

# Exploring the Pathways for Social Work Intervention in Community Governance under Party-Building Leadership

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## Abstract

Community governance is the foundational project of the national governance system, and the organic integration of Party-building leadership with the professional strength of social work represents an important direction for enhancing the effectiveness of community governance. Currently, social work intervention in community governance faces practical dilemmas, including insufficient professional recognition and ambiguous identity positioning, administrative absorption and the weakening of professional autonomy, and imperfect mechanisms for the coordination of multiple actors. Based on the internal logic of Party-building leadership in social work intervention in community governance, this paper elaborates on the implementation pathways for social work participation in community governance from three dimensions: political leadership, administrative coordination, and professional services. It proposes a framework for building a "concentric circle" pattern of community governance centered on Party-building, and advances an approach to promoting the integrated development of social work and community governance through platform construction, mechanism innovation, capacity building, and the establishment of evaluation and incentive systems. This study aims to provide theoretical reference and practical inspiration for realizing a new governance pattern of joint construction, joint governance, and shared benefits at the grassroots level.

## Keywords

Party-building leadership, social work Intervention, community governance.

## 1. Introduction

Community governance is the cornerstone of national governance and a key link in advancing the modernization of the governance system and governance capacity. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) explicitly proposed to "improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and common interests, and enhance the effectiveness of social governance," emphasizing the need to "improve the grassroots governance platform with grid-based management, refined services, and information-based support." In 2023, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued *The Reform Plan for Party and State Institutions*[1], formally establishing the Society Work Department of the CPC Central Committee. This marked the integration of social work into the Party committee's work sequence, providing an institutional guarantee for Party-building to lead social work participation in grassroots governance.

The replacement of "social management" with "social governance" is not merely a change in terminology but represents a conceptual innovation. Governance differs from top-down management; it emphasizes the diversification of governing actors, interactive cooperation among actors, and the construction of autonomous and self-governing network systems [2]. As the basic social unit, the community is an arena where diverse governance forces converge.

However, community governance currently faces deep-seated dilemmas of utilitarianism, fragmentation, and hollowing out [3]. On the one hand, amid rapid social change, grassroots Party organizations have exhibited a "suspended" state, and the channels for shifting the governance focus downward have not yet been smoothed out. On the other hand, the rapidly developing professional social work, in the process of intervening in community governance, has encountered structural dilemmas such as unclear identity, low professional recognition, and administrative absorption [4]. Social work is a profession and occupation based on the concept of "helping people to help themselves," which has a natural compatibility with community work methods and grassroots governance. Social work concepts and methods can be applied to and drawn upon in community governance, thereby improving the management level and service quality of communities [5]. However, how can the community governance under Party leadership be organically integrated with professional social work services in the context of China's grassroots communities, taking root and flourishing on Chinese soil, and thereby blazing a community governance innovation path suited to China? This is one of the questions that scholars and relevant government departments urgently need to answer. Therefore, building upon the existing research achievements mentioned above, this paper takes Party-building leadership as the main thread to examine the practical dilemmas and internal logic of social work participation in social governance, and on this basis, explores the specific pathways for the organic integration of the two, with a view to contributing to the innovation of grassroots social governance.

## **2. The Practical Dilemmas of Social Work Intervention in Community Governance**

### **2.1. Insufficient Professional Recognition and Ambiguous Identity Positioning**

When social workers enter the community—an acquaintance or semi-acquaintance society—through an "external embedding" identity, the first problem they face is not how to apply professional techniques to carry out their work, but how to gain the recognition of legitimacy. Due to low professional recognition, the professional value and role of social workers are widely questioned by various community actors. Meanwhile, owing to ambiguous identity positioning, social workers find it difficult to identify their behavioral boundaries and functional roles amid complex community work. The two intertwine, constituting the foremost practical dilemma of social work intervention in community governance.

Insufficient professional recognition is mainly reflected in the cognitive biases of community cadres and residents toward social workers. The "instrumentalized" perception of social workers by community cadres leads them to equate social workers with administrative service personnel rather than equal collaborative professional partners. Community residents tend to confuse social workers with volunteers, grid workers, or neighborhood committee staff. In addition, when professional methods (such as community building, which requires a relatively long period) conflict with administrative efficiency requirements, some social workers are forced to prioritize obedience to administrative directives, and social workers themselves often develop professional confusion.

The primary cause of ambiguous identity positioning is the structural relationship of dependency. The office location, resource allocation, and work assessment of social workers often rely on the sub-district offices and neighborhood committees, which compels social workers to follow administrative directives in their actual work, thereby eroding their independent professional identity. Moreover, various parties (government, residents, property management) tend to expect social workers to "take care of everything" when encountering thorny problems, forcing social workers to become "firefighters" handling all kinds of trivial

matters and disputes. This leads to the infinite expansion of their professional domain and the passive dilution of their professionalism.

