



Integrating Devolution with Centralization: A Comparison of Poverty Alleviation Programs in India, Mexico, and China

Cai (Vera) Zuo¹

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Abstract

The theoretical connection between decentralization and the representation-cum-efficiency advantage in combating poverty has been questioned by empirical evidence. How decentralization shall be integrated with the intervention from higher-level governments in anti-poverty efforts remains unclear. Drawing on the comparison of India (West Bengal), Mexico, and China, this analysis examines the institutional designs of the poverty alleviation programs across the cases, including the selection of recipients, allocation of fiscal resources, and monitoring, and the political dynamics that generate the designs. Despite differences in the level of poverty and political backgrounds preceding the programs, the key contributors to their success in reducing poverty lie in some common factors, including the strong commitment of the ruling authority to poverty reduction, decentralization in beneficiary identification, and centralized arrangements that reduce elite capture and the power of local brokers. These findings advance our understanding of the endogenous political nature of anti-poverty efforts and the importance of integrating devolution with centralized arrangements in the war against poverty.

Keywords Poverty Alleviation · Decentralization · Panchayats · *Progres-Oportunidades* · Targeted Poverty Alleviation

Introduction

The past decades have witnessed implementation of various anti-poverty programs in developing countries. Based on experience, scholars identify four types of effective poverty alleviation strategies including community organizations based micro-financing, capability and social security, market-based, and good governance [58]. Different from traditional approaches to poverty reduction that put emphases on

✉ Cai (Vera) Zuo
czuo@fudan.edu.cn

¹ School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, Room 737, Wenke Building, Handan Road 220, Yangpu, Shanghai 200433, People's Republic of China

economic growth and social expenditure, the importance of participatory governance in combating poverty [54] has been recently recognized because studies have shown that poverty originates from and further exacerbates social exclusion and the lack of capabilities [56]. Among all the institutional remedies for alleviating poverty, decentralization is widely believed, especially among policymakers, to be an effective tool for implementing anti-poverty programs because governments at local level have better information and more incentives to design and implement policies that respond to local demands and enhance public participation in policy-making [42, 74].¹ However, empirical evidence fails to support the pro-poor effect of decentralization [6, 10, 11, 30] because successful decentralization that realizes the representation-cum-efficiency advantage requires prerequisites that are often absent in developing countries. Without accountability or monitoring mechanisms, decentralization also provides channels to empower local elites and brokers to expropriate wealth and divert resources away from the poor [2]. Therefore, intervention of higher-level authority is almost always needed for overcoming elite capture in implementing locally managed poverty alleviation programs. What is less clear in existing literature is how decentralization shall be integrated with the intervention from higher-level governments in anti-poverty efforts and what are the specific institutional designs that generate pro-poor outcomes? This article aims to shed light on these questions by examining the institutional designs of three successful poverty alleviation programs carried out in countries of different geographic regions over different historical periods.

The main finding is that effective poverty alleviation programs share some common institutional factors, including a strong and credible commitment of the ruling party to reduce poverty, institutional designs that circumvent the capture of traditional rural elites and undermine the power of local brokers, and organizational arrangements that are both centralized and decentralized. Although originated from different sources, the strong commitment to poverty alleviation is revealed and made credible through a set of institutional designs that closely monitor the program implementation and sanction misconducts. While decentralization is introduced in identifying beneficiaries and resolving conflicts, centralized arrangements that undermine elite capture, albeit with different forms, are of crucial importance to ensure the pro-poor outcomes.

This article makes several contributions. First, it advances our understanding of the form of political centralization necessary in decentralized provision of public goods. Traditional fiscal federalism theory suggests that decentralized governance ensures a more efficient delivery of public goods, overcomes aggregation problems by bringing policy decisions closely into line with citizen preferences, and holds local decision-makers responsive to local needs by the threat of exit² [62]. However,

¹ This is also called the “representation-cum-efficiency” advantage of decentralization. See more discussion in [32, 66].

² Spatial mobility of taxpayers and capital enhances the inter-regional competition and creates pressures for the local politicians to respond to local needs and to offer the most attractive package of taxes and services.

such advantages can be realized only under certain conditions [73]. Empirical evidence finds the effects of decentralized provision of public goods on preference matching are far from clear-cut.³ The incentive of local politicians is the primary mediating variable between decentralization and public service results. Moreover, the results of decentralization of public goods provision depends on the level of political centralization, including the strength of the party system [51] and the administrative control of local officials by central authorities [35]. Building on these literatures, this research reveals the specific form of political centralization that is indispensable to the effective delivery of locally managed welfare service. Second, the comparison of three “most-different-similar outcome” cases sheds light on the common institutional factors underlying successful poverty reduction. In recent studies of the institutional approach to poverty alleviation, most attention is placed on improving participatory governance, enhancing administrative competence, and reducing corruption. Not disapproving the importance of these institutional arrangements, this article focuses on the political institution that shapes the incentives of local politicians in championing the interests for the poor.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature and develops theoretical expectations. Section III compares three cases that are considered exemplars of effective anti-poverty reforms in order to identify common institutional factors underlying their success of poverty alleviation. The last section concludes.

Theory and Argument

Poverty is a complex, multidimensional concept. It is “pronounced deprivation in well-being” ([74]: 15) and “the inability of people to meet economic, social and other standards of well-being” ([50]: 27) due to a lack of capabilities, opportunities and freedoms [55]. It is widely accepted that economic growth is necessary, but hardly sufficient, to reduce poverty, and that growth policy needs to be complemented with government interventions in order to lift the poor out of poverty. Macroeconomic and political stability and good governance are regarded as prerequisites for poverty alleviation [60, 74]. Promoting opportunities to the poor (by increasing their access to employment, markets, financial service, infrastructure, social service and land), facilitating empowerment of the poor by incorporating them into decision-making processes, and reducing poor people’s vulnerability to different threats, are treated as three complementary and effective elements in putting poverty to an end [74]. Approaches to poverty reduction can be categorized into technocratic and institutional one. The technocratic approach emphasizes “targeting and explores program designs that try to direct limited resources to people with greatest need,”([66]: 72) whereas the institutional approach stresses developing and strengthening

³ Empirical studies show the performance of decentralized system of public goods provision depends upon spillovers associated with different public goods and heterogeneity of preference in local population [5], and the institutional arrangements [49].

institutions to improve participatory governance, enhances administrative competence, and reduces corruption that hinders public service delivery to the poor.

