

Policies and Effects of Poverty Reduction for People with Disabilities in China

Zhang Dongmei

Disability is an evolving concept. According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability is the result of interaction between persons with injuries and disabilities and various attitudinal and environmental impediments that keep them from participating in society on an equal basis with others. According to the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons, "disabled persons" refers to persons who have lost certain tissues or function or who have serious handicaps in terms of psychology, physiology, or body structure and whose daily life or social activities are under continuous restriction. Persons with disabilities include persons with visual, hearing, language, limb and trunk, intelligence, or mental disabilities, as well as other disabilities or combinations of disabilities.

China is home to 83 million people with disabilities, accounting for more than 6 percent of the total population. According to the Second China National Sample Survey on Disability in 2006, 75 percent of those with disabilities (62 million) live in rural areas. The number of rural people with disabilities living in indigence totals nearly 14 million. This segment of the population with disabilities is included in China's effort to reduce national poverty and is covered by the rural minimum living allowance system, but the combination of disability and poverty poses challenges for poverty reduction.

Causes and Effects of Poverty among People with Disabilities

Low Incomes and High Expenditures

In 2005 the per capita income of Chinese families with members who have disabilities was 4,864 RMB in urban areas and 2,260 RMB in rural areas, less than half of the average for families who do not have members with disabilities. About 67 percent of people with disabilities have multiple disabilities, such as physical, visual, and cognitive disabilities, a situation that creates challenges for poverty reduction. People with severe or extremely severe disabilities total 25 million (30 percent of people with disabilities) and are not capable of engaging in poverty reduction activities involving agricultural production. People whose disabilities are classified as moderate or mild total 58 million, or 70 percent. Because of the disabilities themselves and social prejudices regarding disabilities, employment opportunities for people with disabilities are limited and their employment rate is low. At the same time, the costs of medical care are huge, with the result that diseases cause disability and disability causes poverty.

Lack of Knowledge and Technology

Surveys show that 43 percent of the Chinese people with disabilities over age 15, or 36 million people, are illiterate. Only 63 percent of children with disabilities between the ages of 6 and 14 are enrolled in school nationwide, and only 5 million people with disabilities have graduated from high school. About 85 percent of poor people with disabilities have not been educated past junior middle school. As a result, many people with disabilities have comparatively low qualifications and poor production skills and consequently are reluctant to accept new concepts (including their own potential for self-reliance) and often never have the opportunity to learn new practical techniques. Their exclusion from training and basic education means that they are ill equipped to compete in the market, and this situation prevents them from participating in poverty reduction activities.

Lack of Funds and Lack of Projects

In China, people are geographically dispersed, with 30 percent living in old revolutionary basis areas, ethnic minority areas, remote areas, and extremely poor areas and 70 percent living in nonpoor areas. Funds for supporting people with disabilities in nonpoor areas are limited. Even if funds are available, it can be difficult to get them to people with disabilities because of poor transportation and information and a consequent lack of projects. Moreover, it is difficult to implement poverty alleviation projects for rural people with disabilities with only a small amount of funds and without a conducive external environment, such as adequate markets and technology.

The country implements a system of arranging employment for persons with disabilities *pro rata*, but this work started relatively late in the central and western provinces, and the funds collected for it are insufficient. Moreover, projects for the poverty alleviation and development of persons with disabilities are not within the scope of expenditure and use of the People with Disabilities' Employment Security Fund.

Low Levels of Economic and Social Development in Rural Areas

Because of the poor natural environment in central and western China, along with the lack of infrastructure, limited production structure, and slow social development, people with disabilities in rural areas lack jobs and social security. The rate of employment of people with disabilities is 59 percent, and they are short of independent economic support. Only 5 percent benefit from the local policies that provide a minimum living allowance, and only 12 percent receive regular or irregular relief funds.

In light of the difficulties people with disabilities face, poverty reduction for them must solve two major problems: (1) their lack of access to food and clothing and (2) the social and economic gap between them and others and a lack of harmony. Poverty reduction for people with disabilities requires building an effective, long-term mechanism that is mainstreamed into the overall plans and policies of central and local governments, the government accountability system, and the rural social security system. Multiple social service measures must be undertaken to unlock the potential of people with disabilities and to achieve the goal of providing and maintaining food and clothing for them.

