

Review Paper

Enhancing Public Participation in Poverty Governance: A Policy Feedback Framework of China's Counterpart Assistance

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Abstract: Public participation is critical to the effective implementation of anti-poverty policies, but it faces challenges such as low participation from marginalised groups, which stems from low awareness of opportunities for participation, lack of motivation, lack of resources and barriers such as the high cost of participation. The Chinese government's counterpart assistance policy is believed to have played an important role in mobilising public participation in poverty alleviation, but its mechanisms and impacts on public participation, especially in terms of social and political effects, remain understudied. This study aims to construct a comprehensive analytical framework to elucidate how counterpart assistance affects public participation in anti-poverty efforts through policy feedback theory and involuntional effects, covering both positive and negative feedback mechanisms. A systematic literature review constructs a conceptual framework that explains how counterpart assistance affects public participation by integrating participation resources, participation attitudes, and participation autonomy as mediating variables. The proposed framework argues that counterpart assistance positively affects public participation through participation resources (resource effect) and participation attitudes (interpretation effect), enhancing material support and shaping positive attitudes. However, counterpart assistance may negatively affect participation autonomy, leading to an involution effect that manifests itself in reduced autonomy and formalistic participation. These mediating variables highlight the dynamic interaction of policy feedback in public participation. The framework offers fresh ideas for designing effective anti-poverty policies in developing countries, guides future empirical research, and informs policy adjustments to enhance public participation by balancing resource provision, attitude shaping, and autonomy maintenance.

Keywords: Counterpart assistance; public participation; policy feedback; involution; anti-poverty

Introduction

Public participation (PP) serves as a vital pillar in shaping effective anti-poverty policies and initiatives. However, groups in poor or marginalised areas are often at a disadvantage in the participation process, which calls for the government to seek to use available resources to actively and proactively engage the public (Levenda et al., 2020). China's counterpart assistance (CA) policy is a critical component of its anti-poverty strategy. Not only has it mobilised massive funds and significant human resources for China's distinctive anti-poverty efforts, helping tens of millions of impoverished people escape poverty, but more importantly, it is regarded as having made significant innovative contributions to China's national governance, including expanding governance entities, enriching governance resources, establishing governance responsibilities, and innovating and improving governance mechanisms (Wang, 2022). While its economic impacts, such as

infrastructure development and industrial growth, are well-documented (Wang et al., 2024), the social and political impact on public participation, especially at the individual level, has not been adequately studied.

Most of the available research on counterpart assistance has focused on conceptual interpretation, policy development, the use of economic effects to test policy effectiveness (Shi & Fan, 2020; Wang & Wang, 2020; Zhong, 2013), while lacking an assessment of its political and social effects. Meanwhile, there are voices of concern; compared to government forces, public participation remains inadequate, massive policy inputs have diminished marginal efficiency, and negative social incentives highlight implementation challenges (Liu et al., 2019). This gap underscores the need for a systematic analytical framework to reveal how counterparty assistance policy affects individual public participation behaviour, emphasise sustainable participation mechanisms, and enhance transparency to optimise CA's effectiveness and inform global poverty alleviation strategies.

Whereas in certain research, scholars have used policy feedback theory to assert policy resource effect and interpretative effect to analyse how policy affects public participation by allocating resources and changing attitudes (Mettler, 2002), which provides us with a framework for exploring the mobilisation mechanism. Nevertheless, strong empirical evidence is needed to extend the scope of the application of the theory, as previous studies have ignored negative feedback considerations in the alleged process of achieving a boost in participation through such motivational and promotional mechanisms (Daugbjerg & Kay, 2019).

This study integrates academic perspectives on the negative factors affecting public participation in poverty alleviation, adding the involution effect to policy feedback theory to enhance the negative feedback explanation of the policy. In addition, a study using counterpart assistance as the independent variable and public participation as the dependent variable, introducing participation resource (PR), participation attitude (PAT) and participation autonomy (PAU) as mediating variables to interpret the resource effect, interpretative effect, and involution effect of counterpart assistance, thus, analysed specific mechanisms for CA to influence public participation. The proposed framework offers new insights into how Chinese policies mobilise public participation, expanding the application of policy feedback theory, governance theory, and involution effects in developing countries. We identify the key influencing factors and the specific mechanisms by which policies facilitate public participation. It is of great practical significance to promote the development of participatory governance, improve policy responsiveness, and mobilise the public.

