

# The Evolution of China's Poverty Alleviation Policy: Text Analysis Based on the State Council's Report on the Work of the Government from 1986 to 2018

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## ABSTRACT

In order to clarify the evolution process and ideological context of China's poverty alleviation policy, this work analyzed the report on the work of the government from 1986 to 2018 by using the method of policy text measurement and coding analysis. It is found that the process of poverty alleviation in China can be divided into four stages, showing a significant transformation change of value orientation from solving food and clothing to moderately prosperous society in all respects, action logic from extensive to accurate, pattern from government leading to pluralistic participation, and poverty alleviation mechanism from single means to comprehensive strategy.

**Keywords:** Poverty alleviation policies; Report on the work of the government; Attention; Text analysis;

*Targeted poverty alleviation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a worldwide challenge, and China's achievements in targeted poverty alleviation have attracted worldwide attention. In November 2013, General Secretary Xi Jinping made the first important instruction of "targeted poverty alleviation" when he visited Xiangxi City, Hunan Province. In October 2017, the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly pointed out that it should ensure that by 2020, the rural poor should get rid of poverty under the current standards of China, all poor countries get out of poverty, and overall regional poverty is solved. How the concept of targeted poverty alleviation is formed, how poverty alleviation policies have evolved, and what changes have taken place in the government should be paid attention to.

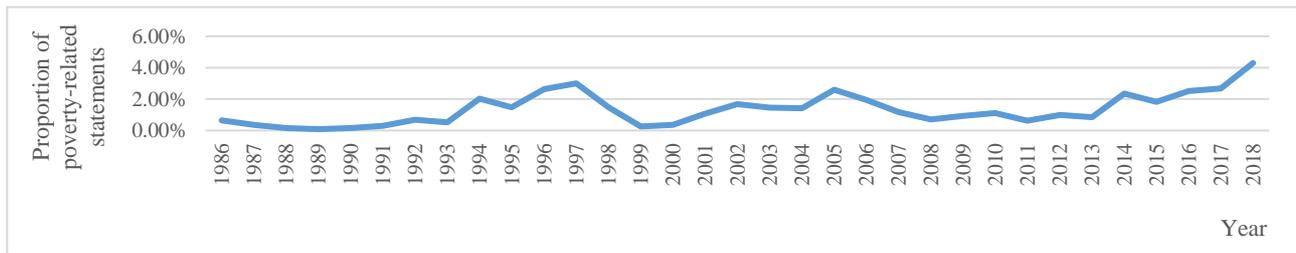
The academic community has carried out in-depth study on targeted poverty alleviation. Scholars mostly summarize the experience and lessons of targeted poverty alleviation in different places through case analysis, and some scholars also expatiate on the idea of targeted poverty alleviation from a relatively theoretical perspective. However, there is still insufficient research on the ideological context of targeted poverty alleviation from policy texts. The limited and scarce attention of the government is an important factor to push policy into agenda setting, formulation and implementation, which can be reflected through specific policy texts. The government work report issued by the State Council annually directly reflects the distribution of government policy attention and a good carrier for research.

This work selected the report on the work of the government from 1986 to 2018, analyzed the relevant

contents of poverty alleviation through text measurement and content coding, examined the origin, evolution and development of poverty alleviation policies, displayed the changes of government attention intensity and direction in different stages, and explored its transformation path and innovation trend.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT HISTORY OF CHINA'S POVERTY ALLEVIATION POLICY

Fig. 1 shows that the proportion of poverty alleviation in the government work report has alternating characteristics of "rising rapidly and fluctuating downward" stage. The central government's focus on poverty alleviation increased significantly from 1993 to 1994, from 2000 to 2001 and from 2013 to 2014. These time nodes are highly consistent with the key points of the government's poverty alleviation policy: the implementation of the "87 Poverty Alleviation Project" in 1994, the promulgation of the China Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Project (2001-2010) in 2000, and the proposal of "Targeted Poverty Alleviation" in 2013. Thus, the evolution of poverty alleviation policies can be divided into four stages: the stage of large-scale poverty alleviation in special poverty areas from 1986 to 1993; the stage of "87 Poverty Alleviation Project" aimed at solving the problem of food and clothing from 1994 to 2000; the poverty alleviation and development stage for the improvement of production and living conditions in poor areas from 2001 to 2012; the new stage of targeted poverty alleviation from 2013 to date.