According to the fiscal federalism literature, decentralization,⁴ especially political decentralization has a pro-poor impact primarily out of its “representation-cum-efficiency” advantage [32, 33]. First, as political decentralization often involves the devolution of decision-making powers to elected subnational units of government, it, therefore, brings about increased opportunities for people, especially the poor, to participate in decision-making of public goods provision. The enhanced representation and political participation of the poor will lead to greater responsiveness to their demands and help rectify the anti-poor bias in welfare programs that are captured by powerful political and economic elites. Second, local governments also have informational advantage compared to the center and possess better, more complete, information regarding the preferences and needs of the poor. Therefore, decentralization also brings in a higher level of policy efficiency in tackling poverty.⁵

However, both theoretical and empirical evidence cast doubt on the optimism regarding the virtues of decentralization [10, 61]. Decentralization is not necessarily bringing about the expected outcome due to serious constraints in the implementation of decentralization itself that greatly inhibit the enhancement in participation, accountability and efficiency. The success of decentralization depends on a range of factors that are often lacking in most developing countries, including “the political commitment of the center, strong human and financial capacities, clearly defined procedures, competitive local elections, the level of information of all relevant actors, and policy coherency” ([60]: 7).⁶ Moreover, in the absence of accountability mechanism, decentralization also provides channels to empower local elites to capture resources and expropriate wealth at the expense of the poor [2]. Cross-national studies yield no support for the pro-poor effect of decentralization, and the impact of decentralization on poverty is context and design specific [6, 10, 11, 30].

The elite capture problem suggests that intervention of higher-level government is always needed to ensure pro-poor outcomes in locally managed poverty alleviation programs. The upper-level government can counterbalance the forces that tend to disfavor the poor in a number of ways. First, higher-level states can send “counter elites” to groups that resist efforts to make poverty alleviation more pro-poor [11, 47]. By sending officials who are hold accountable to the higher-level government to penetrate local communities, higher-level authorities establish direct linkage with the poor, by passing, and eventually undermining, the power of traditional intermediaries and local brokers in resource allocation. Second, higher-level governments can structure incentives, including career prospects and earmarked funding, and intensify monitoring to promote public participation and accountability to the poor [31]. Third, upper-level governments can send signals of their strong commitment

⁴ See the definition of decentralization in [52].

⁵ Some empirical studies confirm the informational advantage and higher accountability and better targeting to the poor under decentralization [20, 21].

⁶ For more discussion on the prerequisites for decentralization to achieve welfare-optimal outcome, see also [2, 11].

to poverty alleviation to local officials and the poor through the introduction of new agencies and operational rules that more strictly sanction clientelism or political manipulation. Therefore, an effective and successful anti-poverty reform needs institutional designs that circumvent elite capture, break the influence of entrenched interest over decision-making and resource allocation, and signal the strong commitment to poverty reduction. In particular, the intervention of higher-level government is of crucial importance to strike a balance between local autonomy that promotes the representation-cum-efficiency advantage and a lack of elite capture for any locally managed poverty alleviation program.

The subsequent analysis draws on comparisons of India (West Bengal), Mexico, and China to test these theoretical expectations and demonstrates the forms of intervention and political dynamics that generate upper-level governments' institutional arrangements. Existing explanations for the success of anti-poverty programs mostly focus on specific policies. For example, in explaining the sharp decline of the percentage and the number of the poor in rural West Bengal, Chatterjee ([9]: 3006) summarized factors ranging from technology-induced productivity in agricultural production, land redistribution, to decentralized planning through elected panchayats. China's success in poverty alleviation is attributed to a rapid economic growth and the implementation of a series of large-scale, government-led anti-poverty policies [43, 44, 46]. The exception is Mexico and the success of the *Progreso-Oportunidades* is attributed to institutional factors including the strong political commitment, fostering of strong national-local linkages between the federal policy makers and implementers on the ground, and introduction of sound monitoring and fiscal management systems [65]. In sum, both the general theory of the impact of decentralization on poverty reduction and the explanations of the poverty alleviation success in specific countries fail to explicitly identify politically centralized institutional arrangements that are necessary in locally managed poverty alleviation programs.

Comparison of Three Cases

The comparison of the three poverty relief programs follows the logic of “most-different-similar-outcome” design (MDSO). As suggested by Gerring [23], MDSO design uses cases that are different on variables (that are closely related to the outcome variable according to existing literature) but are similar in the outcome variable. It is believed to be a particularly useful strategy to identify new explanatory variables.

Despite numbers of differences as listed in Table 1, the poverty alleviation program in West Bengal of India in the 1980s, the *Progreso-Oportunidades* program in Mexico between 1997 and 2000s, and the TPA program in China (2014–2020) are all considered as successful and effective anti-poverty exemplars. A comparison of the institutional designs underlying the three programs thereby provides the opportunity to uncover some common institutional factors that contribute to the success of poverty alleviation.

As shown in Fig. 1, poverty rate in India (1980s) was high and the poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP) was over 50 percent. The rural poverty

Table 1 Relevant indicators of India, Mexico, and China

	poverty rate	GDP per capita, PPP, current international prices (USD)	polity score	background of program introduction	main features of the anti-poverty program
West Bengal, over 50% India (1980s)		315.16 ^a	8	a national-level minority political party took power with a high level of electoral vulnerability	implementation through panchayats under the leadership of the Communist Party of India; use its members and its supporters in the mass front organizations to penetrate the countryside
Mexico (1997-2000s)	20%	9712.091 ^b	2	a profound economic and political crisis	a depoliticized top-down program managed directly by the federal agency with the delivery of education, health, and nutrition services delegated to local government; use international and academic organizations to evaluate the program
China (2014–2020)	2%	12,549.772 ^c	-7	long-term stability and prosperity	autonomy is granted to local governments in determining rural industry and in identifying beneficiaries; strong commitment to combat poverty is made credible through institutions including the leading small group, pairing-up, and work-team mechanisms

a the 1986 data on India, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263776/gross-domestic-product-gdp-per-capita-in-india/>, accessed in May 2021.

b the 1997 data on Mexico, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=MX>, accessed in May 2021.

c the 2014 data on China, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=CN>, accessed in May 2021.

Data Source. World Bank; Polity IV project.

