

The Social Welfare Provision for the Elderly in Rural Areas of China: A Case Study in Da'an District of Zigong in Sichuan Province

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Abstract

This qualitative research aimed to 1) investigate the living conditions and challenges of the elderly in rural areas of Da'an District, Zigong City. 2) To analyze the social welfare provision to improve the quality of life of the elderly. This study involved a total of 16 key informants through purposive sampling. The research methods used to collect data in this study include document analysis and interviews. The data were analyzed by content analysis.

The study found that 1) the elderly population in Da'an District, China, lives in modest conditions and engages mostly in farming occupations. They are considered relatively underprivileged and rely on farming, their children's support, government allowances, and savings as their primary sources of income. Family care is the primary source of support for older people in rural areas, and they often opt to get medicine from a pharmacy to save money. They face economic difficulties due to insufficient income, lack of access to quality healthcare services, and limited opportunities for spiritual, cultural, and recreational activities, which leads to a sense of emptiness and loneliness. 2) Collaborative social welfare implementation among the government, community, and family support systems has been effective in providing social welfare for the elderly in rural areas, including basic housing units, free medical check-ups, monthly subsidies, winter clothing, essential food items, and mobility aids. This study highlights the effectiveness of collaborative governance in providing social welfare for the elderly in rural areas and can serve as a model for future policymaking and implementation in other areas.

Keywords: Social Welfare Provision; Elderly policy; Rural elderly; Da'an district; Zigong, China

Introduction

In the 21st century, global aging is accelerating (Béland & Durandal, 2013). China is one of the fastest-growing aging populations in the world. The population of people over 60 years old in China is projected to reach 32.45 % in 2040, and 41.91 % by 2060 (figure 1) and the size of the elderly population aged 60 and above is expected to peak at about 482 million in the 21st century, possibly in 2053 due to longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates. This huge demographic shift presents many new challenges and opportunities for public health and socioeconomic development, in particular the development of an integrated system that caters to the health and social needs of older people with equal access to health care regardless of geographical area. (Zhai et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2023). In conclusion, the population size of the elderly in China is rising, and the demand for social welfare for the elderly will continue to increase.

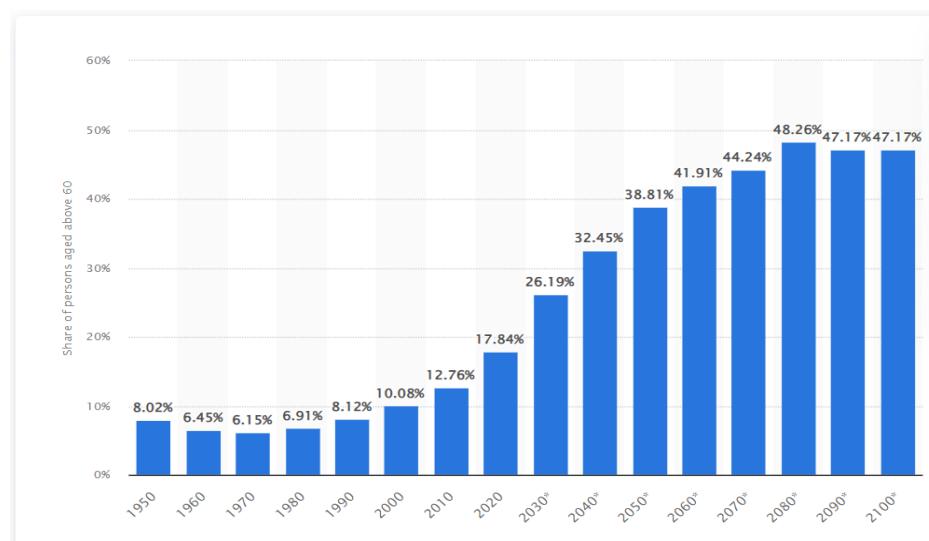


Figure 1: Share of population aged 60 and older in China from 1950 to 2020 with forecasts until 2100 (Statista, 2021).

The aging problem in China poses a significant challenge in rural areas, as more than 70% of the aging population resides in the countryside (Yang, 2007). Due to rural–urban migration, the rural population is aging at a rapid pace, and by the year 2030, the proportion of people aged 60 and above in rural and urban areas will reach 21.8% and 14.8%, respectively (Cai & Wang,

2005). Therefore, with the trend of population aging, the government will also face the pressure of social welfare management for the elderly.