**Figure 1.** Changes in the intensity of the central government’s focus on poverty alleviation policies from 1986 to 2018

Through keyword coding of poverty alleviation related content in the annual report, it can be found that keywords at different stages present different characteristics.

**Table 1.** Keywords on poverty alleviation policies in government work report at all stages

First stage (1986-1993)	"Aged, young, remote, poor" (1986, 1987, 1993); counterpart support (1986, 1993); material support (1986); systematic poverty alleviation (1990); improvement of production and living conditions (1991); motivation of all parties (1992)
Second stage (1994-2000)	"87 Poverty Alleviation Project" (1994, 1995, 2000); addressing the problem of food and clothing (1994, 1996, 1997, 1998); family planning (1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998); financial support (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998); work relief (1995, 1997); social concern (1996); diversified forms of poverty alleviation (1996)
Third stage (2001-2012)	Rural poverty alleviation and development project (2003, 2011, 2012, 2013); "aged, young, remote, poor" (2001, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013); social assistance system for urban and rural people with special difficulties (2005, 2006); "five insured households" support system (2005, 2006); minimum living security system for rural residents (2006); raise poverty alleviation standards (2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013); entire-village advancement (2009); labor force transfer training (2009); industrial poverty alleviation (2009); new rural social pension insurance (2010)
Fourth stage (2013 to date)	Targeted poverty alleviation (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018); poverty alleviation from village to household (2014); basic public services (2014, 2017, 2018); social forces participation (2014, 2016, 2017); special poverty alleviation fund (2017, 2018); education poverty alleviation project (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018); relocation of impoverished residents (2016, 2017, 2018); industrial poverty alleviation (2016, 2017, 2018)

### 2.1. Stage of large-scale poverty alleviation in special poor areas

After 1978, the reform of rural economic system greatly liberated the productive forces. However, the reform of market economy has increased the degree of income inequality within rural areas, and the income gap between urban and rural areas has widened again since 1988 [1]. In order to improve this situation, the government began to implement large-scale poverty alleviation in poor areas. In September 1984, the Notice on Helping Poor Areas Change their Appearance called for "concentrating efforts

on solving the problems of more than a dozen poor areas". In 1985, counties with per capita income of less than 150 yuan were identified as poor counties. In 1986, the "Seventh Five-year Plan" pointed out that it is necessary to "support the aged, young, remote and poor areas to get rid of economic and cultural backwardness as soon as possible". At the organizational level, the "leading group on economic development in poor areas of the state council" was established in 1986, and the administrative system established by local governments at all levels has standardized and institutionalized poverty alleviation and development.

In the report on government work at this stage, except 1986, when poverty alleviation was elaborated in detail, relevant statements in the following years were only a few words. It can be seen that the government's attention to poverty alleviation during this period was still a little insufficient.

### 2.2. Stage of "87 poverty alleviation" aimed at solving the problem of food and clothing

In March 1994, the National 87 Poverty Alleviation Plan was promulgated, requiring to concentrate efforts to basically solve the problem of food and clothing within seven years. Since 1994, the work-relief fund and the discount interest loan for poverty alleviation have both been increased by another 1 billion yuan, and will continue to increase funding. Party and government organs, enterprises and institutions will be fully mobilized to link up with designated poverty-stricken counties, democratic parties will carry out intellectual support, and developed provinces and cities along the eastern coast will help the development of the poverty-stricken provinces (autonomous regions) in the west [2].

At this stage, the description of poverty alleviation in the government work report has increased significantly. The "87 Poverty Alleviation Plan" has been mentioned in many reports. A large amount of capital investment in the development of poverty alleviation is the main mode of work at this stage.

### 2.3. Stage of poverty alleviation and development for improving production and living conditions in poor areas

After the last stage, the number of poor counties decreased rapidly, and the spatial distribution of the poor population gradually dispersed [3]. In 2001, the Outline of China's Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development changed the emphasis from county to village, emphasizing "whole village advance". In this period, the new rural cooperative

medical care, rural minimum security system, and rural social endowment insurance system has been established one after another. Based on the development and poverty alleviation, it should pay more attention to the protection of vulnerable groups [4]. In 2011, the Outline (2011-2020) pointed that the challenge of poverty reduction had shifted from widespread absolute poverty to transitional poverty characterized by income inequality.

The description of poverty alleviation in this stage of the government work report adds a large number of social security policies, indicating that poverty alleviation has changed from development-oriented poverty alleviation to "two-round" mode that connects poverty alleviation and development with social security.