Methodology

To achieve the objectives of this study and minimise the impact of bias, a systematic literature review will be conducted using the methods suggested by Islam et al. (2020), Newman and Gough (2020), and Sargeant and O'Connor (2020). The review process consists of three stages: (1) determining inclusion/exclusion criteria, (2) systematic searching and screening, and (3) quality assessment. The inclusion criteria were limited to peer-reviewed studies (excluding classic literature) from authoritative databases (Web of Science, Scopus and CNKI) between 2000 and 2025, focusing on topics such as policy feedback theory, counterpart assistance, public participation, involution effect, participation resources, participation attitudes, and participation autonomy. Keywords such as "policy feedback theory", "counterpart assistance", "public participation" and synonyms such as "pairing assistance" and "anti-poverty" were used in combination with Boolean operators and truncation symbols to conduct Chinese and English searches to ensure comprehensiveness. Of the initial 9,016 articles, 347 were selected for full-text review after deduplication and screening, and 67 high-quality studies were ultimately included in the comprehensive analysis.

Comprehensive research (see Table 1) provides robust evidence for the conceptual framework, clarifying that targeted assistance influences public participation through three mechanisms: participation resources, participation attitudes, and participation autonomy. For example, findings related to policy feedback theory confirm that policies significantly enhance public participation capacity and participation by providing material and technical resources, while policy learning enhances the public's attitude toward participation. Research on the involution of grassroots governance suggests that accountability pressures and regional competition may limit the autonomy of participants in policy implementation, triggering the risk of involution. These studies collectively support the development of the conceptual framework.

Table 1. Summary of critical research

Study	Theme	Methodology	Key findings
Wang, Q. et al. (2024)	Counterpart assistance, poverty alleviation	Quantitative, empirical analysis	Counterpart assistance enhances public participation through material resources (e.g., funding, infrastructure) but requires local autonomy to avoid resource dependency.
Beland, D. & Schlager, E. (2019)	Policy feedback theory, public participation	Theoretical review	Policy feedback shapes resource allocation and public attitudes, boosting participation willingness, particularly in resource-oriented policies like counterpart assistance.
Campbell, A. L. (2011)	Policy feedback, public attitudes	Theoretical, Case study analysis	Policy designs influence participation attitudes through resource provision and perceived benefits, suggesting that counterpart assistance can incentivize poverty alleviation engagement.
He, X. (2019)	Grassroots governance, autonomy	Qualitative, Case study	Top-down resource inputs without internalized autonomy may lead to involution, undermining the effectiveness of counterpart assistance in participation.
Kalleberg, A. L. et al. (2009)	Participation autonomy,	Quantitative, Survey	Autonomy and resources (e.g., consultation, teamwork) positively impact participation outcomes, implying that counterpart assistance must strengthen community autonomy to enhance participation quality.

The Findings

1. Counterpart Assistance

As a policy, using counterpart assistance as an independent variable helps us to understand how specific policy elements have feedback effects (Moore & Jordan, 2020). Counterpart assistance can also be called pairing assistance or partner assistance programs. It is a form of intergovernmental or interregional economic assistance or cooperation (Wang & Wang, 2020) that reflects distinct Chinese characteristics: its objectives and content are diverse, and its political mobilisation is rooted in China's centralised political system (Shi & Fan, 2020). China's counterpart assistance policy starkly contrasts with Western aid models that are driven by market mechanisms or international organisations. Firstly, China's counterparty assistance operates as a top-down institutional arrangement under a centralised system, typically pairing economically developed regions with less developed ones to foster long-term, stable collaborations. This mechanism leverages the state's robust administrative capacity to swiftly and effectively allocate resources, proving particularly effective in addressing natural disasters and public health crises (Wu et al., 2021; Zhong & Lu, 2018).

Moreover, China's approach distinctly emphasises "mass mobilisation" and "social participation" (Tang, 2019). In poverty alleviation, not only do local governments and enterprises engage, but social organisations and volunteers also participate extensively, reflecting a "campaign-style governance" model that mobilises collective societal responsibility (Tang, 2019; Wei et al., 2025). Additionally, inter-regional partnerships enhance the public sense of belonging and engagement, extending the impact of assistance beyond policy implementation to encompass social networks and emotional connections (Jing & Yu, 2024). The characteristics of the counterpart assistance policy effectively promote a positive interaction between policy implementation and public participation.