China has implemented comprehensive policies on social welfare for the elderly through various means, including constitutional provisions, laws such as the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, government decisions like the Decision on Strengthening the Work on Aging, long-term plans such as the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of China's Aging Undertaking, and specific guidelines like the "Opinions on Strengthening the Work on Aging in the New Era". These policies are primarily established through legislation, regulations, rules, and government initiatives. They aim to provide extensive coverage and support for the elderly population in China (Krings et al., 2021). However, social welfare policies for elderly individuals in rural areas are relatively limited and cannot effectively address the needs of a large proportion of the population and rapid growth.

Sichuan Province is facing a serious aging challenge due to its large aging population base, rapid growth rate, advanced age, and high number of empty-nest elderly. According to the 2010 National Population Census, Sichuan Province has a permanent resident population of 80.4 million, with over 10.9% of the population aged 65 or older, which is 2.08% higher than the national average. It is projected that by 2027, more than 25% of the province's population will be aged 60 or older, and this will increase to over 33% by 2036. The growing demands for pensions, medical treatment, and social services for the elderly are having a profound impact on the economy and society of Sichuan Province (Lu, 2015). Despite central and local government efforts to improve social welfare for the elderly as a whole, elderly people living in rural areas still face problems receiving social welfare that is sufficient for their livelihood.

According to the 7th National Census Bulletin of Zigong City, the city's population is 2.49 million people, with 68.05 ten thousand people aged over 60, accounting for 27.34% of the total population. This marks an increase of 8.65 percentage points from 2010. Additionally, the population living in rural areas is 1.1 million people. The aging rate of Zigong City ranks fourth in the country and second in the province (Zigong Municipal People's Government Office, 2022). Da'an is a district of Zigong, located in Sichuan Province, China. In Zigong, there are 690,000 elderly people aged 60 or above, accounting for 27% of the total population. In Da'an District, there are 290,000 permanent residents, with 84,000 people aged 60 or older accounting for 29% of the total population, including 240,000 rural residents. The acceleration of aging has had

a negative impact, which has resulted in increased pressure on the government's social security and public services.

The statement above outlines the challenges that the elderly population in rural areas of Zigong, Sichuan Province, as well as the government, are facing. Therefore, this study was conducted in the Da'an District of Zigong and aims to examine their living conditions and propose social policies to ensure basic social welfare for them. The results of this study are expected to make a significant contribution towards promoting effective social welfare policies by the governments (central and local) that can adapt to the rapid aging of the rural population in China.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the living conditions and problems faced by the elderly in rural areas of Da'an District, Zigong City.
2. To analyze the social welfare provision to improve the quality of life of the elderly in rural areas of Da'an District, Zigong City.

Literature Review

Social welfare

Social welfare refers to social services provided by the state or other sectors to assist people in achieving a good quality of life and a standard of living that is acceptable in society. The forms of assistance or services provided can be either monetary, goods, care, or other types of services. Assistance or services may be related to areas such as education, healthcare, housing, income security, employment, recreation, and other social services (Sodapacha et al. 2017). In other words, social welfare typically focuses on two aspects: income and economic sufficiency for livelihood, as well as other factors related to quality of life and personal well-being, such as mental health. It is important for social welfare providers to prioritize both aspects to ensure that beneficiaries can have a fulfilling and high-quality life. Social welfare provision can be divided into two types (Bualar, 2022). The first is "Basic Welfare by State," which refers to mandatory welfare programs provided by both the central and local governments to improve the quality of life for people in society. These programs cover areas such as healthcare, housing, employment and income, education, social security, and access to social services. The second type is "Optional social welfare," which refers to community-based welfare programs that are developed through

collaboration between members of the community and government agencies to promote additional welfare and services for people in the community to receive stronger benefits.