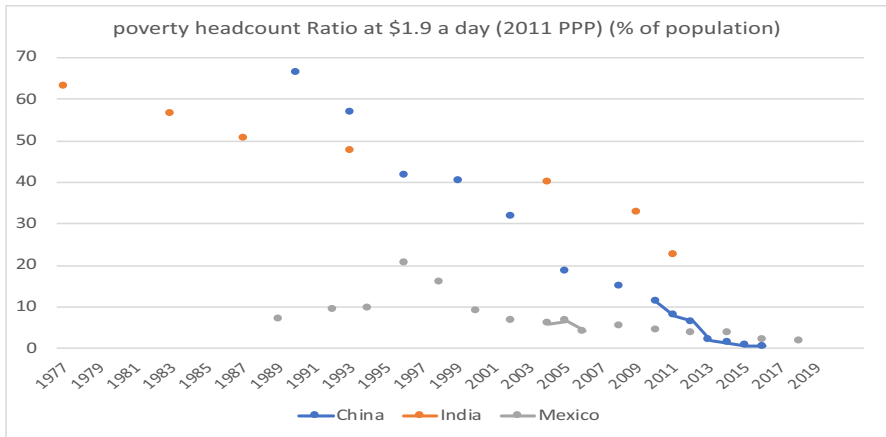


Fig. 1 Poverty Rate in India, Mexico, and China. Data Source: World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY>. Accessed January 2021

rate in West Bengal, as will be shown below, was even greater than the national average rate in the 1980s. The ratio of Mexico in 1997, when the *Progresá* program was introduced, was slightly above 20 percent, whereas that of China, at the beginning of the TPA program, was less than 2 percent. The distinct levels of poverty imply different nature of central problems that needs to be immediately addressed in reducing poverty and different levels of difficulties and challenges governments face to achieve success. The three cases also differ drastically in the level of wealth and political system and therefore possess divergent amount of fiscal resources and distinct political dynamics in the introduction and implementation of poverty alleviation programs. The political and economic backgrounds of these three programs also differ drastically. The poverty relief program in West Bengal in early 1980s was developed soon after a national-level minority political party took power in the state government with a high level of electoral vulnerability. *Progresá* in Mexico was introduced in the context of profound economic crisis and a rebellion occurred in the place where previous poverty relief programs poured a large amount of funds, which thus clearly indicated the failure of previous poverty alleviation efforts. The TPA program in China serves as a key initiative to complete building a well-off society (*xiaokang shehui*) after decades of economic growth, which constitutes the central agenda of the ruling Communist party. All these background differences likely generate different motives of the principal actors and political dynamics that shape the program design.

Despite all these differences, the three programs, to a large extent, are considered successful and effective in bringing down the poverty rate and reveal some common institutional features, including a strong and credible commitment of the ruling party to combat poverty, institutional designs that circumvent the capture of traditional rural elites, and organizational arrangements that are both centralized and decentralized. It is, now, to these common factors that the subsequent analyses will turn.

Poverty Alleviation in West Bengal, India

Locating in the east corner of India and bordering with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, West Bengal has been considered as an exemplar state in effectively reducing rural poverty, especially between 1980 and 1990s [13, 34]. At the time of the independency of India, West Bengal was the most industrialized state, yet its rural poverty expanded due to several post-independency policies of central government.⁷ In the early 1970s, over 70 percent of rural population lived below the poverty line (see Table 2). The three poorest groups in rural West Bengal, namely scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and Muslims, accounted for slightly more than half the population ([13]: 2691).

Rural poverty in India, similar to most other developing countries, is directly related to the lack of access to productive assets, including land and skills. Poverty alleviation efforts in post-independence India can be divided into four phases: soon after independence when the government of India launched the Community Development Program that put emphasis on infrastructure building and investment in human resource development; from the beginning of 1950s to the end of 1960s when major anti-poverty programs involved redistribution of land and tenancy reforms; from late 1960s to early 1990s when after the programs that were implemented during the first two phases were only met with limited success and they introduced new programs, namely the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) and National Rural Employment Program (NREP), that targeted small and marginal farmers and landless laborers and put emphasis on creating employment opportunities and distributing renewable assets among them; from the beginning of 1990s when the target-group oriented programs were replaced by market-oriented policies which aimed at boosting economic growth from which the poor will eventually benefit [67].⁸ This analysis focuses on the third phase of poverty alleviation efforts in rural West Bengal, which has witnessed the decline of poverty rate by more than 30 percent (see Table 2).

India's ideological commitment to poverty eradication lies in the nature of the independence movement which was "profoundly influenced by the Gandhian approach with an emphasis on the need to uplift the social and economic status of the poorest of the poor, and ...large sections of the poor participated in the struggle for national independence with the hope that they would be given economic where-withal once the country attained independence" ([67]: 2559). The national consensus on poverty alleviation provided the condition for launching series of anti-poverty policies. A distinguishing feature of poverty alleviation in West Bengal since 1978 is the implementation through panchayats⁹ (elected local governments) under the

⁷ These policies include the freight equalization policy of the mid-1950s, the discriminatory licensing policy, and the parsimonious allocation of plan funds and credit from banks and financial institutions; in addition, the technology of the green revolution has also bypassed the state ([13]: 2691).

⁸ For more detailed description and evaluation of policies in different phrases, see [19, 67].

⁹ For a comprehensive discussion on the historical origin, functioning and impacts of panchayats in India, please refer to [2].

leadership of the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM), a left-wing political party that is communist in name and organization, but “social democratic in ideology and practice” ([34]: 9). The power politics of West Bengal further intensifies the necessity of CPM to implement pro-poor programs. The CPM swept into power in 1977, albeit with a high level of electoral vulnerability [34, 72]. As Benoy Chowdhury, the leader of the peasant wing of CPM (Kisan Sabha), commented: “the Left Front does not hold state power, it merely occupies a position of temporary power within the state. It must act accordingly.” ([72]: 132). To consolidate its power against the Congress Party and the Janata Party, coupled with the ideology shift from a revolutionary to a reformist orientation,¹⁰ the CPM prioritized the issues of development with redistribution and the poverty alleviation programs that were believed to most effectively expand its support base among the peasants and that the central government had the lowest motivation to intervene. CPM’s strong commitment to poverty alleviation and its coherent leadership¹¹ laid down the foundation for subsequent decentralization and democratization reforms of panchayats to implement poverty alleviation programs.