Successful Poverty Reduction Policies for Poor People with Disabilities

Ensuring the provision of food and clothing for people with disabilities and steadily increasing their income are key components of China's national poverty reduction task. In recent years poverty reduction efforts for people with disabilities in China have yielded results, with support from the central government, local governments, and the China Disabled Persons' Federation. Some 10 million people with disabilities gained access to food and clothing, and the number of absolutely poor people with disabilities was reduced from 20 million in 1992 to 11 million in 2007. Eight million people with disabilities received technical training in agricultural production. Since 2003, the China Disabled Persons' Federation and the government have helped 51,803 rural families with members who have disabilities to rebuild derelict houses, benefiting 63,957 people with disabilities and 150,000 poor people.

The technical training in agricultural production relies on various kinds of social training institutions and organizes persons with disabilities with different technical needs into many levels and forms of training, mainly focusing on practical rural technologies. Henan province, for example, conducts training by relying on scientific and technical people in colleges and universities, technical secondary schools, polytechnic schools, and technical popularization stations to enable persons with disabilities at different levels to obtain practical technologies and skills for planting, breeding, and processing.

The achievements in poverty reduction for people with disabilities have contributed a great deal to accomplishing China's strategic targets for poverty reduction. In the process, some lessons have emerged that fit China's national conditions and the particularities of poverty reduction for people with disabilities.

Mainstream Poverty Reduction for People with Disabilities into Overall Poverty Reduction Planning by Central and Local Governments

The key to mainstreaming people with disabilities is to include them in all policies, plans, and projects. Poverty reduction is an important strategic goal of the central government, and the State Council has always given attention to the poverty problems of people with disabilities. In 1991 the State Council approved the Eighth Five-Year Plan for Supporting Disabled Persons to establish objectives, guiding principles, methods, and measures for reducing poverty among people with disabilities as components of the national plan and for carrying out poverty reduction for them in a planned and organized way. To fully implement the Seven-Year Priority Plan for Poverty Alleviation, the government formulated the State Plan for Poverty Reduction of the Disabled People (1998–2000). This plan adopted more powerful and better-targeted policies and measures and increased financial inputs and efforts to address priorities. In 2001 the government formulated the Poverty Reduction Plan for the Rural Disabled (2001–10) to include the rural population with disabilities in the Poverty Reduction Program for Rural China. This plan currently guides poverty reduction for people with disabilities.

Local governments have also included specific measures and requirements for helping people with disabilities in their local poverty reduction plans. Their plans are designed to help strengthen leadership in organizing the relevant departments, implementing the projects, and providing human resources, funds, and materials.

Maximize Government Leadership, and Increase Policy Support

Since 1992 the central government and its relevant departments have held six conferences on poverty reduction for people with disabilities to improve supportive policies. Local governments have gradually established systems for social security and cooperative medical care in rural areas, along with reforms of rural taxation, and

have formulated a series of policies and measures to improve the productivity and life conditions of people with disabilities, such as policies to give them basic medical treatment and rehabilitation services and to give social relief to their families. Local governments have also included poverty reduction for people with disabilities in the government accountability system. In Gansu province, for example, governments at all levels take responsibility for specific tasks, and their performance is regularly appraised.

Mobilize Social Resources to Help Poor People with Disabilities

Poverty reduction is the responsibility not only of government but also of society. It is important to encourage government agencies, the business sector, collective economic organizations, volunteer organizations, Communist Party members, officials, students, and people in neighborhoods to partner with one another or with agencies and households with members who have disabilities. Trade unions, the China Youth League, the All-China Women's Federation, the China Association for Science and Technology, and chambers of commerce all have roles to play. Partnerships between the Communist Party or executive organs and businesses have supported villages; party members and officials have supported households; and volunteers, neighbors, and wealthy households have paired off with families with members who have disabilities. Mobilizing the participation of social sectors has become an effective way to ensure that food and clothing are provided for people with disabilities. For example, beginning in 2002 in Xin County, a county committee and the county government implemented "1+1" Project to help persons with disabilities and give financial assistance to poor people in the county, with responsibilities divided up and assigned to every household. Attention was given to the "four helps": (1) help with establishing correct ideas and building up confidence; (2) financial assistance; (3) technical assistance, such as practical rural technologies; and (4) appropriate projects for poor persons with disabilities in terms of the planting, breeding, and processing of agricultural products. In addition, in Zhejiang province a program known as Thousands of Persons Form Pairs to Alleviate Poverty and Help Persons in Difficulty was formed. The whole province formed a total of 16,403 pairs through which more than 10,000 persons with disabilities emerged from poverty in a year.