Theory of Collaborative Governance (CG)

The Theory of Collaborative Governance (CG) (Ansell & Gash, 2008) is a framework for understanding how collaborations among stakeholders can be used to address complex public problems. The theory is based on the idea that traditional bureaucratic approaches to problem-solving are often inadequate for addressing complex issues and that collaborative governance can be more effective. Ansell and Gash (2008) identify several key factors that are necessary for successful collaborative governance. These include shared goals, mutual trust, open communication, inclusive participation by a diverse range of stakeholders, including government agencies, community organizations, and private sector actors, and adaptive learning. CB should be flexible and able to adapt to changing circumstances, with an emphasis on continuous learning and improvement. Ansell's Theory of Collaborative Governance emphasizes the importance of collaboration, trust, and communication in addressing complex public problems. By bringing together diverse stakeholders and fostering a shared understanding of the problem, collaborative governance can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions. The CG theory had been employed in various studies in different countries and found success in multiple areas. Firstly, the study by Chriqui et al. (2013) demonstrated that collaborative governance was effective in reducing childhood and adolescent obesity rates within a community. This suggests that collaborative governance can be a valuable approach to addressing complex public health issues and achieving positive outcomes. A study conducted by Alam and Mahmudul (2022) further highlighted the critical factors essential for the success of collaborative efforts to cope with the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh. These factors include effective coordination between governmental and non-governmental entities, the mobilization of resources, facilitating access and communication, active community engagement, and the government's ability to adapt in response to the crisis. And lastly, in Thailand, Collaborative Governance of Local Governments to Promote the Quality of Life of the Elderly in Samut Prakan Province by Supromin (2023) found that the factors of leadership and participation in both the public sector (central and local government), private sector, community, and the elderly group are essential for the success of collaboration to promote the quality of life of the elderly in urban areas.

Concept the quality of life of the Elderly

The measurement of quality of life has become a major feature of much social research in health care and social studies. The concept of quality of life is now widely used as an indicator to provide social welfare for people and as an indicator to assess the living conditions of people to achieve their receiving social welfare from the government. However, the concept of quality of life varies not only from person to person but also from time to time (Liu, 1975). The World Health Organization (WHO, 1997) has provided a widely used measure for evaluating quality of life that identifies four aspects of the elderly population's quality of life.

(1) The physical domain is the perception of a person's physical condition, which affects daily life.

(2) The psychological domain is the perception of one's own mental state, such as perception, knowledge, or spreading legs.

(3) Social relationship is the perception of one's relationship with a person, smell, perception, receiving help, and being a person who helps other people in society.

(4) Environment is the perception of the environment that affects life; perceived interactions between oneself and the environment. The perception of one's independent life is safety and stability in life, etc.

Moreover, when measuring the quality of life of the elderly, typically two dimensions are considered (Netuveli & Blane, 2008): (1) the objective dimension, on the basis of observations external to the individual such as standard of living, income, education, health status, and longevity. (2) Subjective well-being dimension, on the basis of psychological responses by the individual such as life satisfaction, happiness, and self-ratings.

Furthermore, Shen et al. (2012) proposed that the measurement of quality of life should cover four areas in measuring the quality of life for the elderly in China, including physical, psychological, healthcare, economic status, and income. In summary, measuring the quality of elderly life must include both physical and internal dimensions and psychologically as well. Therefore, based on the relevant theory and literature, this study employed a research framework that measures the elderly quality of life in both the subjective well-being dimension and the objective dimension, as depicted in Figure 2.