## **2.2. Administrative Absorption and the Weakening of Professional Autonomy**

Under the institutional framework of government procurement of services, social work agencies enter communities by undertaking projects, but they often face the risk of being absorbed by the grassroots administrative system. Research has pointed out that in the outsourcing of social service projects, grassroots governments exhibit a "process-based embedding" control logic toward social work agencies [6]. This is mainly manifested in three aspects: First, the administratization of task content. Social work service plans should be designed based on community needs, but under the government procurement system, the service content, service recipients, and frequency of activities are often directly designated by the administrative party, thus restricting the professional space of social work. Second, the administratization of working methods. Professional social work emphasizes a flexible service process of "building relationships—needs assessment—intervention—evaluation," with the time rhythm varying according to individuals and matters. However, the administrative system often requires progress and results to be visible on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis, forcing social workers to abandon certain professional steps in practice and squeezing out professional social work methods. Third, the replacement of professional ethics by administrative directives. For example, in community conflicts, professional ethics require social workers to remain neutral, understand the demands of all parties, and seek common solutions. However, the administrative party sometimes hopes that social workers will side with one party to help do the "ideological work" of the other. When conflicts arise, due to the resource-dependent nature of social workers and agencies, they often choose to comply with administrative requirements. Over the long term, the internalized standards of professional judgment are gradually replaced by administrative standards.

Administrative absorption weakens the unique value of social work intervention in community governance. When the government procures social work services, what it ultimately obtains may be a low-cost administrative auxiliary force rather than a professional force genuinely capable of innovating governance models and stimulating community vitality.

## **2.3. Imperfect Mechanisms for the Coordination of Multiple Actors**

Community governance advocates the joint participation of multiple actors. In practice, departmental barriers and fragmentation between vertical and horizontal structures remain prominent obstacles. The absence of coordination platforms and coordination rules makes it impossible for different governing actors to achieve information sharing and resource mobilization, and governance struggles to form a synergy. Consequently, social workers' services are often confined to "going it alone" in areas such as organizing cultural and sports activities and providing visiting and supporting services—basic tasks. For deep-seated problems requiring multi-party coordination, such as disputes over installing elevators in old residential communities, the renovation of community public spaces, and comprehensive environmental remediation, social workers find it difficult to intervene, or even after intervention, are unable to drive fundamental resolution, leaving services perpetually at a "superficial" level.

When coordination mechanisms fail and projects or services led by social workers produce poor results due to resource cutoffs or poor information flow, other actors (such as community cadres and residents) tend to attribute the failure to "the incompetence of social workers" or "the ineffectiveness of professional methods," rather than reflecting on the problems of the mechanism itself. This intensifies doubts about the professionalism of social workers, further reducing their discourse power and trust in subsequent coordination.

### 3. The Internal Logic of the Party Building Leading Social Work to Intervene in Community Governance

#### 3.1. Value Alignment

The purpose of the Party is to serve the people wholeheartedly, and "putting the people first" is the starting point and ultimate goal of all the Party's work. The core mission of social work is to help people help themselves, serve disadvantaged groups, and safeguard residents' rights and interests. The value foothold of both focuses on enhancing the well-being of the people. The Party's mass line emphasizes "from the masses, to the masses," with its essence lying in trusting the masses, relying on the masses, and mobilizing the masses. The social work profession likewise upholds concepts such as "client self-determination" and the "strengths perspective," regarding residents as capable, resourceful actors rather than passive recipients of relief. The two share a value foundation of "respecting subjectivity and stimulating endogenous strength" in their basic attitudes toward community residents. In this sense, Party-building leadership and social work intervention in community governance are two forms of practice on different tracks but stemming from the same value root—an inherent unity.

#### 3.2. Functional Complementarity

Party-building leadership in social work essentially combines the political advantage of the Party's overall leadership with the professional advantage of social work [7]. Grassroots Party organizations possess strong capacities for organizational mobilization and resource integration, enabling them to break down departmental barriers and forge governance synergy; social work possesses professional skills such as needs assessment, relationship adjustment, resource linkage, and capacity building, enabling it to precisely respond to the diverse needs of residents. On the one hand, social work faces the practical dilemma of "professional suspension" in grassroots governance. Particularly when social work participates in coordination mechanisms such as the "Five-Sphere Linkage" or "Three-Sphere Linkage," without a strong central coordinating force, it can easily fall into a fragmented situation where each acts on its own. On the other hand, traditional community Party-building work takes organizational development and political education as its core tasks, but in responding to increasingly complex resident needs, resolving deep-seated community conflicts, and promoting refined services, it often faces problems of insufficient methods and limited responsiveness. Social work has methods and techniques but lacks the capacity for authoritative resource mobilization, while Party-building work has political authority and organizational networks but requires professional methods to enhance its service supply capacity. The complementarity of the two constitutes the functional logic of Party-building leadership in social work intervention in community governance.

