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Strategy for the Involvement of Social Work in Social Assistance

Final Report

Strategy for the Involvement of Social Work
in Social Assistance in China
Demand, Current Situation and Action Strategy

Consultants: Xinping Guan (Team Leader & Social Work Consultant)
Ying Sun (Social Work Consultant)
Joanna Rogers (International Consultant)

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Basic terminology

Poverty: Poverty is the situation of individuals or families whose living standard is below the socially recognized minimum standard.

Anti-poverty actions: Anti-poverty actions refer to a series of actions sponsored by the government and society to eliminate or alleviate poverty.

Families experiencing hardship: Families experiencing hardship refers to those families with a relatively low living standard or suffering hardship in some respects, including poor families officially identified by the government.

***dibao*:** This refers to the urban and rural minimal living guarantee system in China. It is a kind of social assistance system for the government to provide cash assistance for all families living below the local minimum living standard, as set by the local government.

***dibao* standard:** The minimal living standard set by local governments based on the calculation of local residents' basic living expenses, with the per capita income of family as the measurement unit. It is a standard used by local governments to calculate amounts of cash assistance for families in need. In 2014, the national average *dibao* standard was CNY410.5/month and the national rural *dibao* standard was CNY2777/year.

***dibao* beneficiaries:** The people who meet the conditions to be covered by the local minimal living guarantee system and are approved to receive the subsistence allowance through a formal procedure, usually with the family as the unit. At the end of 2014, a total of 10.261 million households and 18.77 million residents were covered by the urban minimal living guarantee system, and 29.436 million households and 52.072 million people were covered by the rural minimal living guarantee system.

Living Supports to Persons in Extreme Difficulty (LSPED). LSPED refers to a social assistance project that aims to provide economic support in the form of food, clothing, housing, health services, funeral services and education, to people who have no working ability, no family supporter and no other income source. The previous counterpart was the rural Five Guarantee System.

***dibao* marginal households:** Households with per capita income above the local minimum standard but below the standard for marginal households. The standards of *dibao* marginal households are different in various regions, usually 120–150% of the local minimum standard. Marginal households are characterized by low income; they are also known as low-income households.

Poor disabled people: Disabled people of low-income families and families

covered by the minimal living guarantee system, people with severe disabilities in economic difficulties and people with mental health problems.

The elderly living in poverty: Including the elderly of low-income families and families covered by the minimal living guarantee system, the disabled elderly and senior people in economic difficulties.

Migrants: Migrants in China refer to people whose places of domicile differ from their permanent residences (cities, counties). According to the latest population statistics, there are a total of 243 million migrants in the country, more than one-sixth of the total population.

People left behind: People left behind are those family members left at home in rural areas after the main workers in the family go out to work in non-local areas; the category includes left-behind children, left-behind elderly people and left-behind women.

Social assistance: Social assistance refers to the institutional system for the government and society to provide material assistance and related services for families in need. China has established a comprehensive social assistance system with the minimal living guarantee system as the basis, covering a variety of special assistance.

The rural Poverty Alleviation & Development program (PAD): The PAD refers to a series of anti-poverty actions based on the central government's financial support, with the aim of helping poor regions alleviate their poverty.

Social assistance staff: Social assistance staff refers to the social relief work management and service staff of the grassroots government and the residents' self-government organizations, usually including the staff of district and county-level civil affairs departments responsible for social assistance, the staff of social assistance agencies, the staff of urban sub-district offices and rural township governments responsible for social assistance, and the staff of urban neighborhood and rural village committees responsible for social assistance.

Community: The communities in this report refer to the regional societies formally divided by the government in urban or rural areas and the residents'/villagers' autonomous organizations in the societies. Urban communities are usually the regions divided into sub-districts, while rural communities usually take the village as a unit.

Community workers: Community workers usually refer to the workers of community residents' autonomous organizations and their affiliated social service organizations.

Social work: Social work refers to the jobs that provide professional social services for individuals, families, communities and organizations to improve people's welfare and solve social problems, upholding the values of social justice and social care.