Conceptual Framework

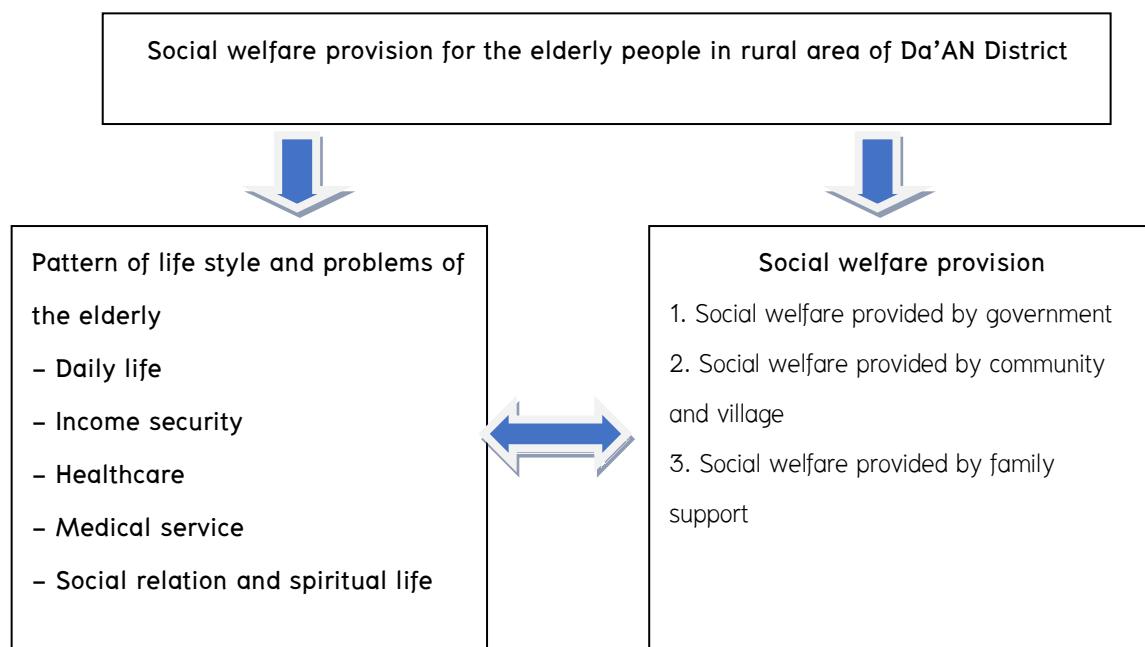


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods to investigate the living conditions and social welfare provision of elderly individuals residing in rural areas of the Da'an district of Zigong. The data collection process involves document analysis and in-depth interviews, which are subsequently analyzed using content analysis techniques.

Sampling and Selection This study focuses on two villages situated in Da'an District, Zigong, China, as the case studies. The research used purposeful sampling to carry out in-depth interviews with 16 key informants from four different target groups, which include 8 elderly individuals from villages A and B, 2 heads of village, 4 officials involved in social welfare for the elderly from the Zigong Municipal Government, 2 experts and researchers specializing in social welfare for the elderly, and 4 government officials in charge of social welfare (Table 1).

Table 1: The sampling and Key Informant for Interview

Key Informants	Number
1. The Chinese elderly in Rural area village A	4
2. The Chinese elderly in Rural area village B	4
3. Head of village	2
4. Experts or researchers	2
5. A government official in charge of social welfare	4

Research Instrument: The data collection method utilized in the study involved the use of documents, research articles related to livelihood and social welfare provision in China, and semi-structured interview forms for research purposes. The researcher created an interview form based on theoretical concepts of social welfare for the elderly and collaborative governance. The interview form was then reviewed by three experts to ensure its accuracy and appropriateness. The researcher then revised the interview form to align with the experts' recommendations.

Data Collection: The researcher scheduled the interviews and provided the date and time accordingly. On the day of the interviews, the researcher requested permission to record audio and take photographs for the purpose of accurately documenting the research findings in the report, in accordance with the research objectives. The researcher interviewed the key informant of the sample group, examined the data, and then combined the data for analysis until sufficient data saturation was achieved, aligning with the study's objectives. (Cresswell, 1998)

Data analysis: This study is qualitative research. The content analysis is employed to analyze the existing laws and regulations related to social welfare for the elderly that are implemented at the central and local levels in China and based on research objectives. Additionally, the data from the interview is analyzed through content analysis, which consists of four steps: data collection, data organization, data presentation, and data validation (Mile & Huberman, 1994). Finally, to ensure accuracy, reliability, and prevent errors in data collection, it is necessary to verify the consistency of the data. In qualitative research, triangulation is commonly used to achieve accurate data. Triangulation involves using multiple methods to cross-check the data. The researcher has employed data triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodology methods in this research (Denzin, 1970).

Research results

Objective 1 The research result found that the living conditions of the elderly in Da'an District, Zigong City, are relatively simple, only needing to satisfy the basic needs. Most of them are farmers. When they are sick, they go to pharmacies to buy medicine instead of going to hospitals, where they will be prescribed a lot of medicines and tests that are very costly because they want to save money. They feed themselves on animals such as chickens, ducks, fish, and pigs. Elderly people's income comes from farming, their children's support, and the allowance of the government. People over 60 years old can get at least 60 yuan a month from the government. They do not want to spend that much money. Most of the transportation is by foot or public bus. The most difficult thing for Chinese seniors is income; they need more income for life support. Home-based nursing care meets daily care needs, but does not have the attention of the community care model. Elderly people have little or no spiritual life or recreational activities and overall feel empty and lonely.

In conclusion, it was found that the quality of life of the elderly in rural China is relatively low and that they face difficulties in their lives due to physical and mental health problems, low economic income, increased costs of medical care, and a lack of social attention and services.