2. Public Participation

According to Saunier and Meganck (2010), the concept of 'participation' refers to the identification and incorporation of the public's views and concerns in decision-making processes. The public participation in this study should include that of the village elite, rural organisations, enterprises, social groups, and poor households in the whole process of poverty alleviation (Zou, 2019). However, public participation in China has been criticised as inadequate due to a lack of civil society development in the country (Zhao, 2015). In China, the highly centralised political structure plays a crucial role in shaping the governance model. This structure enables strong decision-making capabilities and efficient policy implementation at the national level.

However, it also significantly influences the distribution of power and resources at the local government level, which in turn affects the mechanisms and pathways of public participation in poverty

governance. Unlike the Western model, which stresses individual autonomy and community-driven development, the Chinese model places greater emphasis on the combination of government mobilisation and social capital to drive poverty alleviation efforts (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

3. Participation Resource

In governance networks based on public participation, the composition of resources is diversified, including traditional resources such as finance, technology and information, as well as intellectual and human resources such as innovative methods for citizen participation, “customised” governance tools and expert advisors, which are often created through collaboration within the network and shared among its members (Barrutia & Echebarria, 2019). Both tangible material resources and intangible knowledge and information resources are indispensable for achieving effective participation (Ijon et al., 2024).

China's counterpart assistance system has played a critical role in resource allocation and social mobilisation, presenting a complex relationship between “political mobilisation, resource integration, and public incentives”. First, in terms of resource allocation, the central government not only channels resources to poverty-stricken areas through the targeted assistance mechanism but also guides developmental resources into these regions, thereby activating their endogenous development potential and significantly enhancing the efficiency of rapid fiscal and material resource allocation (Wang et al., 2024). Second, the external injection of resources creates institutional space and social incentives, enabling the public to participate more actively in poverty alleviation and community development. Specifically, the extensive involvement of social forces in targeted assistance not only directly promotes income growth for impoverished households but also indirectly enhances the confidence and capacity of impoverished populations to participate in governance (Jing & Yu, 2024). When resource allocation mechanisms are fairer and information is more transparent, public willingness to participate increases, and participation becomes a more sustainable mechanism of feedback from targeted assistance, further enhancing governance efficiency and social trust (Zhang et al., 2022).

4. Participation Attitude

In the field of psychology, attitude is often defined as an affective or evaluative judgement (Barki & Hartwick, 1994). The individual's attitude not only reflects their cognitive evaluation of specific behaviours but also directly influences their level of engagement in social activities (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011). In this study, participatory attitudes are defined as a higher-order attitudinal construct that encompasses more specific first-order attitudinal components, including value identification, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (Barrutia & Echebarria, 2019). Based on research on planned behaviour theory, it has been found that the public's intention to participate is significantly influenced by their attitude towards participation, social norms, and a sense of behavioural control. In particular, the higher the responsiveness to government advocacy and resource support, the stronger the willingness to participate (Luo et al., 2022). While promoting the restructuring of social resources, China's counterpart assistance policy has also subtly changed the public's attitude towards participation and further stimulated participatory behaviour (Jing & Yu, 2024).

5. Participation Autonomy

Autonomy, as a moral right, embodies the ability of individuals to think independently and make decisions on their own, enabling them to have a degree of control and influence over the events they experience in their daily lives (Sensen, 2012). In this study, 'participatory autonomy' is defined as the ability of participants to reposition themselves as subjects of action, with the capacity to set goals, take control of resources and environments, and take ownership of the processes that affect their lives (Orbach, 2011; Richardson et al., 2013). In the Chinese context, although China's poverty alleviation policy has gradually shifted from a “government-led” model to a “multi-stakeholder participation” model, at the implementation level, due to its strong guiding and goal-orientated nature, some localities have intensified external intervention to ensure compliance with performance evaluation standards. Such interventions may have reduced the autonomy of local governments and communities in terms of participation methods (Wang & Xu, 2021). This situation

makes it necessary to reflect on how to continuously optimise incentive mechanisms and participation conditions in practice, enhance individuals' intrinsic motivation, and avoid “substitute governance”, weakening the sustainability of public participation.

6. Proposition Development

To clarify the positive and negative relationships between the variables, we used the screened literature for review and direct descriptions of the text and tried to construct a conceptual framework that corresponded to the topic of the study.