Social workers: Social workers refer to the social service professionals who

provide direct social work services in many fields and have certain professional knowledge and skills in the field of social work. Social workers in China are currently divided into professional social workers and non-professional social workers. The former are required to have certain qualifications, unlike the latter.

Professional social workers: Professional social workers refer to those social workers who provide direct social services in social welfare and other related fields and have mastered the required professional knowledge and skills for professional social work. In China, professional social workers are usually required to have passed the examination for professional-level evaluation of social workers and assistant social workers, or to have graduated from colleges with social work as their major and to engage in social work.

Social work institutions: With professional social workers constituting their main staff members, social work institutions refer to the social service agencies providing professional social work-based social services; they are usually officially registered independent legal entities.

Social organizations: Social organizations refer to the non-profit organizations established with social resources rather than government resources, equivalent to “non-governmental organizations” (NGOs). Social organizations are currently separated into three categories in China: associations, private non-enterprise units and foundations.

Social services: This refers to the services provided by the government, social organizations, community organizations, enterprises and institutions to improve social welfare and meet people’s basic needs in various fields. Social services are divided into different levels. On the level of society, they are social services provided by the government to the whole of society, including the services in the field of education, healthcare, social security and housing. On the community and organizational level, they mainly refer to the services provided to directly improve the welfare of residents and staff.

Community services: Community services refer to a variety of social services provided by community organizations to the community residents within the community. Generalized community services also include a variety of social services provided by community organizations for the community residents on behalf of the government.

Social work services: Social work services refer to the professional services provided to people in need by social work institutions and professional social workers by applying professional social work methods and skills based on the theories of social work.

Preface

Poverty is a global problem. As a large developing country, China has a huge poor population. Over the past three decades, China has alleviated poverty in the country to a large extent through economic development and the making and implementation of social policies, becoming one of the world's most successful countries in anti-poverty actions; for example, the figure of those living in absolute poverty fell from 43% in 1981 to 13% in 2010.¹ China's achievements, however, have not solved the problem of poverty completely. On the contrary, after the former poverty problem was alleviated, new poverty related problems have occurred. Moreover, with the economic development and social transition, the poverty problem in China is becoming increasingly complex and the new anti-poverty task more difficult. To this end, China needs not only to continuously carry out anti-poverty actions, but also to constantly update the objectives and strategies of anti-poverty actions so that the anti-poverty approaches can deal with the new characteristics of the poverty problem and meet the changing needs of people living in poverty more precisely.

Among the anti-poverty actions, social assistance is the most basic institutionalized action system. Directly targeting people living in poverty and providing basic living security for people in need, the social assistance system undertakes this underpinning task and plays a significant role in the anti-poverty action system. Currently, all countries have established social assistance systems, which play an important role in anti-poverty campaigns. Their social assistance practices show that, in the anti-poverty actions, only when the social assistance system is compatible with other social policies and combined with the social work system can it play a better role.

Professional social work has always been targeted to people living in poverty and vulnerable groups. After one century of development, most, if not all, countries worldwide have established professional social work systems, which play a significant role in maintaining social harmony, serving all kinds of families and individuals and meeting people's needs in many respects, and playing a positive role in the anti-poverty actions as well. The involvement of social work in social assistance will further enrich the content of the social assistance system, enhance the function of this system, increase social benefits and improve operational efficiency. In particular, it can assist the social assistance system fulfill its function of providing social support, psychological comfort and motivation enhancement to help achieve the transition from general assistance to positive

¹ Map of "The World's Poor": the proportion of China's poor fell by 30% compared to three decades ago; source: China Economic Weekly, Xinhuanet, May 21, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2013-05/21/c_124740255.htm

social assistance. However, the involvement must be conducted in an institutionalized manner. To achieve such an involvement, there is a need to design an action plan based on the actual situation and solve a series of problems such as the institutions, mechanisms and capacity building. Therefore, systematic research needs to be carried out.