The main problems of the elderly in the rural area of Da'an district of Zigong are depicted in Figure 3, which has the following five issues:

1. Economic difficulties. Insufficient income requires more ways to support income.
2. Lack of health care. Poor quality of care and need for specialized health care.
3. High demand for medical and health services. Tendency to self-quality affects health; need better medical services.
4. Basic life needs to be improved. Simple life, no actual dietary expenditure, simple traveling.
5. Lack of spiritual, cultural, and recreational activities, life is empty and lonely.

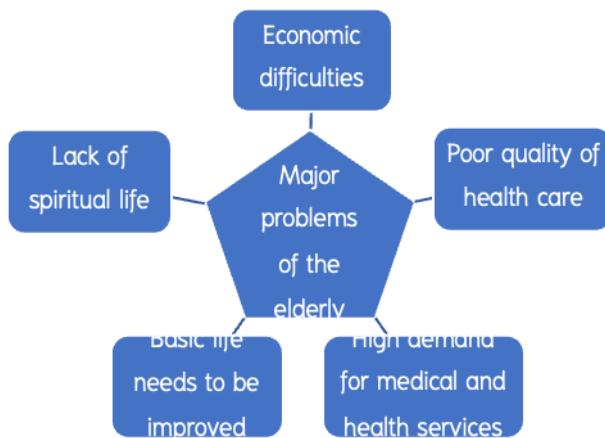


Figure 3: The Main problems of the elderly in Da'an District, Zigong City

Objective 2: The research results found that the local government of Da'An Provision for the Elderly

1. The government constructs basic housing units for elderly people whose homes are at risk of collapsing. The government is building simple homes for elderly people whose current homes are in danger of collapsing. This is to ensure their safety and well-being.
2. Annually, the county provides complimentary medical examinations for elderly individuals residing in rural areas. Every year, the county provides free medical check-ups for elderly people who live in rural areas. This is to help them maintain good health and detect any potential health issues early on.
3. The elderly who are experiencing difficulties can receive voluntary assistance and are eligible to access free daily living support at public nursing homes. Elderly individuals who are struggling can receive voluntary assistance and may qualify for free daily living support at public nursing homes. This is to provide them with the care they need to live comfortably.
4. Village doctors conduct medical consultations and checkups for elderly individuals at their homes. Local doctors visit the homes of elderly individuals to provide medical consultations and checkups. This is to make it easier for them to access healthcare services.
5. The government offers a minimum monthly subsidy of 60 yuan for the eligible elderly. The government provides a minimum monthly subsidy of 60 yuan to eligible elderly individuals. This is to help them with their living expenses and ensure that they have a basic standard of living.

Community Welfare for the Elderly in Rural area

1. Daily minivan transport is available between villages and towns, but the elderly have to pay for themselves. This means that there are minivans that operate daily to transport people between villages and towns. However, elderly individuals would need to pay for their own transportation fees.

2. Winter clothing is provided free for the elderly in need by the village committee. Winter clothing is provided free for the elderly in need by the village committee. The village committee provides winter clothing at no cost to elderly individuals who are in need. Winter clothing may include jackets, gloves, hats, and other warm clothing items.

3. A quarterly distribution of rice, oil, and meat is made free of charge to elderly in need individuals at their homes. Every three months, a distribution of rice, oil, and meat is made available to elderly individuals who are in need. This distribution is provided at their homes and is free of charge.

4. Wheelchairs are provided at no cost to elderly individuals with mobility impairments or disabilities. Elderly individuals who have difficulty moving around due to mobility impairments or disabilities can receive wheelchairs at no cost. These wheelchairs are provided free of charge to help them move around more easily.

5. The "Elderly People's Association" is established by the village committee, which organizes cultural and recreational activities such as singing and dancing twice a month. Collaborative recreational activities with neighboring villages are also organized. Moreover, the village committee provides an elderly center and facilities for social activity such as daily meetings, physical exercise, libraries, and card games. And lastly, every month, the headman of the village pays a visit to the elderly in their homes.

Family Support for the Elderly in rural area.

1. Daily care is provided by their spouse, sons, and daughters. Elderly people who live in rural areas of DA'An depend on four primary sources of income to support themselves: farming and agriculture, support from their children, government allowance, and their savings."

(1.1) Farming and agriculture: This refers to the practice of growing crops, raising livestock such as pigs, ducks, chickens, or other agricultural activities that generate income for the elderly in rural areas.