#### **2.4. The new stage of targeted poverty alleviation**

With the change of environment, the poverty reduction effect of economic growth decreases, and it is very important to implement more targeted poverty alleviation. After the "targeted poverty alleviation" proposed by General Secretary Xi Jinping in November 2013, Opinions on Innovating Mechanism to Solidly Promote the Work of Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development proposed the establishment of six major mechanisms such as targeted poverty alleviation work mechanism, which pushed poverty alleviation to a new stage. In May 2014, the Implementation Plan for the Establishment of a Precision Poverty Alleviation Work Mechanism called for the active promotion of "five batches" projects such as industry support and poverty alleviation [5]. In December 2015, the Decision of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on the Fight against Poverty" called for "by 2020, the rural poor will have no worries about food and clothing, and that compulsory education, basic medical care and housing are guaranteed". Under the guidance of the idea of precision poverty alleviation, it emphasizes "precision", mobilizes society and adopts comprehensive means to get rid of poverty.

At this stage, the proportion of poverty alleviation description in government work report is increasing, and the related discourse system is also changing. For example, the 2014 report stated that it is necessary to continue to declare war on poverty; the 2015 report pointed out that no matter how difficult it is, it is necessary to reduce rural poverty more than 10 million people this year"; the 2016 report mentioned that poverty alleviation is a hard task, and governments at all levels have set up military writ"; the 2018 report showed that poverty alleviation should be recognized by the masses and stand the test of history. Its language intensity has increased markedly.

### **3. TRANSFORMATION PATH AND INNOVATION TREND OF CHINA'S POVERTY ALLEVIATION POLICY**

The focus of government poverty alleviation in each stage has also shifted, and its path and trend have become apparent in the process of practice, and are reflected in the work reports of the central government over the years.

**Table 2.** Multidimensional evolution of statements related to poverty alleviation policies in government work reports over the years

Policy objectives	Solving the problem of food and clothing (1987, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998); common prosperity (1994); comprehensively build a well-off society (2017)
Policy implications	Development poverty alleviation (1996, 2001, 2003, 2009); poverty alleviation to village-to-household (2014); targeted poverty alleviation (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018); land-based policy (2016); implementation of safeguards for households (2018)
Policy subjects	Give full play to the enthusiasm of all parties (1992); mobilize the whole society to care about poverty alleviation (1996); participate in social forces (2014, 2016, 2017); industrial poverty alleviation (2016, 2017, 2018)
Policy tools	Material support (1986); financial support (1986, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998); counterpart support (1986, 1993, 2000); work relief (1991, 1993, 1995, 1997); talent exchange (1993, 1998); agricultural tax exemption (2002, 2005); east-west collaboration on poverty alleviation (2003); entire-village advancement (2009, 2017); special poverty alleviation fund (2017, 2018); integration of agricultural funds (2017)
Policy areas	Cultural poverty alleviation project (1995); science and technology poverty alleviation project (1997); education poverty alleviation project (2014, 2015, 2016, 2018); health poverty alleviation (2017, 2018); financial poverty alleviation (2018); ecological poverty alleviation (2018)
Policy evaluation	Minimum living security system for urban and rural residents (2002, 2006); social assistance system for the masses with special difficulties in urban and rural areas (2005, 2006); basic public services (2014, 2017, 2018); poverty exit mechanism (2017)

#### **3.1. Policy objective: solve the problem of food and clothing and comprehensively build a well-off society**

From the government work report, it can be found that the value orientation of the poverty alleviation policy goal has experienced the evolution from solving the problem of food and clothing to realizing the comprehensive well-off society, and the goal of "solving the problem of food and clothing" has been clearly put forward in the early reports.

Since 2011, with the promulgation of the Outline (2011-2020) and the introduction of "targeted poverty alleviation", China's poverty alleviation policy objectives have been further upgraded. The 2017 government work report pointed out that "poor areas and poor people are the biggest shortcomings in comprehensively building a well-off society". It means that getting rid of poverty and becoming rich is no longer a single demand for poverty alleviation in China. Building a well-off society around and enhancing people's happiness are the ultimate destination and core meaning of poverty alleviation policy.