In recent years, many studies in Chinese academic circles have called for promoting the involvement of social work in social assistance, and the relevant government departments have introduced a series of documents to advance the work. Professional social work, however, has a relatively short history in China and is still at a developmental stage. To undertake and complete its function of involvement in social assistance and serving people living in poverty, social work needs to be improved in many aspects. For this reason, studies should be carried out into many issues. In order to promote the involvement of social work in social assistance and achieve the institutional development and promotion of social assistance, the Asian Development Bank and the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China jointly launched this research program. Commissioned by Asian Development Bank and the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, over the past two years, the research team has collected a large number of documents, carried out field research, obtained a large amount of first-hand survey data, done extensive analyses on the situation of the urban and rural poor, the social assistance system and its operation, as well as on the development and operational situation of social work, and, on this basis, completed this report.

Part I: Project overview

Along with the development of social assistance, it has become a governmental policy direction to promote the involvement of social work in social assistance. In May 2015, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) jointly issued an important document ‘Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Social Work in the Field of Social Assistance’ (MOCA [2015] No.88), and set out general guidelines in this practical area. After the introduction of this document, China will accelerate the process of the involvement of social work in social assistance. In this context, the social work and social assistance departments nationwide are in greater need of specific institutional arrangements and action programs for the involvement of social work in social assistance. To advance the work, however, specific action plan needs to be put forward on the basis of sufficient information. Therefore, this in-depth study has been launched to meet the important social needs, obtain the necessary information, and put forward relevant policy recommendations and action programs for the reference of relevant government departments, and social assistance and social work institutions.

Strategies for the involvement of social work in social assistance include a series of complex action programs. The main task of this study is to design these action programs, which requires a comprehensive understanding of the needs and social conditions for the involvement of social work in social assistance. To this end, it is necessary first need to analyze the research background, summarize the existing studies, put forward our research theme and objectives, and formulate and implement the field research program. Starting from the first half of 2014, over the past two years, the research group has done extensive research work. In this part, an overview of this work is presented.

I. Research background

The background to the research includes the following three dimensions:

1. China’s economic and social development and anti-poverty goals have established a new requirement for social assistance.

After three decades of rapid economic development and anti-poverty action, the poverty situation in China, in terms of absolute poverty, has been greatly alleviated, but the problem of poverty still exists in China and has become more complex. First, China still has a large poverty-stricken population. Second, after the basic food and clothing problem has been solved, the quality of life of many families in need is still low, and these families still live well below the

conventional living standards of local residents. Third, the causes of poverty and the composition of poverty-stricken people are now more complex, including not only individual poverty caused by various reasons, but also the group poverty facing the disadvantaged, and the structural poverty that is the product of various social factors. Therefore, the anti-poverty actions must be further improved and the level of the anti-poverty programs must be raised. Finally, many families and individuals out of poverty still have insufficient development potential, and face many obstacles in opportunity, capacity and motivation for development. In order to improve their quality of life and development potential, the traditional anti-poverty actions cannot be relied on alone; there is a need to provide new, positive social services for them.

In addition, the goal of the establishment of the “moderately prosperous society” has set a higher social assistance requirement. According to the national development goal set by the Chinese Communist Party’s (CPC) 18th National Congress, China will achieve the goal of becoming a “Moderately Prosperous Society”, which means that all Chinese people, including people living in poverty, will become better-off in the following years. The 5th Conference of CPC’s 18th Central Committee further proposes an idea of “shared development”, which involves “ensuring all the people have a higher sense of achievement”, and proposes a goal of “reducing income inequality”. All these ideas and requirements have been included in the Outline of 13th Five-Year Economic and Social Development Plan of People’s Republic of China, and have become the central guidelines for China’s economic and social development in the next five years. To achieve the goal of building a moderately prosperous society by 2020 and to follow the shared development idea, it is necessary to enhance the living standards of all Chinese people, including people living in poverty, through higher social assistance. Thus the level of social assistance must be raised. Simple enhancement of the entitlement criterion and benefit level, however, will probably further deteriorate the existing structural contradictions and lead to more serious welfare dependency, forming a larger conflict with promoting employment. Therefore, the social assistance system must be reformed and adapted it to the new situation. It is one of the important links of the reform to promote the involvement of social work in social assistance.

