems remained unresolved for long periods. Residents gradually lost their willingness to provide feedback, and governance conflicts continued to accumulate.

2) Inadequate Governance Safeguard Mechanisms

The absence of safeguards across three dimensions — institutions, funding, and operational management—is a significant cause of instability in the multi-stakeholder collaboration system.

First, the rights and responsibilities system and regulations are imperfect. In Community B, the property management privately outsourced basic services. The lack of third-party operation and maintenance led to the deterioration of the community environment. Residents were unable to pursue accountability due to the high cost of rights protection, whereas the property management could recover property fees through judicial channels. The antagonism between subjects continued to intensify.

Second, there is insufficient funding for operation and maintenance. In Community B, elevator faults remained unaddressed for a long time. Residents refused to pay property fees due to the absence of property services, while the property management’s income shrank, leaving it unable to afford operation and maintenance. Service quality continued to decline, forming a vicious cycle.

Third, there is a lack of long-term operational mechanisms. Old residential communities lack a standardised property management system. Charges and service standards are not transparent, and the owners’ committee lacks coordination capacity. High-quality property management companies are reluctant to enter, making it difficult to reconcile the interests of market entities and residents.

4.5.2 Internal Factors: Subject Deficiency and Psychological Bias

1) Structural Subject Deficiencies

The triple imbalance among the four types of subjects — government, community, property management, and residents — in terms of cognition, capacity, and status is the internal root cause of collaborative governance failure.

First, subject needs are cognitively unclear. After the withdrawal of the basic-needs property management in Community D, residents’ demands became fragmented. Some residents hoped the government would take over operation and maintenance, while others advocated for the market-based selection of property management. The community failed to integrate residents’ opinions in a timely

manner, leading to the prolonged shelving of public facility shutdown issues.

Second, subject governance capacity is unequal. Grassroots governments and communities possess professional resources and policy advantages, whereas residents lack professional governance knowledge. During consultations, residents struggle to put forward effective opinions and have weak discursive power, making it difficult to establish an equal interaction pattern.

Third, the status of subject interaction is unbalanced. Grassroots governance exhibits a unidirectional administrative-led model. Residents generally hold a 'wait-and-depend' mentality, believing that their individual opinions are ineffective, and consequently voluntarily abandon participation in deliberation. Multi-stakeholder co-governance is difficult to implement.

2) Subject Psychological Bias

Three types of psychological factors—profit-seeking mindset, differences in plan preference, and trust limitations — continually amplify subject conflicts and hinder the achievement of consensus.

First, a profit-seeking mindset intensifies interest conflicts. During the planning of a public leisure square in Community S, nearby residents, concerned about noise disturbance and pursuing their own personal interests, persistently obstructed the project's implementation, bringing the community-benefit project to a standstill.

Second, differences in plan preference trigger resistance psychology. In the parking space renovation of an old residential community, residents without cars believed the plan favoured car-owning residents, refused to participate in consultations, and resisted governance work.

Third, trust limitations foster estrangement between subjects. Trust is the core capital of collaborative governance. Information opacity and inadequate service provision easily breed suspicion. During the installation of elevators in residential buildings, residents on lower and upper floors engaged in mutual gaming. Substandard property management services triggered residents' doubts. The breakdown of trust between subjects completely eliminated the basis for collaboration.

5. Conclusions and Implications

5.1 Research Findings

The 'connected but immobile' dilemma is the result of the coupling effect of four categories of factors: subject deficiency, psychological bias, communication barriers, and inadequate safeguards. Each factor reinforces the others and is nested in a cyclical manner, forming a closed generative loop that is difficult to break on its own. Communication barriers and inadequate safeguards constitute external preconditions that continuously exacerbate structural subject deficiencies and psychological estrangement. Conversely, internal subject shortcomings weaken the effectiveness of external

governance mechanisms. This bidirectional negative cycle solidifies the state of collaborative governance failure.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

First, building on Olson's theory of collective action dilemmas, this study transcends the limitations of static analysis and constructs a dynamic evolutionary logic chain of 'subject deficiency—psychological bias—communication barriers — inadequate safeguards'.

Second, drawing on Putnam's social capital theory, this study integrates the lack of trust and normative deficiency into the dimensions of psychological bias and communication barriers, thereby enriching the application of social capital theory in the field of urban community governance.

5.3 Practical Value

First, clarify the boundaries of rights and responsibilities of multiple stakeholders through the rule of law, and refine the procedures for dispute resolution; construct a diversified funding system comprising 'government subsidies + property fees + social capital', and establish professional operation teams to address the shortcomings in institutional safeguards.

Second, leverage smart Party-building governance to build digital communication platforms, improve regular consultation and deliberation mechanisms, and establish a closed-loop for two-way feedback on residents' opinions, thereby ensuring residents' institutionalised channels of participation.

5.4 Research Limitations and Future Prospects

This study only selected four communities in City X for investigation. The cross-regional and multi-type community applicability of the research findings requires further validation. The qualitative research nature of grounded theory results in limited external validity of the model, and the causal relationships between elements lack quantitative support. Future research could conduct cross-regional comparative studies to test the universality of the closed-loop dilemma generation mechanism.

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