#### 3.3. Pathway Commonality

The Party's mass line and professional social work methods exhibit a high degree of isomorphism at the operational level. The core method of the mass line is to realize the Party's flesh-and-blood ties with the masses by going deep among the masses, listening to the masses, and mobilizing the masses. Professional social work methods likewise emphasize going deep into communities, assessing needs, linking resources, and empowering and mobilizing—the two are essentially different routes leading to the same destination. On the one hand, introducing social work methods into Party-building work can promote the transformation of Party-building work from an "administrative command" mode to a "service-oriented leadership" mode. On the other hand, the Party's mass line also provides profound value resources and methodological nourishment for the localization of social work, enabling professional social work to escape the dilemma of "rootless suspension" in the Western theoretical context and gain new vitality in the practical soil of the mass line. Finally, the masses'

sense of ownership and enthusiasm for participation are not only the goal orientation of the Party's mass line but also the practical destination of social work's concept of "empowerment." The core goal of social work is to help service recipients move from "passive acceptance" to "active participation," which is highly consistent with the Party's fundamental proposition of "relying on the people to create great historical undertakings."

#### **4. Pathways for Social Work Intervention in Community Governance under Party-Building Leadership**

##### **4.1. Building a "Concentric Circle" Pattern of Community Governance Centered on Party-Building**

For Party-building to lead community governance, it is first necessary to clarify the positioning of multiple actors and the core position of Party-building leadership. The community Party organization serves as the center of the concentric circles, responsible for political oversight of social work intervention projects, conducting "secondary allocation" of governmental vertical-and-horizontal resources, resources of units within the jurisdiction, and social resources, and coordinating conflicts between professional social workers and other actors using public interest as the yardstick. Under the direct guidance of the Party organization, professional social workers undertake the roles of professional translation and relationship bond, including translating the Party organization's macro-policy language (such as "micro-governance" and "refined services") into operable technical processes, and cultivating community-internal organizations and guiding their standardized operation. Business committees, property management, units within the jurisdiction, volunteer teams, and resident backbones are incorporated into the outer layers of the concentric circles. The Party organization annually releases a "Community Governance Participation Opportunity List," clarifying the specific affairs that each actor can undertake. The depth of participation of each actor is divided according to the nature of the issue: for example, service-oriented issues may be authorized for social workers to lead; resource-allocation issues require the Party organization to take the lead, with social workers providing technical proposals and resident representatives voting; and rule-making issues require full discussion, with social workers serving as facilitators. The concentric circle model does not emphasize hierarchical relationships between superior and subordinate, but rather emphasizes the goal consistency among different actors and their mutual linkage and support.

##### **4.2. Establishing Effective Service Platforms and Linkage Mechanisms**

"Opinions on Strengthening the Modernization of the Grassroots Governance System and Governance Capacity," issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in 2021, explicitly required "innovating the linkage mechanism among communities, social organizations, social workers, community volunteers, and social charitable resources" [8], providing direction for social work participation in community governance.

The physical carrier of the service platform should rely on the Party-Mass Service Center to establish a "Five-Sphere Linkage Workstation," which, combined with the professional advantages of social work, is divided into a resource docking zone, a project incubation zone, a joint deliberation zone, and a capacity training zone. The operation of the service platform requires fully mobilizing multi-party interaction, embedding the linkage mechanism throughout the entire process of community governance, including joint diagnosis of needs, dynamic resource ledgers across the five spheres, and combined packaging of actions, forming a closed loop of "needs—resources—actions" that drives the interaction of the five spheres.

To address the problems of the temporary nature of volunteers and the contingent nature of charitable resources, the platform should establish a "position-based + certification-based"

mechanism for volunteers and a "project-based + transparency-based" mechanism for charitable resources. The former requires setting up fixed volunteer positions, with social workers serving as position supervisors. Completing a certain number of hours earns points, which can be exchanged for services or resources, thereby incentivizing the long-term continuity of volunteer service. The latter requires breaking the one-time donation format when docking with merchants, enterprises, and public welfare foundations within the jurisdiction. Funds should be deposited following a "community micro-fund" model, with social workers designing small and micro projects according to needs and periodically providing illustrated execution reports to donors, thereby consolidating the credibility of charity.

Party-building leadership is the fundamental prerequisite for ensuring platform operation and effective linkage. First, the Party organization holds the final veto power over the platform; any cooperation proposal that deviates from the public welfare direction, involves obviously unfair distribution, or may intensify conflicts can be vetoed by the Party committee and ordered to be reconsidered. Second, regular self-examination should be conducted around dimensions such as mass satisfaction, coordination efficiency, and public welfare ethics, with corrective measures proposed to prevent the linkage from degenerating into competing for resources and shirking responsibilities.