2. Scholars have carried out many studies into the need for the involvement of social work in social assistance.

To solve these problems, many researchers have carried out relevant studies and put forward many policy recommendations on the involvement of social work in social assistance. First, the researchers have noted that changes in the poverty situation require social work interventions. They have, for example, pointed out that with China’s economic development, accelerated urbanization and population aging, changes have taken place to the characteristics of its population

and poverty situation. The current poverty problem in the country is characterized by complexity: the needs of poor families and individuals are diverse. These families and individuals are confronted with not only economic difficulties, but also many problems and difficulties in employment, social relations, child education and care of the elderly and sick, as well as psychological problems. Government social assistance based on relevant standards fails to meet their diverse needs (Li Hongbo, 2011). In addition, the nature of poverty has changed. After the establishment of the market economic system and the gradual improvement of the social security system, China has entered a “post-transition stage”. Compared to the “policy poverty” in the transition period, the poverty at this stage is usually “post-policy poverty”, known as “new type poverty” and is combined with social problems.² These new features and new changes require a commensurate transformation of the poverty alleviation-based urban and rural social assistance system (Guan Xinping, 2010a, 2010b; Li Hongbo, 2011; Guan Xiangmei, 2011).

Second, the researchers believe that the social work philosophy of “helping people to help themselves” is in line with the transition toward development-oriented social assistance; the inherent advantages of social work makes the involvement of social work in social assistance possible and can play a positive role in improving social assistance. The involvement of social work in anti-poverty action has a long history in the world (Guan Xinping, 2010b). As early as the Charity Organization Society period, social work began to provide people-oriented services to alleviate the dependence of people living in poverty on assistance (Altman & Goldberg, 2008). The history of social work is actually the history of the practice of social assistance. Social work and social assistance have the same institutional origin; they are both activities to provide help for vulnerable groups and have the same purpose (Xiao Ping, 2012; Wang Hao, 2008). In addition, social work attaches importance to human values and dignity, recognizes human potential and ability, advocates social solidarity and the value of “helping people help themselves”, and encourages social members to share the fruits of social development to promote the self-development and self-realization of individuals (Pei Xiaoru, 2012). This “people-oriented, helping people help themselves” philosophy will make social assistance workers show more respect for the beneficiaries of social assistance and treat them as equals; it will enhance the service awareness of frontline social assistance workers, reinforce the social values of frontline social assistance (Wen Jun, Yi Zhenzhen, 2009), and change the previous individualist views of poverty among social assistance workers, the social assistance ideology, and the particularist actions in social assistance practices (Cheng Yan, 2008).

Moreover, the researchers believe that the professional skills of social work can

² Such as the poverty of landless peasants, private employees who are poor because they have retired, poverty, or the returning poverty of *dibao* beneficiaries.

improve the effect of social assistance services. First, social work can play a preventive role. Wen Jun and Yi Zhenzhen (2009) believe that social work is an important means of alleviating social problems and conflicts, and social workers can find social problems or pay attention to possible social problems earlier than ordinary people. Second, the professional skills of social work can improve the degree of specialization in relief work. Modern social assistance is becoming increasingly complex and the patterns of social assistance are becoming increasingly diverse, urgently requiring the support of professional social work skills (Wen Jun, Yi Zhenzhen, 2009). The level and scope of social assistance can be enriched by good use of social work methods such as case work, group work and community work (Pei Xiaoru, 2012). The normative professional approaches ensure the integrity of stages in social assistance, and scientific professional approaches ensure the correctness of social assistance methods (Wang Jinshan and Liu Haibin, 2010). Finally, social work makes up for the implementation deficiencies of social assistance. As no professional investigations and assessment had been carried out on the social assistance work in China, Li Hongbo (2011) proposed to use professional social workers in the investigation of family properties. Social workers' professional attitude and methods ensure an objective review of the applicants' conditions and an objective assessment of their real needs, allowing the payment standard to be set based on the actual situation of each poor family. Zhang Xiaonan (2010) argues that social work can also play an important role in improving the rural minimal living guarantee system.³

