



## Anti-poverty Policies and Discourses of Blame in China

Chinese President Xi Jinping addresses the 2015 Global Poverty Reduction and Development Forum in Beijing, 16 October 2015. PC: Xinhua

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*Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese authorities have promised to eradicate rural poverty in the country by 2020. Since it was first announced, this goal has entered the popular imagination, becoming a major engine of policy innovation. A new report prepared by a special group within the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on the occasion of its 2019 session offers an assessment of progress in poverty reduction, providing up-to-date targets and candidly discussing contradictions within the poverty alleviation strategy*

History comes early in China, such is the speed of development. Precisely when the goal of eradicating rural poverty by 2020 was established is lost in the fog of history, but Xi Jinping's speech to the 2015 Global Poverty Reduction and Development Forum—where he committed China to lifting 70 million above the poverty threshold at the rate of over 36,000 per day—is as good a date as any.

Since this speech, the goal has entered the popular imagination, being repeated countless times. In this process, the goal has become a

major engine of policy innovation, as described in a 2019 Report prepared by a special group within the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC). This document is important for its assessment of progress, its focus on strategy with up-to-date targets, and its candid discussion of contradictions within the poverty alleviation strategy that echo those already familiar in the policies found in the West.

The Report, initiated at the highest level by Congress Chairman Wang Chen, is underpinned by field research in 16 provinces and autonomous regions, site visits to Sichuan and Qinghai, and presentations from relevant state bodies. The document is, therefore, possibly better characterised as a rapid evidence assessment than in-depth research. As such, it inevitably begins with a record of success—such as the assertion that poverty fell from 98.9 million in 2012 to 16.6 million at the end of 2018, with 13.8 million being ‘lifted out of poverty’ (脱贫) in the past year alone—before identifying more contentious issues.

## A Multi-faceted Assault on Poverty

Xi's assault on poverty is multi-faceted, with investment in infrastructure and economic development aimed at addressing deficiencies in demand in order to ‘revitalise’ rural areas (农村复兴), human capital investment to enhance labour supply, and social assistance to meet subsistence needs. Complementing regional with household targeting in 2014, a registry of all people in poverty was completed in 2016 and 775,000 officials were assigned to ‘resident task-forces’ (驻点干部) in every ‘poor village’ (贫困村), with a ‘person-in-charge’ (扶贫干部) allocated to each household in poverty. 188,000 Communist Party officials were similarly sent to build grassroots Party support, while 267 developed cities and counties in the wealthier eastern region supported 400 poor counties in

the west, state-owned enterprises organised poverty-relief programmes covering 10,000 villages, and 22,000 private enterprises were mobilised to assist 10,000 rural enterprises in as many villages. Additionally, 250 billion yuan were allocated over five years for relocating impoverished populations on an unprecedented scale.

No other country has reduced poverty as rapidly as China, and few have the infrastructure to engage in such an ambitious project of completely eliminating penury. But there are some caveats that must be considered. First, the official poverty line, set in 2011, is 2,300 yuan per year, which in 2017 purchasing parity (1.78 USD/day) equates to less than the World Bank's international poverty line of 1.90 USD/day. Moreover, China has been classified as an upper middle-income country since 2012 and the corresponding poverty threshold set by the World Bank is therefore considerably higher: 5.50 USD/day. Furthermore, the statistics are based on the registry compiled in 2016, thus they precisely account for the numbers lifted out of poverty, but fail to count persons becoming poor since 2016.

## Present and Future Challenges

The NPC Report documents the political support and administrative energy devoted to enhancing policy design, strengthening policy measures, and improving implementation. This was given further impetus by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, with ten ministries, including the State Council, publishing new strategies in 2018. Provinces have the principal responsibility for delivering on the poverty eradication target. Their financial contribution to poverty alleviation has increased by over 30 percent annually, topping 100 billion yuan in 2018, while the annual rise in central government funding has exceeded 20 percent.