### ***3.2. Policy implication: extensive to targeted***

Table 2 shows that the development of poverty alleviation is more accurate and concentrated. The early targeting mechanism ranged from poor counties to poor villages. During this period, the government work report mentioned "development poverty alleviation" many times. This overall poverty alleviation mode was determined by the national conditions at that time, and large-scale regional development ensured the efficiency of poverty alleviation. However, it is easy to produce the malpractice of accepting poverty alleviation ontology dislocation [6]. With the alleviation of the overall poverty situation in China, the problem of local poverty has gradually become prominent, so the fourth stage comprehensively implements the targeting mechanism of poor households, which is also reflected in the government work report. Since 2014, "targeted poverty alleviation" has been written into reports every year, and further proposed that "poverty alleviation should be extended to villages and households", "policies should be adopted according to people and places", "safeguard measures should be implemented according to households and people", and "extremely poor groups" should be taken care of.

### ***3.3. Policy subject: government dominance to pluralistic participation***

In the process of poverty alleviation for more than 30 years, the main body of policy presents a trend from single to pluralistic. In the early stage, the mode of large-scale regional poverty alleviation and development was mainly dominated by the government. But over time, the government, as a single entity, has been unable to fully meet the needs of poverty alleviation [7], therefore, the introduction of multiple subjects has become a consensus. In 1992, the government's work report put forward "giving full play to the enthusiasm of all parties and striving to do a good job in helping the poor"; in 1996, it put forward "mobilizing the whole society to care for poverty alleviation work". In the new stage of precision poverty alleviation, the government pays more attention to "social participation" and encourages enterprises to participate in "industrial poverty alleviation". A poverty alleviation

pattern of government-led, market-driven and social participation basically takes shape, which reflects the transformation of national governance concept from traditional to modern.

### ***3.4. Policy tool: single approach to comprehensive approaches***

In the first two stages, the government mainly adopts the means of "counterpart support", "material support", "fund support", and "work relief". Most of them belong to supply-oriented policy tools, and the types are relatively single. The 1996 report noted that poverty alleviation measures should be more diversified in order to "support and promote economic and social development in poor areas in various forms. In the new stage, the government began to use the policy toolbox in an all-round way and put out "combination boxing", including tools or measures such as "reducing agricultural and animal husbandry taxes, "regional cooperation and poverty alleviation, "changing areas for poverty alleviation and relocation, and "special poverty alleviation funds". The transformation from a single means to a comprehensive strategy makes the structure of policy tools more balanced and enhances the sustainability and unity of policy tools.

### ***3.5. Policy area: agriculture-oriented to comprehensive governance***

The government attaches great importance to rural work, and issued two ten-year "rural poverty alleviation and development project", which is reflected in the 2003, 2011, 2012 and 2013 government work reports. In the first two stages, the government focused on the issues of "promoting the healthy development of township enterprises", "reducing the burden of farmers", "rural population and family planning", and then expanded its policy coverage. In the past two years, the "cultural poverty alleviation project", "science and technology poverty alleviation project" and "education poverty alleviation project" have been carried out, and the health poverty alleviation, financial poverty alleviation, and ecological poverty alleviation have been put forward, gradually forming a comprehensive governance poverty alleviation system.

### ***3.6. Policy evaluation: income poverty to multidimensional poverty***

Early poverty alleviation assessment mainly calculates income, which easy to fall into the "digital poverty relief" pattern. Over time, the government is also promoting the establishment of more scientific and reasonable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; for example, it considers "basic public services" and social security policies, including the "minimum living guarantee system

for urban and rural residents" and the "social assistance system for urban and rural people with special difficulties" as important contents of the performance assessment of poverty alleviation. In addition, after entering the new period of targeted poverty alleviation, the government attaches importance to the establishment of dynamic "poverty withdrawal mechanism", puts forward that it should pay attention to "poor people returning to poverty due to illness", and improve its "endogenous motive force". Multidimensional poverty measurement should be combined with dynamic exit mechanism, so as to ensure the effectiveness of poverty alleviation policies.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS**

Through the text analysis of the government work report of the State Council from 1986 to 2018, the course of poverty alleviation in China can be divided into four stages. The study found that government attention and political centre of gravity is constantly changing, which formed the value orientation from adequate food and clothing to the well-off, action logic from extensive to precise, pattern from government leading to multiple participation, poverty alleviation mechanism from single approach to comprehensive approaches, poverty alleviation system from agricultural dominance to comprehensive treatment, and measurement models from income poverty to multidimensional poverty.

In the future, the primary absolute poverty in China will be gradually reduced, and will face more hidden and more difficult secondary poverty and relative poverty [8]. In the face of new challenges, how the government will form a comprehensive poverty management mechanism is crucial.

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