Finally, the researchers have explored various paths for the integration of social work and social assistance. The first is values integration. The integration of values is embodied in the updating of the service concept and the role change of practitioners. The so-called new service concept refers to establishing a positive concept of social assistance by using the philosophy of "helping people help themselves", respecting human dignity and worth. We should not only provide necessary economic aid and social services for people living in poverty, but, by a developmental perspective, help them develop the ability to change their current situation. As for the role change of the practitioners, the role of the assistance personnel should change from administrators to service providers addressing the problems of vulnerable groups, becoming coordinators of social assistance resources and influencers of social assistance policy (Xu Daowen, 2008; Xiao Ping, 2012; Cheng Yan, 2008).

The second is the institutional arrangement of these two action systems. To achieve institutional arrangements, we should first establish the patterns of the involvement of social work in social assistance. Guan Xinping (2010a) put

³ This role is reflected in three aspects: (1) screening the beneficiaries of the minimum living security system to avoid benefiting people who are not eligible; (2) collecting information to ensure rational benefits; and (3) reducing the possibility for failing to get benefits and enhancing the ability of the beneficiaries of the minimum living security system.

forward three pattern options: first, participation in community management; second, participation in agencies; and third, entrusted by government. Li Youfa (2012) believes that the main indication and result of the convergence of social work and social assistance is the creation of organizations and jobs integrating social work and social assistance in the social assistance institutions at all levels. Some researchers (Guan Xiangmei, 2010) have emphasized that the civil affairs departments should play a key role in the convergence. At first, the civil affairs departments should take the initiative to learn the concepts and methods of social work, setting up the social work service departments equipped with a certain number of full-time staff who take concurrent responsibilities for social assistance and social work (Li Youfa, 2012). Second, there is a need to make the role of social assistance staff more like that of social workers (Guan Xiangmei, 2010), by three means (Yang Xingliang, 2011): first, strengthen the social work skills training of social assistance workers; second, vigorously introduce social work graduates or employ full-time social workers; third, government purchasing of NGOs' social work services. The Interim Measures on Professional Level Evaluation of Social Workers and the Implementation Measures on the Professional-Level Exams of Social Workers and Assistant Social Workers, jointly issued by the Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, provide policy support for the convergence between social work and social assistance institutes (Xu Daowen, 2008). Social work and social workers' development in the field of social assistance in China, however, still face many problems, such as the slow and underpowered development, and uncertainty in the direction in which social work is developing. To break the bottlenecks and obstacles in this field, we must analyze the problems from three perspectives: the social construction, social welfare system transformation, and the localization of social work (Feng Yuan and Peng Huamin, 2013).

Currently, the social assistance issue is becoming increasingly complex and simple administrative methods can no longer meet the diverse needs of social assistance, so the professional approaches of social work are urgently needed to improve the effectiveness of social assistance. First, as for social assistance decision-making and management, there is a need to introduce the administrative methods of social work, and to change the order-oriented management into participatory governance to improve the level of scientization and the democratization of decision-making and management (Xu Daowen, 2008). Second, it is necessary to use social work expertise in social assistance services. One is the combination of direct services and indirect services – providing direct services for poor families with the social work methods for case work, group work and community work (Wang Hao, 2008). Indirect services include policy advocacy, social assistance assessments, social assistance referral and resource integration (Xiao Ping, 2012). Taking the assessment of social assistance as an example, we can strengthen the management of social assistance investigation by using the techniques for the dynamic assessment of social work. Another is to

provide continuous services to turn passive assistance into positive aid: (1) attaching importance to the long-term, repeated, comprehensive assistance to the recipients in the process of social work practice to make up for the defects of the current one-way social assistance (Xiao Ping, 2012); (2) meeting the needs of the recipients for capacity building, advantage exploitation and social interaction, not limited to “material” assistance (Guan Xiangmei, 2011). Finally, individualized, differentiated services need to be provided to the recipients. Under the current system, the diverse needs of relief subjects may be ignored or deliberately refused. Gao Lingzhi and Yang Hongbin (2010) have proposed the use of a case management approach to solve this dilemma. One of the characteristics of case management is the high attention paid to the diverse needs of the evaluation subjects and providing tailored solutions for them.