The benefits of previous welfare programs in West Bengal were distributed inequitably on the basis of patron-client ties and subject to the dominance of traditional rural elite whose strength lay in land and caste. Before CPM came to power, the decentralization reforms initiated by the central government of India since 1957 and the follow-up Panchayat Acts passed in West Bengal in 1957 and 1963 did little to empower the rural poor. The panchayats were devolved few responsibilities and powers, lacking in financial support, bypassed by administrative officials. Direct elections were not held regularly and only held at the village level, and involved little or no popular participation. These panchayats served as “little more than an additional institutional base from which the local rural elite could assert its dominance.” ([72]: 134).

To break the mold of traditional politics and the entrenched interests, CPM reorganized and changed the nature of panchayats in West Bengal through the following measures. First, the four tiers of panchayats, below the state, were reduced to three, namely the *zilla parishad* (district), *panchayat samiti* (block), and *gram panchayat* (GP), and covered eight to ten villages. The main responsibility devolved to the *gram panchayats* included the settlement of disputes and the selection of beneficiaries of resources allocated by higher levels of the government [1, 13]. Since 1985, “all state development plans have been drawn up on the basis of Annual District Plans which in turn are based upon proposals from panchayat committees below.” ([72]: 139). In general, half of the development expenditure in the state was spent by the panchayats [13].

¹⁰ They dynamics of electoral-constitutional politics, the CPM’s past experiences, and the need to maintain a healthy economy are the main factors underlying the ideological shift ([34]: 100–102).

¹¹ Kohli ([34]: 96–98) argues that despite the presence of three factions within the CPM, the party was able to remain united due to the party discipline (“democratic centralism”) and a shared perception of the common enemy – the central government of India in conjunction with the “bourgeois-landlord” forces.

Table 2 Percentage below poverty line in West Bengal and India

	Rural WB	Rural area of India	Urban WB	Urban area of India
1973–1974	73.16	56.44	34.67	49.01
1983–1984	63.05	45.65	32.32	40.79
1993–1994	40.80	37.27	22.41	32.36
2004–2005	28.60	28.30	14.80	25.70
2015	20.67	22.48	11.53	20.45

Source. Planning Commission of Government of India [8]

Second, the CPM introduced direct elections by secret ballot for all three levels of panchayats every five years, and the 1985 amendment created a system of decentralized planning or budgeting. As the constituency size increased, it became increasingly difficult and costly for traditional rural elites to mobilize votes by invoking the patron-client ties. Therefore, the introduction of direct election contributed to the breakdown of traditional patronage politics and started to bring party machineries into the election campaigns and village politics. Empirical evidence demonstrates that the political participation and representation of the poor (small peasants, the landless, and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes) achieved through these elections, were greatly improved [11, 41, 71], “producing panchayats in which about 70 percent of the elected members were from the poor strata (mainly poor peasantry), another 25 percent from the middle strata (including school teachers), while about 5 percent came from the rich strata of the village population.” ([13]: 2697). Direct elections brought in more accountability. Possible beneficiaries were provided with channels to participate in the decisions on resource allocation and in the selection of beneficiaries. For example, in implementing “Operation Barga”,¹² public meetings were held where “a team of officials (to ensure that they are not intimidated by the powerful few) meet the villagers collectively (again, to minimize the possibility of intimidation)” to identify beneficiaries ([13]: 2696). The panchayat system was amended significantly under the guidance of CPM in 1985 by introducing decentralized planning or budgeting “whereby panchayats would communicate their priorities and needs to higher-level tiers, which would subsequently incorporate them into allocations across districts, blocks, and GPs” ([2]: 209). The subsequent 1992 Amendment to the India’s Constitution further mandated that *gram sabha* (village committee)¹³ should hold two meetings annually to publicly discuss issues concerning reviewing and monitoring past and current GP projects (including corruption or mismanagement complaints), agenda for future projects, and selection of beneficiaries [2, 25].

¹² Operation Barga was a programme for hastening the process of recording land rights in the land reform. A “parcha” or temporary document recoding the land rights was issued after the operation and the sharecroppers can use the document to secure credit and other facilities [13].

¹³ According to the 73rd Amendment to India’s Constitution, gram sabha, which constitutes all eligible voters within a gram panchayat area, serves as a principal mechanism for transparency and accountability [31].

Third, the CPM relied on its members and its supporters (also called sympathizers) in the mass front organizations to penetrate the countryside without being captured by the landed classes. Left-wing political parties in West Bengal have long cooperated with their peasant organizations in mobilizing the rural poor, for example the “tebhaga movement” of the 1940s and the “food movements” of 1950s and 1960s. In the 1980s, the leader of the *Kisan Sabha* (peasant association) in West Bengal, Benoy Chowdhury, was also the veteran CPM leader and Minister for Land Reforms and Panchayats. Those serving at higher level of the *panchayat samiti* and the *zilla parishad* were mostly full CPM party members, while party members or CPM supporters in the mass front organizations were elected to serve a majority of the *gram panchayats*. “The *gram panchayat*’s affairs were discussed by the local party members in closed meetings and the elected supporters are then advised as to how party policy should be carried out through the *gram panchayat*” ([72]: 141). Through the personnel control, the party was able to challenge vested and entrenched interests and at the same time impose discipline and monitoring on members of panchayats to prevent corruption in the implementation of poverty alleviation policies. For example, an open accounting system was instituted for panchayats and “all accounts have to be periodically written on blackboards for verification by the community and the party” ([34]: 115).

The benefits of decentralized panchayat-led development programs are multifold: first, since most panchayat members live in the village and their regular interactions with the villagers bring in more accountability. Compared to the arbitrary selection of locations and beneficiaries by bureaucracy who is often influenced by the rural rich [12], panchayat members’ decisions are more likely to reflect the community consensus. Village meetings were regularly convened and formed a channel of accountability to the rural poor; second, panchayat members act as information intermediaries that help translate new ideas into local dialects and idioms and information on funds are widely known and therefore subject to more close scrutiny of the party and the community [13]. Behind the panchayat-led programs lies the strong commitment of the CPM to combat poverty, the penetration of the party members and supporters to the countryside, and the supervision of the party and the Left Front government at the state level.