Counterpart Assistance and Public Participation in Anti-poverty

Policy feedback theory provides an explanatory theoretical framework for studying how policies change citizens' behaviour, thereby influencing subsequent political activities or giving rise to new types of political behaviour (Mettler, 2002; Mettler & Welch, 2004). Current studies have demonstrated that policies can influence popular political participation, engagement, and attitudes (Beland & Schlager, 2019; Campbell, 2011). For example, Mettler (2019) tested the resources and interpretive effects of the potential educational benefits of the GI Bill, illustrating that it promoted increased civic engagement among beneficiaries in the immediate post-war era. Counterpart assistance is a policy involving resource allocation and administrative support to address poverty and falls within the policy feedback theoretical framework. By providing resources (such as funding and training) and shaping interpretive frameworks (such as fostering a sense of collective responsibility), counterpart assistance is expected to encourage public participation in anti-poverty initiatives. Although direct evidence is limited, the resource and interpretation effects of similar policies suggest that counterpart assistance may enhance participation by providing citizens with the means and motivation to do so. Therefore, we propose the basic hypothesis of this study.

H1 Counterpart assistance positively affects public participation in anti-poverty.

The Mediating Effect of Participation Resource

To understand how policies alter mass publics, government elites, and interest groups, policy feedback theory distinguishes between two mechanisms, namely resource effects and interpretive effects (Pierson, 1993). Resource effects refer to policy-creating distributions of material resources. Public policies create incentives for interest group activities; they may also provide resources that make those activities/mobilizations easier and enhance civil capacity (Goss & Kristin, 2002; Mettler, 2002). For some new, previously inaccessible areas, policy investment of resources can lower the threshold and risk for beneficiaries to participate, giving them the initial advantageous conditions for participation (Duerst-Lahti, 1989). Policy resources shape the political participation of organisations and individuals; for instance, Social Security is particularly important in increasing the political participation of older adults, especially those with low incomes (Beland & Schlager, 2019; Campbell, 2011). In other similar cases, the increase in welfare resources resulting from the policy has a positive effect on voter turnout (Baicker & Finkelstein, 2019), while reduced resources due to austerity policies can significantly reduce voter turnout (Haselswerdt & Michener, 2019). Mobilising resources for disadvantaged areas through counterpart assistance, including technical exchanges, knowledge training, etc., will potentially benefit the participants and enhance their participation capital. From the above views, combined with H1, the hypothesis is proposed:

H2 Counterpart assistance positively affects participation resources.

H3 The participation resource positively affects anti-poverty public participation.

H4 The participation resource would significantly mediate the relationship between counterpart assistance and public participation.

The Mediating Effect of Participation Attitude

According to the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, an individual's attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, perception of risk, and perception of behavioural control are considered to be the four core factors that drive public participation (Luo et al., 2022). Among them, an individual's self-identity and his or her attitude toward a project or matter have also been shown to have a significant impact on his or her participation in decision-making (Cullen et al., 2020). It has been noted that citizens' willingness to participate in local development planning is inhibited by several negative factors, such as negative attitudes, lack of capacity, lack of incentives, and political interference (Nyama & Mukwada, 2023). According to the traditional "attitude-behaviour" theoretical framework, citizens who are interested in public affairs, share democratic values, trust the political system, and believe that their actions have an impact are more likely to participate actively in all types of public affairs than those who are disinterested, politically detached, or have low levels of confidence (Jurlina Alibegović & Slijepčević, 2018; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014).

In terms of the interpretative effects of policy feedback theory, public policies can be seen as sources of information, such as administrative regulations, procedures, and resources that can help citizens make their judgements, thereby influencing their attitudes and opinions (Mettler, 2002; Pierson, 1993; You et al., 2020). "Recipients were more cognisant that government was for and about people like them, and they responded by participating as more active citizens" (Mettler & Welch, 2004). The visibility of the policy, the proximity of citizens, and the time of exposure are likely to have an impact on public attitude (Pacheco, 2013; Soss & Schram, 2007). The value advocated by counterpart assistance, poverty alleviation, is a mission and responsibility shared by the whole society, and the demonstration of action by the multitude of organisations and individuals actively participating in the process may have had a positive impact on the attitude of individuals toward participation and has led to public participation in the anti-poverty process. Accordingly, the hypothesis is proposed:

- H5 Counterpart assistance positively affects the participation attitude.
- H6 The participation attitude positively affects anti-poverty public participation.
- H7 The participation attitude would significantly mediate the relationship between Counterpart Assistance and public participation.