Earmark Funds Especially for Poverty Reduction among People with Disabilities, and Build Up Multiple Channels of Financing for Them

The Chinese government earmarks credit funds for poverty reduction. In 1992 the government issued revolving, subsidized-interest loans to be used to reduce poverty among people with disabilities. The amount of these revolving loans increased from 100 million RMB during the Eighth Five-Year Plan (1991–95) to 800 million RMB in 1999 and 7,400 million RMB at the end of 2006. The Agricultural Bank

of China formulated rules for managing these funds and avoiding risk. To help the loans reach households and individuals, the China Disabled Persons' Federation, along with the Agricultural Bank of China, set rules for streamlining the system, for helping more poor people with disabilities benefit from the loans and use them effectively, and for ensuring the safe circulation and use of the loans. To date, there have been no cases of embezzlement of the loan funds. By the end of the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–05), 80 percent of the loans had been distributed, and more than 5 million poor people with disabilities had been relieved of the problems of having too little food and clothing.

Local governments have also arranged for funds to reduce poverty among people with disabilities. During the Tenth Five-Year Plan, local governments spent 650 million RMB to rebuild the houses of poor families with members who have disabilities. Local governments set up subsidized-interest loans and applied for loans from banks and financial institutions for planting, breeding, and processing activities supporting the enterprises of persons with disabilities. Some local governments strengthened cooperation with domestic enterprises and international organizations to attract funds. Some invested money in employment and training for poor, rural people with disabilities. These methods expanded the channels for collecting funds for poverty reduction among people with disabilities.

Adopt Methods to Ensure That Support Reaches Households

Over the years, the Chinese government has taken several approaches to ensuring that support reaches households with members who have disabilities. In 1992 this principle involved companies partnering with rural households to offer employment and training. In 1998 China promoted microfinance, which offers low costs, rapid results, high rates of coverage and return, and easy access for people with disabilities. Disabled Persons' Federations at the county level and township service agencies put forward development projects in such areas as planting, breeding, and processing, as well as loan applications based on their knowledge of the local situation. The village committee selects the households of people with disabilities to be supported, and the Agricultural Bank of China conducts field investigations and approves or disapproves the applications. Loans are between 2,000 and 5,000 yuan for a term of 1 to 3 years.

In 2000 poverty reduction for people with disabilities stressed industries in areas such as planting, livestock breeding, handicrafts, and household sideline production that could both meet the requirements of the local market economy and help people with disabilities meet their needs. In 2003 the China Disabled Persons' Federation established poverty reduction bases for poor people with disabilities that cover production, pre-job training, and support for households to address the subsistence problems of those with disabilities and to increase their income. At

present, China has established more than 2,693 county-level bases to help 275,000 poor people with disabilities climb out of poverty. Practical planting, processing, and breeding projects and a company-to-family approach based on local resources and market demand is proving to be an effective method for solving the problems of providing food and clothing for people with disabilities.

Strengthen the Grassroots Service System for Reducing Poverty among People with Disabilities

Local governments have strengthened efforts to develop the grassroots China Disabled Persons' Federation and to build service centers for people with disabilities. By the end of 2006, there were 16,290 county-level and town-level service centers with 22,699 staff; these initially formed the service system for rural people with disabilities. The service centers deal mainly with the day-to-day work of learning about the actual situation of poor people with disabilities, coordinating revolving loans for them, helping them choose proper businesses, implementing specific measures for them, and coordinating local agricultural and scientific departments to provide them with services before, during, and after agricultural production. More than two-thirds of service agencies and service branch agencies have more than one person with disabilities working in them.

Stimulate the Enthusiasm of People with Disabilities and Enhance the Four "Self-Reliance Spirits"

Poverty reduction for people with disabilities requires help from all over the country and society, but most of all from people with disabilities themselves. It is important to stimulate their spirits of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-improvement, and self-reliance to mobilize their enthusiasm and encourage them to conquer difficulties and participate in production and labor. Local governments have carried out new technical training and drawn on existing training for poor people with disabilities, thereby improving their qualifications and professional skills and in turn stimulating their desire to strive for a good future and strengthening their confidence that they can overcome poverty. People with disabilities have changed society's false view that they can only rely on relief and never develop their capacities.