In summary, the researchers have carried out a number of studies and made many recommendations on the necessity, service contents, service mode and institutional mechanism of the involvement of social work in social assistance. In addition, the researchers have carried out studies into the theory and practice of foreign social work involvement in social assistance. Meanwhile, many domestic regions have practiced, and made explorations into, the involvement of social work in social assistance. All these studies and practices are the basis of this research. Through systematic investigations and research, this study attempts to further summarize the views and suggestions of various parties and to put forward relatively systematic policy recommendations and an implementation plan for the involvement of social work in social assistance.

3. Governments have done some work to propel the involvement of social work in social assistance.

China’s social assistance system after the reform and opening up was initially set up in the early 1990s. Starting from the establishment of the urban minimal living guarantee system in Shanghai in 1993, China’s new social assistance system has a history of more than 20 years. Over the past two decades, China’s social assistance system has been gradually improved, and has grown from the initial minimal living guarantee system into an comprehensive social assistance system of nine projects based on the urban and rural minimal living guarantee systems: the minimal living guarantee (*dibao*), support for people with extreme difficulties (the “Five Guarantee System”), medical assistance, education assistance, housing assistance, employment assistance, assistance for the victims of natural disasters, temporary assistance, and legal aid. This represents a relatively complete system covering both urban and rural areas. Meanwhile, the supporting fiscal system and management system have been established, at least in a basic form. We can say that China’s social assistance system is essentially complete. It provides basic living security and special assistance for impoverished families, who account for more than 5% of the total population,

and plays an important role in the anti-poverty actions. However, there are also some problems in China's social assistance system, such as the low level of assistance, and narrow coverage and convergent assistance, leading to a certain degree of welfare dependency. As a result, social assistance does not play a significant role in promoting employment. On the contrary, it even has some negative impacts on employment. At the same time, the administration of the social assistance system also needs to be further improved.

In recent years, the government has launched many actions to promote the involvement of social work in social assistance, covering three aspects: first, promoting the development of social assistance system; second, boosting the development of professional social work; and third, advancing the involvement of social work in social assistance.

First of all, the government has vigorously pushed forward the development of social assistance system over the past decade. To the government, social assistance is an important part of the Chinese social security system and plays an important role in guaranteeing people's basic living standards, alleviating poverty and maintaining social stability. In the 1990s, the social assistance system was set up in the context of the reform of state-owned enterprises. In the 21st century, the government repeatedly stressed the development goal of guaranteeing and improving people's livelihoods, and attached great importance to the improvement of the social assistance system. As a result, the social assistance system has been constantly improved. At present, China has a relatively complete social assistance system, including nine main programs. However, government departments are also well aware of the deficiencies of this system and there is a need to continue to optimize the system. It is in this context that the suggestion of promoting the involvement of social work in social assistance was made.

Second, professional social work in China has witnessed rapid development in recent years. In 2006, taking the development of social work as an important guarantee of building a harmonious socialist society, the 6th Plenary Session of the 6th Central Committee of CPC called for "building a grand social work team". After that, social work was fully implemented. Now, a professional social work team has been basically set up and a professional social work system is under construction. The government department in charge of social work has clearly recognized that the key to the development of professional social work is to promote the involvement of professional social work in various fields, and to improve the efficiency of social services through the participation of professional social work. To this end, in cooperation with other authorities in various fields, the government department in charge of social work has continued to issue important documents to promote the participation of professional social work in the social services in various fields.