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Farmer in a rural  
Chinese village.  
PC: Samuel Vigier

The Report hints, though, at the challenges of managing so many policy initiatives. In particular it highlights the need to integrate some schemes; to ensure coordination of poverty alleviation and industrial development policies; to provide adequate follow-up assistance measures for relocated households; to increase supervision and auditing; and to implement anti-corruption measures with spot-checks and unannounced visits. At the same time, the Report also reiterates core components of the overall strategy, including spatial targeting at both macro and micro levels, identifying 169 counties designated as being in ‘deep poverty’ (深度贫困); the promotion of rural industry to create employment; and policies to provide the ‘two no worries, three guarantees’ (两不愁、三保障), aimed at eliminating worry about food and clothes, and

guaranteeing decent housing, good education (to inhibit ‘intergenerational transmission’ of poverty), and medical security.

Of most interest, though, are the future challenges identified by the Report. The Report acknowledges that eradicating rural poverty is difficult and that the difficulty is increasing—whether this is a product of analytic reflection or the desire ‘to raise awareness of the significance of winning the battle against poverty’ (坚决打赢脱贫攻坚战) is up for debate. Not only are 30,000 villages still ‘poverty-stricken’, but the 16.6 million people remaining poor are also particularly disadvantaged, often unable to work due to old age, disability, or chronic sickness. For instance, 72 percent of people in poverty in Henan have health problems, with 47 per cent of the total designated as being impoverished also being unable to work. Moreover, the deep

poverty that remains is spatially concentrated, reaching 25 percent in some counties, and often located in the ‘three districts and three states’ (Tibet, Xinjiang, southern Xinjiang, and the prefectures of Linxia [Gansu], Liangshan [Sichuan], and Nujiang [Yunnan]) that lack infrastructure and basic services. Efforts to stimulate industry are critiqued as being typically small-scale, focussed on primary processing that generates little added value and few multiplier effects, poorly organised, and often susceptible to oversupply and falling market prices. The Report also notes failures in education and health-care, including the difficulty of attracting skilled staff to live in poverty-stricken areas. Local cadres are criticised for a failure of leadership and initiative in some areas, handing out cash payments rather than promoting sustainable development.

## Blaming ‘the Poor’

Without being prescriptive—the NPC usually approves rather than initiates policy—the Report responds to these issues by listing 24 policy aspirations grouped into seven clusters. The seventh cluster includes a fascinating glimpse of a post-2020 world in which the goal of reducing urban poverty is added to that of eradicating rural poverty, and a ‘comprehensively coordinated urban and rural poverty management system’ (全面统筹的城乡贫困治理体系) is proposed. As well as suggesting a major change in focus that reflects China’s rapid urbanisation, an additional implication is acceptance either that rural poverty will not be eradicated by 2020, or that one or more thresholds more comparable with international standards are to be introduced (there is currently no national definition of urban poverty). Huang Chenwei (2019), of the State Council, has subsequently acknowledged that ‘although absolute poverty is eliminated, relative poverty will persist for a long time’ (绝对贫困虽消除, 但相对贫困会长期存在).

Contradicting its own analysis of the importance of structural determinants of poverty and the personal challenges confronting those remaining in deep poverty, the Report engages with ideas that mirror Western anxieties about dependency, the culture of poverty, and the underclass. It expresses concern that increasing sums of money are being given to ever-larger numbers of people. It notes high levels of transfer income—accounting for 60 percent of the income of farmers and herders in parts of Qinghai—that undermine initiative and risk-taking. It refers to old customs and habits in Tibet and elsewhere that are difficult to change, and to persons unwilling to work in Jiangxi and Qinghai. Tellingly, the Report repeats complaints from people not receiving help that benefits are going to the idle and lazy, and that poverty is caused by gambling, bride-price, and lack of family support for the elderly. The Report responds by proposing ideological and cultural education, cuts in benefits for people unwilling to work, and punishment to eliminate undesirable attitudes that hinder the eradication of poverty. The risk, given that 58 percent of the Chinese population already believes laziness to be the main cause of poverty, is that this strategy becomes divisive, triggering the process of pauperisation in which people in poverty are deemed to be the cause of their own poverty and blamed for policy failures.

It is politically inconceivable that Chairman Xi’s battle to eradicate rural poverty by 2020 will be lost, but China’s war against poverty will continue. The Report foresees radical new policy agendas including measures to prevent people from reentering poverty, strategies to reach people in poverty who live outside areas designated as poor, and legislation to provide a legal guarantee of poverty alleviation. However, there is an imminent danger that, if the discourse of blame predominates, the war could increasingly be directed against people experiencing poverty rather than against the structural processes that make them poor. ■