Difficulties in Reducing Poverty among People with Disabilities

In spite of the progress made in reducing poverty among people with disabilities, their productivity and living conditions remain inadequate owing to unbalanced socio-economic development, political limitations, lack of funding, and lack of infrastructure serving them, and they face new problems as well. There are many challenges.

First, the total population of poor people with disabilities is still huge. More than 10 million rural poor people with disabilities still have trouble obtaining adequate food and clothing. Even people with sufficient subsistence commonly fall back into poverty. During the Tenth Five-Year Plan, about 400,000 people returned to poverty every year, and coping with this trend is now the most difficult and important task regarding poverty reduction for people with disabilities. The number of poor people with disabilities who are without houses or living in dangerous houses stands at around 1 million, and the basic production and living conditions of these people have essentially not changed.

Second, the difficulty of supporting poor people with disabilities, one of the most vulnerable groups in society because of external barriers and biases, has increased. Because almost 85 percent of poor people with disabilities never receive education beyond junior middle school, they often lack professional skills. As a result, they cannot enjoy the work-for-relief, labor transfer, and other major poverty reduction measures implemented by the government. They are also restricted in choosing businesses because many people with disabilities do not receive the training they need to engage in comparatively high-tech work.

Third, there is a lack of timely and effective services. Along with reforms to the rural economic system and the restructuring of rural industry, the key to reducing poverty for rural people with disabilities is to provide timely and effective services before, during, and after production so their products can enter the market faster. The current rural socialized service system, which offers services related to agricultural pre-production, production, and postproduction, charges for its services, and people with disabilities are too poor to pay. The recently established disabled people's service centers have done much for people with disabilities but cannot meet all of the demand because of a lack of human resources and funds.

Fourth, the shortage of labor and external barriers present difficulties. Rural poor people with disabilities rely mainly on cultivation, and increasing their income requires effective labor. But effective labor is what is absent in a family with a member who has a disability, and the family's lack of labor means it will have a low income. People with disabilities also have difficulties adjusting to changing production and market conditions. Consequently, it will be difficult for poor people with disabilities to gain more income despite improved agricultural conditions.

Adjusting Strategies and Policies for Poverty Reduction for People with Disabilities

Securing the living and development rights of people with disabilities and promoting a harmonious relationship between them and other groups are key components

of a well-off and harmonious socialist society. In the future, poverty reduction efforts for people with disabilities should aim to help them receive adequate food and clothing, improve their living standards, and narrow the economic and social gaps between them and other people.

More than 10 million people who are short of food and clothing should be helped to overcome this problem. Those who have enough to eat and wear should be supported in their efforts to make more money. About 1 million poor people with disabilities in central and western China who are able to engage in production should be given skills training. The old houses of 1 million poor rural households with members who have disabilities should be rebuilt.

Poverty reduction targeting people with disabilities requires establishing and improving effective long-term mechanisms and supportive government policies with clear targets and outcomes. Two types of policies are called for. First, all poor people with disabilities should be included in the rural minimum allowance system and relief system, which currently falls short of complete coverage for financial reasons. In the case of people with severe and extremely severe disabilities who have no working capacity and who cannot obtain food and clothing through poverty reduction programs, local governments should include those who are eligible in the minimum allowance system as soon as possible. People with moderate and mild disabilities should be given relief by type and by phase.

Second, supportive policies targeting people with disabilities should be formulated. In rural areas, poor people with disabilities who can engage in production and increase their incomes should be mainstreamed into the overall national poverty reduction plan. They should be included in village-based development projects, subsidized-interest lending, and training for labor transfer. All levels of government should give them special support in terms of earmarked funds and credits. Local governments should ensure that their financial support is really spent on poverty reduction for people with disabilities and reaches the relevant households to help them actually emerge from poverty. For these groups of people with disabilities, the government should produce special supporting policies involving recovery, education, employment, and medical care.

Conclusion

Poor people with disabilities in rural areas are the most difficult population in China to reach with poverty reduction efforts. The China Disabled Persons' Federation, along with relevant government departments, has been working to pursue better methods, policies, measures, and tools to help poor people with disabilities solve the problems of lack of access to food and clothing as soon as possible.

