People’s Republic of China: Performance Evaluation Model for the Urban and Rural Subsistence Security System

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The creation and coordination of social protection systems is an important aspect of modern state building and involves the development of public sector institutions for social satisfaction and stability. However, evolution and expansion of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) social assistance system has been a stop gap response to sudden new needs created by rapid but unequal socio-economic growth and population change. The resulting system is fragmented in its structures, functions, and information base. For example, its key program, the Urban and Rural Minimum Living Standards Guarantee System (dibao), experiences problems in benefit targeting (leakage and exclusion); rural-urban integration after its introduction to all urban areas in 1999 and rural areas from 2007; and some program overlap with the revised national rural poverty line. Yet dibao remains the most important program in the PRC social assistance system, often providing the qualifying entry point for recipients to access other welfare benefits. For these reasons, it can also provide an effective entry point to initiate a more integrated, better-managed, and ultimately whole government, response to social protection. However, this first necessitates improved information collection, management and evaluation processes to improve system performance and reduce benefit exclusion and leakage. The role for non-profit social work organizations (NPOs) in supporting and improving protection system. The expected outcome of the TA was an improved method for efficiency, inclusiveness, and household-level impact of the existing PRC urban and rural subsistence social management, targeting and provision through government outsourcing and other mechanisms also requires testing.

Expected Impact, Outcome, and Outputs The technical assistance (TA) impact was projected as improved efficiency, inclusiveness, and household-level impact of the existing PRC urban and rural subsistence social protection system. The expected outcome of the TA was an improved method for dibao targeting and tracking that formed the basis for further government-funded testing, expansion, and refinement. Planned TA outputs included: (i) development, pilot testing and documentation of a management information system (MIS) and performance evaluation system (PES) guidelines; together with (ii) training materials and staff trained in the utilization of the MIS and PES guidelines; (iii) a pilot NPO contracting process; and (iv) documentation and dissemination of TA findings.

Delivery of Inputs and Conduct of Activities TA implementation was delayed by six months to accommodate availability of the three key consultants engaged in another completing Asian Development Bank (ADB) TA. A minor TA modification was made in July 2013 to increase emphasis on overall dibao performance evaluation rather than focusing only on beneficiary targeting. This reflected nation-wide introduction of a trial dibao performance evaluation method and opportunities to engage in its review and refinement. These changes did not incur any project cost modification or extension.

The original TA completion date was extended by three months to 31 December 2014 to accommodate new timing of the TA study tour. MOCA had lodged a study tour application in 2013 but stringent new guidelines for government agency international study tours deferred MOCA approval to late 2014. Four MOCA staff visited New South Wales, Australia to review social assistance policy design, administration and performance evaluation from a state government and NPO service provider perspective. They focused on Centrelink, an internationally recognized good example of integrated government social service provision. The group was particularly interested in Centrelink’s ‘one-stop shop’ approach to client-friendly service provision and capacity to access cross agency data for rapid and reliable applicant welfare verification. MOCA is developing similar data sharing agreements with PRC housing and vehicle registration agencies, so the Australian experience was timely. Study tour members subsequently requested ADB to source and translate Australian data sharing legislation and operational protocols into Chinese for MOCA review. This is part of a 2015 application being submitted by MOCA to Ministry of Finance and ADB to for a 2015 bilingual knowledge product based on TA findings and also enhancing TA output (iv).

TA Terms of Reference were clear. Consultant selection was all individual and performance was rated excellent in one case and satisfactory in three. Consultants conducted interviews, focus groups and data collection on local dibao practices in three central and western provinces and two cities in east and west PRC. MOCA convened a data validation workshop with provincial and national agency staff that informed further fieldwork. MOCA then organized training on international good practice in PES and MIS system design and operation in Beijing for 24 central and local civil affairs staff responsible for designing and administering PES and MIS. Staff and consultants then developed an improved PES and MIS protocol for testing in Miyun, a peri-urban county of Beijing. Some project
recommendations were also tested, including NPO social work assessment in dibao operations. Initial findings were presented at the National Social Work Advanced Seminar in Beijing (August 2014) and a Xinjiang-wide training workshop for local social workers (September). MOCA shared data with government agencies and researchers during MOCA convened Kick-Off, Inception, Mid-Term and Completion Workshops and two technical workshops. MOCA and ADB reviewed TA materials and maintained close coordination. The ADB TA manager also joined all Workshops, Beijing Seminar and some Myun fieldwork. Proximity of the pilot to Beijing and curtailment of international study tour scale reduced TA expenditure. MOCA and ADB performance is rated satisfactory.