The Mediating Effect of Participation Autonomy

Increasing the explanatory power of the theory's negative feedback effects could be considered a theoretical contribution that this study attempts to achieve, but evidently, this requires a more cautious approach. The study has found that policies affect specific objects through resource effects, interpretive effects, and involuntional effects, which is a complement to the policy feedback theory (You et al., 2020).

The concept of involution describes a process in which a system continues to refine and complicate itself in the absence of external expansion space but without achieving substantial progress or efficiency improvements (Geertz, 1965; Huang, 2000; Prasenjit, 1991). Involution manifests as diminishing marginal returns on unit inputs and can be divided into three specific forms: (1) mechanical replication of models, (2) deviation of actual goals from original goals, and (3) competition that overconsumes resources (Lu, 2021). The primary causes of involution include external pressures or developmental constraints, which limit individual autonomy and creativity (He, 2019; Lu, 2021). Therefore, the involution effect is not only a structural institutional dilemma but also a profound reflection of the problem of limited individual agency under institutional pressure.

In the context of poverty alleviation governance, the involution effect provides a perspective for analysing how assistance policies (such as counterpart assistance) lead to a "non-developmental improvement" in participatory behaviour by limiting the autonomy of actors. Autonomy is defined as the degree to which individuals can independently choose and control their actions and is crucial for effective participation. Research shows that higher autonomy enhances well-being, work engagement, and performance by enabling individuals to effectively utilise their knowledge and skills (Shimazu et al., 2006), whereas those with low autonomy tend to be unable to gain a sense of control over what they are doing, make autonomous choices

about resources, and feel supported by the organisation, which affects their performance (Nie et al., 2023; Sekiguchi et al., 2017).

The counterpart assistance is an aid policy with political mobilisation. It contains “strong subjectivity” resources and strong administrative accountability pressure, which may weaken the autonomy of the subjects involved in poverty alleviation (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Frese, 1996), causing their performance to be a mere formality (Breugh, 2020; Kácha & Ruggeri, 2018), and the goal of public participation is out of touch with reality (He, 2019; Lu, 2021; Wang & Su, 2020). Therefore, research assumes,

H8 Counterpart assistance negatively affects participation autonomy.

H9 Participation autonomy positively affects public participation.

H10 Participation autonomy would significantly mediate the relationship between Counterpart Assistance and public participation.

Discussion

Based on the findings of the previous literature and the discussion in the previous section, this study proposes an analytical framework (see Figure 1) from the perspective of policy feedback theory to explain how policy impacts public participation behaviour through multiple mechanisms. In this study, we set "counterpart assistance policy" as the independent variable and "public participation" as the dependent variable, and we introduce "participation resources," "participation attitude," and "participation autonomy" as three parallel mediating variables to reveal the internal mechanisms of public participation influenced by the counterpart assistance policy.

First, this study proposes “participation resources” as a key parallel mediating variable, emphasising the empowering role of policies at the material and skill levels. The counterpart policy enhances the public's ability to participate through the injection of resources (e.g., funds, projects, technical support, etc.), thus increasing their actual participation in the pro-poor governance process. Second, “participation attitudes” reflect the public's psychological perceptions and emotional evaluations of the self-efficacy of participatory behaviour. The policy interpretation effect makes it easier for the public to understand and agree with the policy direction, thus forming a positive attitude toward participation, which is then transformed into actual participation behaviour.

Third, “participatory autonomy” reveals the possible negative feedback effects of policies, i.e., the involution effect especially in the context of strong administrative control and performance pressures, policies may reduce the space for individual discretion, triggering formalism and involutionary behaviours. Hence, participatory autonomy is not only a mediator. Therefore, participatory autonomy is not only a parallel mediating variable but also one of the negative indicators for assessing policy effectiveness.

In addition, the framework proposed in this study emphasises that the three parallel mediating variables mentioned above have a significant role in the pathways through which policies influence public participation. Whether the counterpart policy can effectively enhance public participation depends on its feedback effect in the three dimensions of resource provision, attitude shaping, and autonomy guarantee. Therefore, policy feedback is not simply a linear chain of cause-and-effect actions but a dynamic process of multi-dimensional interaction.