(1.2) Income from their children: In Chinese cultures, it is common for adult children to support their elderly parents. When children get income from work, they provide some money to take care of their parents' daily needs. (Children give money to their children, usually from factories and companies, agriculture, and, to a lesser extent, institutions and government jobs.)

(1.3) Government allowance: The government provides a minimum monthly allowance of 60 yuan to eligible elderly individuals. This allowance is intended to help them with their living expenses and ensure that they have a basic standard of living.

(1.4) Savings: Elderly individuals may have saved money over the years to support themselves in their retirement. This may include savings from their own income or from gifts or inheritances from family members.

2. Sons and daughters pay for medical check-ups, and older people with better families pay for their own medical check-ups. But the main thing is to economize. The elderly individuals receive daily care from their companions and family members, including their sons and daughters. This care includes assistance with tasks such as bathing, grooming, and dressing, as well as providing meals and other daily necessities.

Medical check-ups are an important aspect of elderly care, and the sons and daughters of these individuals pay for these check-ups. However, those with better family support pay for their own medical checkups. The priority in all cases is to save money, as resources may be limited. In addition to medical check-ups, the sons and daughters of the elderly individuals also provide alimony to support them financially. The elderly individuals themselves also generate income through agricultural labor, which helps supplement their financial resources.

3. Watching TV, chatting, playing cards, and catching up with a companion or family member. The elderly individuals spend their leisure time engaging in various activities such as watching TV, chatting with companions and family members, playing cards, keeping up with market news, and attending family gatherings. These activities help to keep them socially engaged and mentally stimulated.

Discussion of result research

The living conditions of the elderly in the rural area of Da'An District of Zigong showed that rural Chinese older people have a basically low quality of life, and they face difficulties in their lives due to physical and mental health problems, low economic income, rising costs of increased health care needs, and a lack of social attention and services. This finding is consistent

with Shen et al. (2012), who found that rural older adults have a low quality of life in later life and face difficulties due to illness, financial difficulties, and a lack of social services. Most elderly people had little monetary support, and most of their income from children, agricultural income, and rural pensions was their main source of living. Therefore, we must look at the social welfare of the rural elderly from an economic perspective and call on the government to pay more attention to improving the quality of life of the rural elderly.

Furthermore, the result of this study also coincided with the research about the elderly in Thailand by Rojpaisarnkit and Rodjarkpai (2018), which found that the elderly in urban and rural areas had statistically significant differences in physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being and in overall well-being at the .05 level. The elderly in urban areas had a higher average mean score of physical, social, and spiritual well-being than those in rural areas. The results of this study may be caused by the economic disparities between urban and rural areas in many regions of China and Thailand, as developing countries may be contributing factors. Therefore, there are differences and inequities in the establishment of social welfare and security systems in various regions, the types of social security systems are not complete, and the content of the system does not meet the needs of the rapidly aging society, which is all the more reason to call on the government to pay more attention to and solve the problem.

The main problems faced by the elderly in rural areas are economic difficulties due to insufficient income, lack of access to quality healthcare services, including specialized care, high demand for medical and health services and basic needs such as food and travel that need improvement, as current standards are quite simple, and a lack of opportunities for spiritual, cultural, and recreational activities, resulting in a sense of emptiness and loneliness. The result of this study is a study by Zhang and Gao (2021), which found that, compared with the urban elderly, the rural elderly generally had a lower constant pension in China. In terms of social activity, the urban elderly are not accustomed to life after retirement, which might cause them to feel lonely, useless, and other problematic emotions. Moreover, most of the rural elderly generally did not retire in China, and their social activities usually did not change. Lastly, a higher economic status could improve living conditions and healthcare.

The social welfare provision policy for elderly individuals in rural areas of Da'An is managed through a collaborative effort between the government, community, and family support systems. In rural areas, the support of family is incredibly important for the well-being of elderly individuals. Adult children step up to provide daily care, financial assistance, and help with medical

expenses. At the same time, the government plays a crucial role by offering essential social welfare services like subsidized housing, regular medical check-ups, and a monthly stipend. Community-based initiatives, such as distributing free winter clothing and essential food items, also contribute significantly to meeting the basic needs of the elderly. What's essential here is the collaboration between these three sectors: family support, government assistance, and community efforts. Together, they create a comprehensive system that ensures the overall health and care of elderly individuals living in rural areas. The result of this study also coincides with the study by Chriqui et al. (2013), which found that collaborative governance can be a valuable approach to addressing complex public health issues and achieving positive outcomes. And this finding expresses the importance of collaborative governance for addressing elderly social welfare policy in the 21st century in a study by Alam and Mahmudul (2022), which stated that the essential factors for the success of collaborative efforts to cope with the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh were effective coordination between governmental and non-governmental entities, the mobilization of resources, facilitating access and communication, active community engagement, and the government's ability to adapt in response to the crisis.