Progesa-Oportunidades in Mexico

Starting from the late 1990s, Latin American countries began to introduce conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs that consciously and openly reach out to the poor and provide poor households with a sense of ownership of the program through the conditionality of receiving benefits. CCT programs also generate incentives for beneficiaries to invest in health and education of their children to prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Among all the CCT programs, Mexico’s Program for Education, Health, and Nutrition (*Progesa*), as the first CCT program launched on a large scale in 1997 and the most studied of all such programs, has received wide recognition for its success. *Progesa* has been found to generate increased consumption, declines in school dropout rates and infant mortality rates,

and increases in children's average height and weight [24, 36]. The percent of the extremely poor population dropped from 53 in 1996 and to 24 in 2006 ([17]: 47).¹⁴ International organizations, including the United Nations and Inter-American Development Bank, called the program "a valuable model for other countries" ([36]: 113), and a number of similar schemes were introduced in the sub-Saharan African region [3].¹⁵ What is extraordinary about *Progresa* lies in its stark departure from previous welfare programs that suffer from pervasive clientelism and in its survival of political turnover. The program was introduced under the administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), an Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate. After Vicente Fox, a National Action Party (PAN) candidate, was elected president in 2000, the program was not terminated (as previous welfare programs have been) but instead expanded in rural areas and further extended to urban areas in 2002 with a change of name to *Oportunidades*.¹⁶

Progresa-Oportunidades was developed in the context of profound economic crisis and Mexico's democratic transformation. Mexico's economy has been dependent on the economic dynamics of the United States and signing the North American Free Trade Agreement has aggravated the trend of inequality [65]. Years of liberal economic reform under president Carlos Salinas have culminated in a serious economic recession that caused voters to defect to the opposition. Candidates of PRI, the ruling party that have controlled Mexico's presidency for nearly 70 years, started to lose to PAN or PRD candidates in almost every important local election between 1995 and 1997 ([17]: 116). The endogenous Zapatista uprising that threatened the political stability and the financial crisis of December 1994 created immediate impetus for the revamping of social policy. The setback of seven percent in real GDP in 1995, the largest reduction in economic activity in more than five decades, had a devastating impact on the poverty rate: "the headcount index associated with a food-based poverty line soared from 21.2% just before the crisis to 37.4% in 1996." ([48]: 3) More than 16 million people fell into poverty in 1995 ([15]: 73). The collapse of the anti-poverty National Solidarity Program (*Pronasol*), introduced under president Carlos Salinas, into clientelistic relief and rampant corruption fueled the Zapatista uprising, which strengthened the successor's commitment to fight corruption and to end poverty. Reforms, including decentralization and a new anti-poverty program that more effectively benefit the poor, were of paramount importance to avoid the spread of the political turmoil into the rest of the country.¹⁷

¹⁴ Rodríguez ([53]: 275) states that between 1998 and 2006, extreme poverty steadily decreased every year by an average of 9.6% and the extreme poverty rate was reduced to 13.8% for 2006.

¹⁵ See also Poverty reduction: Scaling Up Local Innovations for Transformational Change, Mexico: Scaling Up *Progresa/Oportunidades*- Conditional Cash Transfer Programme. UNDP report.

¹⁶ The program was renamed *Prospera* under the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto and incorporated financial inclusion and microcredit programs. For more information, please refer to <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/11/19/un-modelo-de-mexico-para-el-mundo>, accessed January 2021.

¹⁷ For more information on the political crisis, see [7, 38]. Díaz-Cayeros et al. ([17]: 13–14) underscore three important processes that encourage the PRI to abandon *Pronasol* and to create formula-based poverty relief programs, including the Zapatista rebellion, voters' rebellion against the system of corruption, and PRI's electoral losses. The Zapatistas rebellion also motivated the electoral reforms that paved the road to democracy in Mexico [45, 63].

The strong commitment of the president and the federal agency to combat poverty alleviation were revealed and made credible through a set of institutions that tied the hands of the president and decreased all politicians' discretion over the program. In addition to clear eligibility criteria and formula used to allocate resources, provisions in federal decrees explicitly prohibited the use of the program by any political party and established that using *Progresa* for political reasons is a federal offense. All documents, forms, and materials that *Progresa* beneficiaries received included texts stating that "receipt of benefits are in no way contingent upon affiliation with any specific political party or voting for any specific candidate running for public office. No candidate is authorized to grant or withhold benefits under the program... Any person, organization, or public servant that makes undue use of program resources will be reported to the appropriate authority and prosecuted under applicable legislation." ([36]: 107) To avoid politicization of the program, legislations prevented *Progresa* officials to "go into the field or enroll new beneficiaries for six months prior to the elections." ([17]: 16) Results of rigorous program evaluations were made public and widely circulated in international organizations and put great pressure on program officials.

Prior to *Progresa*, the fifteen food subsidy programs ran by the federal government failed to reach the rural poor and "over half of the total budget was absorbed by the generalized bread and tortilla subsidies in the urban areas, where most of the income transfers was captured by non-poor households... close to sixty percent of all poor rural families received no food support at all from government." Levy ([36]: 5–6) The *Pronasol* program, a "matching grant program for financing small and medium-sized infrastructure and social projects" ([48]: 4) introduced in 1988 to compensate the negative effects of the economic liberalization reform, was perceived as heavily subjected to political manipulation by the ruling PRI. In distributing *Pronasol* program benefits to municipalities, the PRI diverted more funds to areas vulnerable to opposition entry and withdrew funds from localities controlled by the opposition [45]. Despite millions of dollars spent, it had only marginal effects at improving provision of basic public goods including water and electricity in the poorest places, and the PRI's core supporters, instead of the poor, benefited from the program [17, 75].

The centralization of the fiscal resources was criticized as one of the key factors sustaining the clientelism in *Pronasol*. "The system was purposely designed so that when subnational politicians delegated fiscal powers to the president, the president in turn took care to discipline and unite the PRI behind the common cause of hegemonic party survival." ([17]: 115). Therefore, president Ernesto Zedillo, who took office in 1994, launched a project of political decentralization (known as New Federalism). Funds for the infrastructure and the management of almost 7,000 clinics and 120,000 health workers were decentralized to the states and two-thirds of the resources previously allocated through *Pronasol* were decentralized directly to the municipalities ([17]: 116). Federal transfers for public work and infrastructure investments were distributed according to nondiscretionary poverty-based formulas and on the basis of local needs rather than partisan interest. The decentralization of federal resources was critical to elicit the support of political parties and local officials for the federal budget and the poverty relief program [15, 16].