Traditional policy feedback theory tends to focus on the positive feedback effects of policies, such as promoting public participation through resource incentives and attitude guidance, while giving less attention to the generation and impact of negative effects. The introduction of the theory of involution effectively fills this gap, revealing how self-consuming and inefficient cycles may emerge during policy implementation due to resource competition or institutional constraints. Furthermore, it expands the analytical framework of policy feedback, shifting from a focus on single positive effects to a dynamic balance between both positive and negative outcomes. Finally, it offers new insights for policy optimisation, suggesting that substantial empowerment of autonomy can break the involution dilemma and enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of public participation.

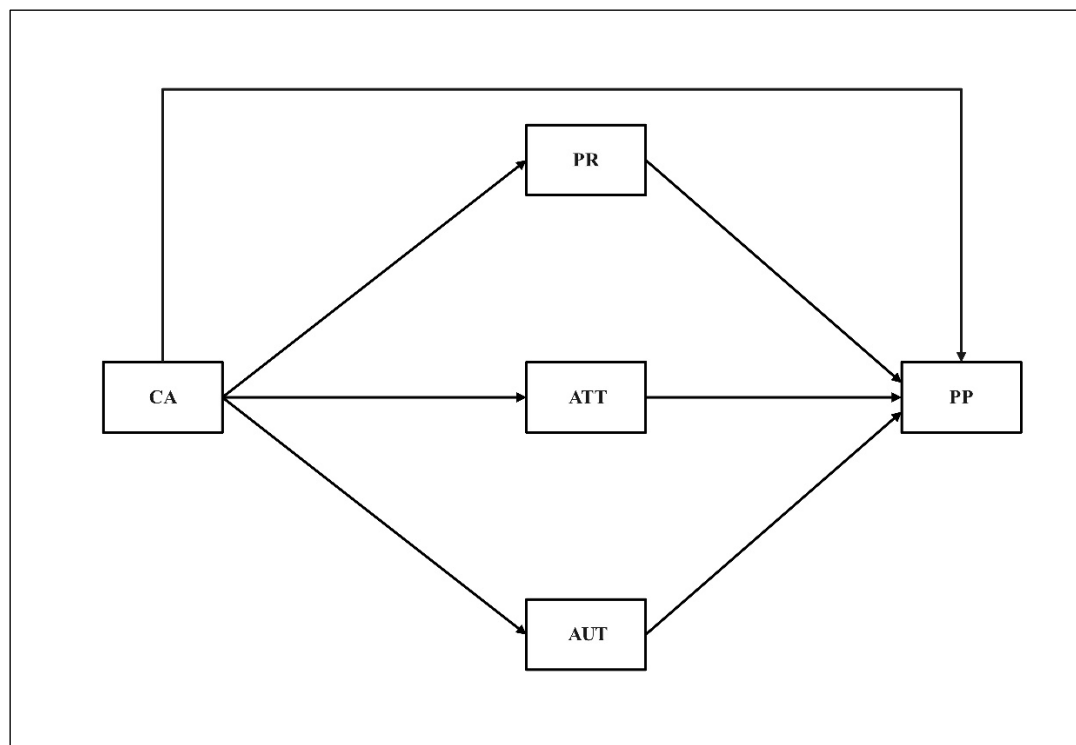


Figure 1. The conceptual framework

Conclusion

This study proposes a new conceptual framework for understanding the impact of counterpart assistance on public participation, which integrates policy feedback theory, the concept of involution, and critical mediating variables: participation resources, attitudes, and autonomy. This framework goes beyond traditional policy feedback theory, which focuses on positive feedback, and enhances the explanatory power of the theory by introducing the involution effect to compensate for its neglect of negative effects. This new perspective not only broadens the understanding of the dynamics of public participation but also offers practical advice for developing countries such as China to enhance public participation in public governance. For example, innovative governance methods need to be adopted to strike a balance between supervision and self-governance and to effectively empower the public (Shumba & Gutsa, 2025).

This study has some limitations. First, it is limited to proposing a conceptual model of the role of public participation in specific Chinese policies through a literature review, without empirical validation of the framework. Furthermore, this study relies solely on existing literature and assumes that the resource effect and interpretation effect are positive, and involution is negative, but these positive and negative effects may be adjusted according to different policy objectives and environments. To validate its robustness, future research could employ structural equation modelling (SEM) to examine the relationship between poverty alleviation policies and public participation, as well as the moderating effects of mediating factors such as resources, attitudes, and autonomy. Furthermore, case studies in different regions or countries could further assess the applicability and generalisability of this framework. Future empirical testing is crucial for evaluating the explanatory power and generalisability of the model, thereby providing robust guidance for policy design and practical application in China and other countries.

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