#### **4.3. Innovating the "Professional Social Worker + Grid Worker" Coordinated Service Mechanism**

The coordinated cooperation between social workers and grid workers is key to enhancing the professionalism of community governance. First, clarify the role positioning of grid workers and social workers. Grid workers are responsible for "comprehensive scanning" and "rapid response"—that is, leveraging their advantages of being familiar with people, places, and situations to complete routine patrols, basic information collection, policy publicity, and on-site mediation of simple conflicts, and referring problems beyond their capacity to social workers. Social workers are responsible for "in-depth intervention" and "resource stitching"—applying professional methods to systematically intervene in complex individual cases reported by grid workers to achieve the goal of resolving or improving problems. Second, achieve mutual capacity empowerment. Grid workers should receive regular social work skills training so that they can provide more professionally valuable information when reporting problems, though they are not required to conduct professional intervention. Social workers should also regularly accompany grid workers on patrols in order to understand grassroots administrative logic, policy interpretations, and the language of mass work, thereby avoiding proposals that are detached from reality.

The Party organization undertakes the role of supervision and resource guarantee. For "stubborn individual cases" that show no improvement even after social work intervention, the Party organization convenes multi-line forces such as public security, health, and civil affairs to hold on-site meetings, with social workers providing professional analysis reports and grid workers providing real-time monitoring information, forming a multi-departmental joint handling plan. In addition, assessment indicators for grid workers and social workers should be innovated, such as adding a "professional coordination index" to the assessment of grid workers and a "grid integration index" to the assessment of social workers, to promote the rapid improvement of coordination efficiency between the two.

#### **4.4. Promoting the Cultivation of Community Organizations and Capacity Building for Resident Participation**

The ultimate purpose of community governance is to cultivate residents' sense of ownership and self-governance capacity, and the concept of "helping people help themselves" and the methods of capacity building in social work can provide professional support for this. Facing

existing or potential community organizations, social workers can divide them into three tiers according to their maturity—nascent organizations, growing organizations, and mature organizations—and adopt different cultivation strategies for different types of community organizations. For successfully operating community organizations, their identity recognition can be enhanced through "plaque awarding" or "prize awarding." Facing community residents, social workers should provide supporting training and hands-on scenarios according to their capacity levels in participating in community affairs. Completing the training and practicing once earns points, which can be exchanged for community services or small gifts. Resident participation requires not only technical capacity but also the internalization of public spirit, and "value internalization" under Party-building leadership is the main strategy for achieving the internalization of public spirit. The Party organization also provides fundamental political legitimacy for the formation and operation of community organizations. By clarifying the institutional boundaries of participation, value bottom lines, and risk-backstop frameworks, residents' self-organizing behaviors gain predictable policy guarantees, avoiding the dilemma of "self-extinguishing as soon as self-initiated" caused by ambiguous identity or suspended resources.

#### **4.5. Establishing a Needs-Oriented Service Evaluation and Incentive System**

Effective community governance also requires corresponding evaluation and reward mechanisms. Currently, the evaluation of grid-based management overemphasizes quantifiable standards such as the amount of information collected and the proportion of problems handled, while neglecting issues such as whether the needs of the masses have been met and how satisfied the masses are. The needs-assessment approach of social work can be learned from to evaluate services based on the degree of mass needs.

Specifically, the evaluation mechanism should be improved in four aspects: First, establish a needs assessment system, understanding and analyzing various resident needs before formulating service plans to ensure that service content is targeted and effective. Second, introduce resident satisfaction evaluation, taking mass evaluation as an important weight in service assessment to ensure that the scoring power returns to the hands of residents. Third, establish professional supervision and peer review mechanisms for social work services to ensure the professionalism and standardization of service quality. At the same time, flexible incentive measures should be designed, such as setting up grid public welfare micro-investment and grid appraisals to mobilize the enthusiasm and creativity of various governing actors.

### **5. Summary**

Social work intervention in community governance under Party-building leadership is an effective approach to advancing the modernization of grassroots governance in the new era. Continued efforts are needed in three aspects: political integration, administrative integration, and professional integration—namely, leading the construction of a community governance ecosystem through Party-building, promoting information exchange and sharing among various actors through platform construction, ensuring the professional independence of social work through institutional innovation, and mobilizing residents' enthusiasm for self-governance through capacity building. At present, social work intervention in community governance under Party-building leadership is still in the exploratory stage. The economic and social development conditions, governance foundations, and cultural traditions vary across regions, and specific forms of practical implementation need to be explored in light of local realities. Future research should pay more attention to the differences in social work intervention across different types of communities, and fully explore the interactive relationship between Party-building leadership and professional social work intervention, so

as to contribute more theoretical support and practical wisdom to building a grassroots governance community in which everyone has responsibilities, everyone fulfills their responsibilities, and everyone shares in the benefits.

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