The State Council and the Ministry of Civil Affairs have therefore actively promoted the involvement of social work in social assistance in recent years. In the Interim Measures for Social Assistance issued by the State Council in 2014, it explicitly states that “the state encourages organizations, individuals and other social forces to participate in social assistance through donations, developing aid projects, founding service organizations and providing volunteer services”, and that “local people’s governments above the region level should encourage social work institutions and social workers to play effective roles in providing professional services for social assistance recipients, including social integration, capacity building and psychological counseling”. These provisions of the Interim Measures for Social Assistance set out the basic direction of the involvement of social work in social assistance. On this basis, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Finance issued the ‘Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Social Work in the Field of Social Assistance’ on May 4, 2015 to accelerate the involvement of social work in social assistance; these Opinions lay out principled provisions on the objectives, overall requirements and tasks of the involvement of social work in social assistance. According to this document, the main objective is to create institutionalized practices for the involvement of social work in social assistance, including in terms of the aims of creating relevant institutions and mechanisms, developing social workers and social work organizations, etc. The main principles include to provide social work services based on the actual needs of people in poverty, to combine the government’s leading roles and social participation, to pursue a professional way and encourage innovative development in social work practice. The main tasks of the involvement of social work in social assistance include social inclusion services, capacity building services, psychological counseling services, resource linkage services, and information services.

Encouraged by MOCA, many local governments have put in place some pioneering practices in the involvement of social work in social assistance. Especially in some regions where professional social work has been developed comparatively better, the local Bureaus of Civil Affairs (BOCA) have actively promoted the involvement of social work by exploring relative institutions and mechanisms, achieving many valuable practical outcomes.

To sum up, the involvement of social work in social assistance is necessarily required by the new situation of economic and social development, and the anti-poverty actions in current China. Scholars have done some work into the necessity of this action, central government ministries have issued some important guideline documents, and local governments have put in place some pioneering practices. It is now necessary to set out more detailed policy guidelines and action schemes, which are the main tasks of this project.

During the implementation of this project, the team have summarized and analyzed

the experience of local Bureaux of Civil Affairs (BOCAs) in the involvement of social work in social assistance. The team have also participated and made contributions to MOCA's policy-making process and provided professional suggestions to the policy makers by participating in the policy workshops, providing experts counseling etc. This report, with the Policy Note and the Implementation Manual, will provide more detailed analysis, policy recommendations and implementation suggestions.

II. Research questions and research objectives

1. Research questions

To accomplish the task of the involvement of social work in social assistance, the government, social assistance and social work institutions need extensive knowledge, information and technology solutions. This report attempts to study how to make up for the shortages in these areas. Specifically, this study focuses on the research in the following issues:

- (1) What are the current needs of Chinese families experiencing hardship for social work services? How about the severity of their need?
- (2) What is the operational situation of China's social assistance system? In particular, what deficiencies does the system have in providing social assistance benefits for urban and rural families in need? Does it need the involvement of social work to make up for these deficiencies? To what extent?
- (3) In the involvement of social work in social assistance, what kind of services should be provided to people living in poverty? How? In what areas should social work become involved in terms of social assistance administration? How?
- (4) What is the current development situation of China's social work system? What is the situation operationally? How about its professional service capacity? Can it undertake the task of involving social work in the social assistance system and providing social work services for poor families? Are there any other problems and shortcomings in the system?
- (5) To undertake the task of involving social assistance, how should we improve the social work system, including the formulation and adjustment of relevant policies, system reform, the supply of resources and the management mode of social work agencies, the measures of the adjustment and enhancement of the professional training of social workers, and the social support environment, etc.?

2. Basic research objectives

The goal of this study is to answer the above questions. To this end, we have

carried out investigations and analysis on these issues and achieved the following results.

First, the report will analyze the current development situation of China's social work system, the problems of the capacity gap and institutional mechanism for the involvement of social work in social assistance, and put forward principled proposals on further strengthening social work system building. This analysis will be based on the detailed study of the current needs for social work services of households experiencing hardship, the operational situation of the social assistance system and the deficiencies of the social assistance system in helping families in need.

Second, the report will present and analyze the problems in the current social assistance system through the policy and technical notes and make policy recommendations on improving the social assistance system and the social work system.

Third, through the Implementation Manual on the involvement of social work in social assistance, the report will propose specific strategies for the involvement of social work in social assistance, including the main contents, work methods and main considerations of social services for urban and rural families in need, as well as the specific contents and methods for the involvement of social work in social assistance management.