New Knowledge

The new knowledge gained from this research can be summarized in figure 4

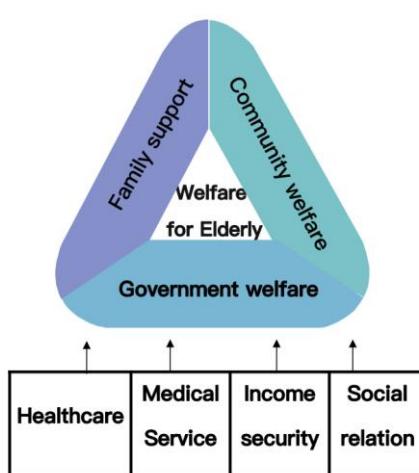


Figure 4 The summary model of social welfare provision for the elderly in rural of Da'An District of Zigong

From Figure 4, the new knowledge gained from this study proved that the collaboration of the government, community, and family support systems in providing social welfare for elderly individuals in rural China demonstrates the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships and stakeholder involvement in policymaking and implementation. This new knowledge reflects the need for a collaborative governance approach involving multiple sectors, including the government, civil society, and families, in providing public services, especially in policies related to the elderly. The government alone may not be able to effectively address public issues, as highlighted in the context of elderly care, especially in rural areas. Therefore, the government should cooperate and involve third sectors such as the community and family to achieve social welfare goals, which can serve as a model for future policymaking and implementation in other areas.

Conclusion

Despite the Chinese government's efforts to develop policies to support the elderly in various dimensions, the elderly population in rural areas, particularly in remote and agricultural areas like Da'an District, still lacks adequate access to government welfare. They rely mainly on farming, their children, and some government allowances and savings as their primary sources of income. Additionally, they face several social, economic, and healthcare problems due to insufficient income, limited access to quality healthcare services, and a lack of opportunities for spiritual, cultural, and recreational activities. However, collaborative governance involving family support, government welfare, and community initiatives is crucial to providing comprehensive care for elderly individuals in rural areas. Collaborative governance and stakeholder involvement are effective in policymaking and implementation, with family support playing a vital role in ensuring the social welfare of the elderly.

In conclusion, the collaborative approach of the government, community, and family support systems in providing social welfare for elderly individuals in rural China highlights the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships and stakeholder involvement in policymaking and implementation. This study demonstrates the effectiveness of collaborative governance in achieving social welfare goals and can serve as a model for future policymaking and implementation in other areas. The government should continue to prioritize the well-being of elderly individuals in rural areas through sustained collaboration with community and family support systems.

Suggestions

Suggestions from the research results are as follows:

1. The research found that elderly people living in rural areas face economic, healthcare, and social challenges. Therefore, both the central and local governments should develop new forms of agriculture and sustainable infrastructure, decentralize power, and establish elderly activity centers. A comprehensive healthcare access program should also be developed, including expanded infrastructure and affordable options. The goal is to improve the overall well-being of elderly individuals in rural communities.

2. To address the issue of loneliness and the lack of opportunities for social, cultural, and recreational activities among elderly populations in rural areas in Da'An District, it is recommended that the local governments should establish a community center for the elderly. These initiatives should focus on organizing events and activities tailored to the interests of elderly individuals.

3. The research found that the provision of basic welfare by the government alone is insufficient to meet the needs of elderly individuals in rural areas. Family and community support are also crucial. Therefore, the Chinese government should support collaborative governance in delivering social welfare services to the elderly.

For future research, to gain a deeper understanding of social welfare provision made by local governments in China, future research should use a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. This will provide a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of the topic. Possible techniques to consider include surveys, interviews, and case studies. And there should be a comparative study of the collaborative welfare management between the government sector and other sectors, especially the private sector and non-government organizations, in providing social welfare to rural people in China.

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