Despite decentralization in fiscal resources and service delivery,¹⁸ *Progresa* was a centrally managed poverty relief program. The newly instituted agency within the Ministry of Social Development was in charge of the day-to-day program implementation all the way down to cash transfer delivery to beneficiaries, which circumvents traditional intermediaries along the monetary transmission belt, including governors, state-level bureaucracy and rural elites. President Zedillo directly appointed the director of the agency and a committee to oversee the program. The formula to allocate program resources was proposed by the president and approved in the Chamber of Deputies. In identifying beneficiaries, *Progresa* relied on proxy means testing method, and eligibility criteria were clear and fixed, based on a geographical measure of poverty constructed from both census data and household income surveys [15, 59].¹⁹ Cash transfers were granted directly to women conditional to their children's school attendance and health clinic visits as well as attending health education talks and nutritional supplements intake.²⁰ In each village, three women, elected by beneficiaries and who were also recipients of the *Progresa*, served as the promoter and the bridge between the community and the federal program staff [14, 28]. They presented complaints and local needs discussed in regular *platicas* (meetings) attended by beneficiaries to local government and program staffs. Rigorous evaluations of the program, including on its administrative effectiveness, was designed and implemented by federal officials in collaboration with the International Food Policy Research Institute.

The strong commitment of the PRI in combating poverty in the late 1990s is linked to its motivation to regain public confidence and to survive the economic and political crisis. The commitment is made credible by a set of institutions that tie the hands of the president and depoliticize the program. *Progresa-Oportunidades* is a top-down program with the operation deliberately reduces the number of intermediaries between the federal government and the beneficiary households, which help to eliminate elite capture in poverty alleviation. The federal administrative unit gathers all the relevant data, applies the point system, determines eligibility, issues payments, contracts for external evaluations and coordinates service delivery with other federal agencies [65]. Only the delivery of education, health, and nutrition services is delegated to subnational governments.

Targeted Poverty Alleviation in China

Before the Reform and Opening policy in 1978, 250 million people or 30.7 percent of rural population living below the China's official poverty line [77]. Poverty was

¹⁸ Local governments are in charge of provision of education and health service. Local health providers and teachers are charged with certifying whether beneficiaries comply with the program's conditions.

¹⁹ The identification of *Progresa* beneficiaries is accomplished in three stages. "First, communities are selected using a marginality index based on census data. Second, within the selected communities, households are chosen using survey data collected at the household level. Third, the list of potential beneficiaries is presented to a community assembly for review and discussion and the list is changed according to established criteria for the selection of beneficiary families." ([59]: 1771).

²⁰ For more description on conditionality, see [4].

reduced rapidly during the reform era due to the agricultural de-collectivization that increased agricultural production and the farm incomes of the rural poor. In addition, the rapid economic development directly provided opportunities for rural peasants to work in urban areas and increased the fiscal revenue to aid the rural poor. Out of the 1.1 billion people lifted out of poverty between 1990 and 2013, China has contributed more than 70 percent [44]. To promote poverty alleviation, the Leading Committee on Economic Development in Poor Areas under State Council, a special anti-poverty government agency, was established in 1986 (renamed to Leading Committee on Poverty Alleviation and Development in 1993) and departments responsible for poverty alleviation were set up at all level of local government. Since then, China pursues the development-oriented poverty alleviation strategy that targeted poverty-stricken counties.²¹ Despite the great decline in poverty rates,²² there were still pockets of extreme poverty, with 128,000 impoverished villages and more than 70 million poor people at the end of 2014 ([43]: 71).²³

As the centerpiece of CCP's agenda and promise to complete building a well-off society in an all-around way, the Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) program was launched in 2014 with an ambitious plan to eradicate poverty in rural areas by 2020. Different from prior anti-poverty efforts that targeted geographical units, such as counties and townships, TPA directly targeted individual poor households, especially those living in geologically hazardous areas, and emphasizes accuracy in identification, assistance, management and assessment. The five approaches adopted in the TPA to eradicate poverty include industrial development, resettlement, ecological compensation, strengthened education and social security [70]. Empirical results have shown that China's poverty alleviation campaign in recent years has borne outstanding results [26, 27].²⁴

In addition to institutions mentioned below, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made the commitment to combat poverty particular strong and credible through establishing the poverty alleviation leading small group (PALSOG) at every level of government. The PALSOG is usually headed by the party secretary and its members include the leaders of the relevant party and government departments, such as the department of agriculture, civil affairs, commerce, transportation, health, and education, the organization department, the united front work department, and the discipline inspection commission. Such a diverse membership allows the PALSOG to coordinate and integrate anti-poverty efforts between multiple departments and to enforce disciplinary measures against officials who fail to carry out poverty alleviation directives [64].

²¹ See the description of different phrases of post-1986 poverty alleviation in [39, 44, 68].

²² According to the World Bank, the poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP) in China dropped from 66.3% in 1990 to 1.9% in 2013. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.POV.DDAY?locations=CN>, accessed January 2021.

²³ Scholars have identified factors that cause persistent regional poverty and individual poverty in rural China. For a good review, please refer to ([43]: 71).

²⁴ Campaigns are normally utilized by the Chinese central government to pressure local governments to follow central orders on specific issues that need to be addressed with priority [69].

Different from previous development-oriented poverty alleviation strategy in which the central government designated the impoverished counties for receiving poverty alleviation policy benefits and funds, TPA granted more leeway to local governments in determining local industry development plan and in identifying beneficiaries. According to an original survey of village cadres and villagers in 50 villages (see the description of survey in the [appendix](#)), village cadres took the leading role in deciding a variety of poverty alleviation tasks ranging from the selection of industry, allocation of funds, identification and termination of beneficiary status, and resolution of conflicts (see Table 3), vis-à-vis first secretaries sent down from higher-level governments. To achieve accurate identification, most provinces devolved some power to villagers in the process of beneficiary identification. Out of the 50 surveyed villages, the identification of beneficiaries in 44 villages adopted democratic appraisal (*minzhu pingyi*) that convened villagers' meetings to openly discuss the eligibility of potential beneficiaries and to scrutinize the preliminary beneficiary list put forward by village cadres. The greater level of decentralization is also reflected in the fact that national government set the official poverty line and provincial governments are allowed to adjust the poverty line to fit local conditions.