Evaluation of Outputs and Achievement of Outcome The TA outcome and outputs were met. An improved PES, MIS, training material and procedures were presented and accepted by MOCA at a Completion Workshop. This was attended by national experts from academia, ministries, and Beijing, Hangzhou and Chongqing civil affairs representatives. Copies of the bilingual final TA report were printed by MOCA and circulated to its offices in all 31 national level municipalities, provinces and ethnic autonomous regions. TA recommendations included; (i) improved definition of dibao goals and objectives in concrete and measurable terms in the PES and MIS to increase data from actual program operations and tracking of results, including collection of outcome data by NPO social organizations for annual public reporting; (ii) associated staff training and matching of tasks and resources with workloads, including for contracted social organizations; (iii) increased data sharing across different government agencies and organizations to improve targeting quality and efficiency, e.g. through public-private partnership data operating centers, similar to the Municipal Digital Government Administration System in Hangzhou. This would increase targeting accuracy and efficiency at lower financial and administrative costs; (iv) continued development of the PES and MIS to assist migrant populations by coordinating eligibility and benefits across urban and rural areas; and (v) creation of an inter-agency steering committee to coordinate social protection activities and resources.

Overall Assessment and Rating The TA is rated successful and relevant. Despite significant TA savings, all expected outputs were delivered and outcome achieved. Interim findings informed the national Minimum Living Security [dibao] Work Performance Evaluation Method (Method) issued by the ministries of Civil Affairs and Finance in early 2014. This included performance indicators for use by local civil affairs that drew on the TA basic performance indicator framework. The 2015 Ministry of Finance (MOF) workplan also aims to “strengthen performance assessment on expenditures that are of particular significance to the people's wellbeing” such as dibao. New ADB TA 8728-PRC: Improving Efficiency in Public Service Procurement, Delivery, and Financing contains a component on improving financial policy choices in the urban and rural dibao system. The TA 8095 consultant Team Leader and ADB Mission Leader both work on this component to ensure transfer, replicability and sustainability of relevant TA lessons to MOF. The 2014 State Council Interim Measures on Social Assistance contain a chapter on “Participation of Social Forces” and five clauses supporting social organization (NPO) participation. Article 2 of the 2014 Method also endorses third party dibao performance evaluation by social organizations. MOCA staff noted that TA 8095 had helped highlight the importance of social organization participation and monitoring of dibao activities.

Major Lessons (i) ADB involvement in the field of PRC social protection arose from a sequential series of TA employing individually recruited consultants. However, recent expansion in PRC social sector TA has brought heavy and competing demands for these pioneering PRC individuals and created some availability delays. It is important that ADB not only deliver effective individual TA but also help to nurture domestic consulting capacity in this important field. Heavy work demands on MOCA staff and a change in MOCA TA focal point made capacity and continuity of consultant inputs particularly important. Selection of a pilot site close to Beijing facilitated involvement of MOCA and Beijing City Civil Affairs and supporting field workers. This also resulted in TA savings due to lower travel and logistics costs. It is suggested that ADB identify and work with more diverse institutions and consultants and explore means for pairing national junior level researchers with more experienced research partners; (ii) Rapid pace of PRC policy creation and revision during Reform means that TA interim outputs or particular findings may have significant and timely policy contributions whereas the impact of larger, final study findings may take longer to materialize. This also requires timely information from client agencies.

Recommendations and Follow-Up Actions Some TA recommendations were included in the draft report of ADB flagship TA 8641: People’s Republic of China: Support for the 13th Five-Year Plan submitted to the National Development Reform Commission and presented at a November 2014 Workshop, e.g. making service outsourcing to social organization a dibao PES evaluation indicator. Final dissemination of the TA 8641 report, and advent of the 13th Five Year Plan itself in March 2016, will provide opportunities to highlight TA 8095 findings and track uptake in Plan content. A dissemination strategy for the proposed knowledge product would be prepared in consultation with MOF. MOF is also involved in the next Asia-Latin America Platform on Latin American and PRC experiences in social assistance. This may also provide further opportunities to highlight TA 8095 findings.

Prepared by: Irene Bain Designation and Division: Social Sector Specialist, PRCM