Meanwhile, the control and influence of higher-level government over poverty alleviation and welfare programs, as shown in Donaldson [18] and Gao [22], remains as a prominent feature of TPA. Higher-level governments exert tight control over village-level officials and on-the-ground policy implementation in subsequent ways. First, the central government had designated 832 impoverished counties and provided earmarked poverty alleviation funds to these counties. According to field interviews, almost 90 percent of poverty alleviation funds in impoverished counties relied on transfers from the central or provincial governments.²⁵ Since late 2012, central government instituted the pairing-up (*jiedui*) between poverty-stricken localities and hundreds of organizations, including central government agencies, satellite party organizations, mass organizations, universities, military, and state-owned enterprises.²⁶

Second, higher-level government had applied regular mechanism of performance evaluation. In 2016, the center government issued a document specifying the methods and criteria of evaluating the poverty alleviation work performance of provincial officials.²⁷ Since then, local governments at different levels accordingly promulgated more detailed evaluation regulations on poverty alleviation performance for their subordinates, and it is not uncommon to find local evaluation rules linking the performance of poverty alleviation to officials' career prospects. According to the cadre survey, poverty alleviation performance accounts for an average of 65 points (out of

²⁵ Interview with an official from the Poverty Alleviation Office of County S (Interview #20,180,125).

²⁶ In November of 2012, eight central government and party agencies promulgated *guanyu zuohao xinyilun zhongyang, guojiajiguan he youguan danwei dingdian fupin gongzuo de tongzhi*. See http://www.cpad.gov.cn/art/2012/11/13/art_50_23725.html, accessed in May 2021.

²⁷ 中共中央办公厅、国务院办公厅(The Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, The Office of the State Council), *省级党委和政府扶贫开发工作成效考核办法(Methods of Evaluating the Poverty Alleviation and Development Work of the Provincial Party Committees and governments)*, February 2016, accessed February, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-02/16/content_5041672.htm

Table 3 Who is taking the leading role in the anti-poverty tasks (%)

	First Secretary	Village Cadre	Others
Selection of poverty alleviation industry (<i>fupin chanye xuanze</i>)	29.67	58.24	12.09
Allocation of poverty alleviation funds (<i>fupin zijin fenpei</i>)	19.41	60.07	20.51
Planning of poverty alleviation (<i>fupin gongzuo guihua</i>)	46.15	37.00	16.85
Identification and termination of the beneficiary status (<i>pingkunhu de shibie yu tuichu gongzuo</i>)	21.25	57.51	21.25
Striving for poverty alleviation resources (<i>zhengqu fupin ziyuan</i>)	51.28	30.04	18.68
Resolution of conflicts in poverty alleviation (<i>huajie fupin gongzuozhong de maodun</i>)	16.85	70.33	12.82

n = 273. Here, others include upper-level governments or other situation in which both first secretary and village cadre jointly decide

Source. The Targeted Poverty Alleviation and Rural Vitalization Survey Dataset

a total number of 100 points) for village cadres and nearly 70% of surveyed village-level cadres reported over half of total annual cadre evaluation points are designated to anti-poverty-related work performance, which are evaluated by the party organization department or poverty alleviation office at the county or township level.

Third, governments at different levels sent out inspection teams and made unannounced visits to monitor local officials' conducts in poverty alleviation. Local authorities have adopted innovative measures, including big data platform and "third-party evaluation (*disanfang pinggu*)" to detect suspected cases of irregularity and these measures have exerted strong pressure on the subordinates to achieve the policy goals [76]. In addition, the poverty alleviation office (*fupinban*) under the State Council created an integrated information platform²⁸ across government levels to collect and monitor data on each poverty household. Since 2016, the office has launched six waves of dynamic adjustments to remove ineligible households and incorporate newly impoverished ones.

Fourth, the Party resorted to the work team mechanism to penetrate the countryside and to overcome problems including elite capture [29], clanism [40], and bureaucratic inertia in poverty alleviation. Organizations and government departments at different levels were instructed to select and support a poverty alleviation work team of three to five people who lead and manage the day-to-day implementation of poverty alleviation policies.²⁹ All poverty alleviation work team members, including first secretaries, must suspend their work in their original units, live in the assigned poverty-stricken village for at least 20 days per month, and visit impoverished households everyday during their stay in the village. By the end of 2017, an estimated number of 195,000 first secretaries and 770,000 work team members were sent down to rural villages, of which around 128,000 were poverty-stricken

²⁸ The platform is named *quanguo fupin kaifa xinxihua pingtai* (全国扶贫开发信息化平台).

²⁹ For more information on the implementation of TPA in China, please see [57].

villages.³⁰ An internal document issued by a county of S province stipulated that first secretaries shall visit at least five impoverished households each day during their stay in the village, and all officials are required to make a phone call to their paired poverty households at least once every week and visit these households' home at least once every month. A county in G province established the "6 assistance" and "5 must-visit" policies, and stipulated that every official must do 3 to 5 practical things (*banshishi*) for their paired impoverished households each year.³¹ Meanwhile, the poverty households play a role in assessing cadres' work performance in poverty alleviation by rating the service they have received and providing their fingerprints to certify that village officials have actually visited their home ([64]: 56). By promoting and institutionalizing the direct linkage between villagers and work team members sent down and evaluated by higher-level government [64],³² on-the-ground service delivery is less prone to the capture of village elites and more likely to align with higher-level governments' incentives and goals.

The strong commitment of the CCP to combat poverty originated from the regime's performance-based legitimacy and is made credible through institutions including the leading small group, pairing-up, and work-team mechanisms. Although more autonomy is granted to local governments in determining rural industry and in identifying beneficiaries than previous anti-poverty programs, the party and the central government maintain their control over the poverty alleviation programs through institutionalized channels. In particular, the party is able to mobilize various kinds of resources to aid the poor and relies on its team of cadre to penetrate the countryside and to create direct linkage between peasants and work team members for overcoming problems including elite capture.

Summary of Three Cases

Despite differences in poverty rate, the level of wealth, and the economic and political environment upon the introduction of poverty alleviation programs, the three cases reveal some common institutional factors underlying their successful anti-poverty programs. The strong commitment of the ruling party to put poverty to an end is made credible through well-designed institutions. To circumvent the capture of traditional rural elites, the ruling party either reduces the number of intermediaries between administrative agencies and households or mobilizes its supporters or party members to penetrate the countryside. Albeit with different levels of mixes, their poverty alleviation programs have both centralized and decentralized elements.

³⁰ <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2017/07-05/8269508.shtml>, accessed July 2019.

³¹ Internal documents gained during fieldwork in G province in 2019. The "6-assistance" includes offering assistance in policies, skills, projects, funds, sale of agricultural goods, and life; "5 must-visit" policy requires that officials must visit their paired households during traditional festivals, busy farming season, and when the households have any difficulty, new birth, disease, death, and dispute.

³² Out of 42 interviewed first secretaries in the survey, 35 originally worked in government agencies or organizations at county-level or above.

Conclusions

The three poverty relief programs, as discussed, combine both decentralized and centralized arrangements. In all these three cases, the lists of potential beneficiaries were presented to a community assembly or villagers' meetings for review and public discussion; the resolution of conflict and the lodging of complaints also relied on grassroots-level agents, such as CPM supporters in the case of West Bengal, the *Progres-Oportunidades* promoter in Mexico, and the village cadres in the case of China. For the two cases of West Bengal and China, the planning of projects or industries is further devolved to elected local governments or village leaders. These decentralized arrangements efficiently utilized the informational advantage local governments possess to improve the precision of targeting and planning. They also to certain extent empowered the rural poor by providing channels for them to participate in the implementation of the program and get their voice heard.

It is equally important to note the significance of centralized arrangements featured in these three programs, especially those that help circumvent and undermine the influence of traditional intermediaries. In the cases of West Bengal and China, the ruling party resorted to their members or supporters to penetrate the countryside and used party discipline coupled with incentive mechanism to control its agents in the execution of anti-poverty policies. In the case of *Progres-Oportunidades*, the CCT program was directly managed by the federal government and bypassed all traditional brokers to eradicate elite capture and political manipulation that had been pervasive in previous poverty relief programs. Such different centralized arrangements can be attributed to the disparate repertoires possessed by the ruling party and diverging popular attitudes towards the ruling party. The communist parties in West Bengal and China both have a long revolutionary tradition in mobilizing the rural poor and are well equipped with experiences as well as manpower to penetrate and transform the countryside. The two ruling communist parties also enjoy a high level of legitimacy and support among rural peasants. However, the deep popular distrust towards PRI's welfare programs makes any party-led initiative unacceptable and a centrally managed program that eliminates the discretion of any political party more likely to achieve consensus and take root.

The depiction of the three poverty alleviation programs as successful cases in this article by no means denies their problems and limitations.³³ Nor is the strong commitment to poverty alleviation treated as exogenous in the analysis. The case comparisons, on the contrary, manifest the variant political dynamics that can generate the strong commitment to combat poverty. As shown in West Bengal, CPM's motivation to secure elections and expand its electoral bases coupled with its historical mobilization of the rural poor contributes to its commitment. The Zapatista uprising that indicates a clear failure of the *Pronasol* and the concern for the spread of the rebellion coupled with the ambition of Zedillo's administration to regain public confidence explains its dedication to poverty. The Chinese experience of TPA

³³ For example, for a comprehensive discussion on the limitation of the *Progres-Oportunidades* in Mexico, see [37].

demonstrates that the strong anti-poverty commitment can also originate under non-politically-competitive and non-crisis contexts, in which a ruling political party with a high level of public support strives to, fulfill its political promise. Here, the discussion of regime may not be relevant. Election or political competition is not the only path to strong anti-poverty commitment. The source of legitimacy seems to be more important. As suggested in the case of China, performance-based legitimacy can motivate the ruling party to eliminate poverty. Arrangements that greatly curb the power of traditional elites and intermediaries are subsequently introduced to make the commitment credible. Future research is needed to shed light on more political parameters that generate the strong commitment to poverty alleviation and the set of binding institutions to benefit the poor.

Appendix

The Targeted Poverty Alleviation and Rural Vitalization Survey

The survey was conducted between July and August of 2019 in Gansu, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Heilongjiang, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces, which included half of the 14 “concentrated, contiguous and extremely poor areas” (*jizhong lianpian tekun diqu*). The 14 areas of clustered poverty were identified by the State Council in 2012 to be the main targets of anti-poverty work. Within these 14 areas, a total of 680 counties are designated by the Poverty Alleviation Department (*fupingban*) as the extremely poor counties (hereafter called list counties).

The research goal is to examine the effect of TPA, in specific, the impoverished status, on political trust, therefore, the target population of the survey is the rural residents living in the poor rural area that are deeply influenced by the TPA. The selection of province and counties was guided by feasibility considerations. Because list counties and relatively poor counties were particularly targeted by the TPA and more subject to its impacts, therefore, in addition to feasibility concerns, two counties, including a “list county” and a “non-list county”, were selected in each province with the intention to maximize variation in geographic location and population size. The only exception was Hubei province, where only a “list county” was selected due to limitations in access. The “non-list” county in each province lies in the lower half of all counties in terms of GDP per capita in 2016. Thanks to the university ties with local government authorities, over 90 percent of the selected counties approved our request for carrying out the research.

Within each county, three villages were selected randomly. Survey in one village of Heilongjiang failed due to encountering the flood disaster during fieldwork. Out of the 50 surveyed villages, 46 have sent-down first secretaries and 49 have poverty-alleviation work teams. Within each village, a probability sample of rural households was drawn from villages’ household rosters using systematic sampling method. Rural residents between the age of 18–70, holding the local household registration (*hukou*), or having lived in the current address for more than 30 days, were

eligible respondents for interviews in the survey. Kish table was used to select interviewees within the household. In total, 1,340 villagers were surveyed in the project. In each village, 3 to 5 cadres, including the sent-down first secretary, village party secretary, village committee head, and other village committee members and poverty alleviation work-team members, were interviewed and a total number of 273 village cadres were surveyed.

Face-to-face interviews were used for the questionnaire data collection. A pilot study in three townships from two provinces was implemented to test the reliability of the questionnaire in January of 2019. Most of the questionnaire interviews were carried out by undergraduate and graduate students at a top university in Mainland China; a third of them had conducted fieldwork on poverty alleviation before the survey, and all of them were trained by the principal investigators before the fieldwork.

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Cai (Vera) Zuo associate professor in School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University, interested in political methodology, bureaucratic politics, and Chinese politics. Ph.D. in political science from University of Wisconsin–Madison. Published or will publish articles in *International Political Science Review*, *European Political Science*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, the *China Quarterly*, the *China Review*. Published books on political methodology and the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Program in China. (In Chinese)