The final goal of this research project is to propose a series of action programs on the involvement of social work in social assistance to the relevant domestic government departments, social assistance institutions and social work agencies, including the basic objectives, service objects, service contents, service mode, the institutional problems that need to be solved and the methods for the capacity building of social work agencies and social workers. In this research we would also like to emphasize that it is important to approach this question not only in terms of the institutional arrangements for "lodging" social work functions in various government departments, but also in terms of the priority to be given to government policy goals that subordinate the allocation of social work functions to the achievement of the policy goals.

III. Research methods

This study has been carried out in a variety of ways, mainly including bibliographical research and field work.

1. Bibliographical research

For this study, we collected and analyzed relevant literature at home and abroad, including the following categories:

- (1) Policy documents of government departments at all levels
- (2) National and local official statistics
- (3) Academic research outcomes (including monographs, papers and research reports)

2. Field work

Extensive field work was carried out using a variety of methods in this study, covering seven cities (counties) of six provinces (municipalities) (the “seven regions of six provinces”), namely: Shanghai, Guangdong (Guangzhou City), Sichuan (Chengdu City), Zhejiang (Jiangshan City), Jiangxi (Wanzai County) and Gansu (Jiayuguan City and Jiuquan City). Specific survey locations include a variety of urban and rural areas, covering not only megacities but also medium and small cities and rural areas.



Figure 1 The field work locations

A range of respondents relevant to the research objectives took part in the survey who largely fell into two categories: first, the beneficiaries of social assistance, including the recipients of the urban and rural minimal living guarantee systems, families experiencing hardship not covered by the minimal living guarantee system, the elderly living in poverty, disabled people, the parents of children experiencing hardship, the floating population and rural people left behind, etc.; second, people not covered by social assistance, including ordinary residents, social assistance staff, principals in social work agencies and social workers.

The field work was carried out using both qualitative methods and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods included in-depth interviews with individuals and focus group discussions. The in-depth interviews targeted representatives of various types of people, including not only the beneficiaries of social assistance (families experiencing hardship), but also ordinary residents, social assistance staff members and social workers. The focus group discussion was reserved mainly for two kinds of people: families experiencing hardship, and the social assistance staff and social workers. A quantitative method was also used in the field work. We carried out a sample survey with 923 questionnaires completed by urban and rural families experiencing hardship in the six provinces (municipalities), of which 80% were beneficiaries of the minimal living guarantee system and the remainder were *dibao* marginal households.

The basic survey information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Field Survey in Urban and Rural Areas

Area	Number of sample questionnaires	Number of interviewees	Number of focus groups
Shanghai	200	29	6
Guangzhou	204	25	6
Chengdu	201	21	6
Jiangshan, Zhejiang	114	30	4
Wanzai County, Jiangxi	95	31	5
Jiayuguan and Jiuquan of Gansu	107	24	5
Total	921	160	30

3. The international study tour

An international study tour went to Australia and the Philippines to carry out field research into the operational situation of these two countries' social assistance systems and their experience of the involvement of social work in social assistance and in serving families in need (see the International Study Tour Report for details).

IV. Research outcomes

In accordance with the requirements of the research, on the basis of the systematic collection and analysis of relevant information, this study achieved the following outcomes:

1. The technical report series

The technical reports mainly analyzed the information obtained at various stages

of the field survey to comprehensively present various findings in the field survey. A total of three periodic technical reports were prepared during the study:

- (1) Analysis of the Economic and Social Situation of Poor Families and Their Needs for Social Services – Based on the Survey Data of Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Jiangshan, Wanzai, Jiayuguan and Jiuquan
- (2) Qualitative Research Report on Families in Need for the Study of the Involvement of Social Work in Social Assistance – Based on the Field Research in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu
- (3) Strategic Study for the Involvement of Social Work in Social Assistance – Based on the Qualitative Research in Four Regions of Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Gansu

2. Final Report

Based on the literature analysis and field work data, to achieve the research objectives, the Final Report (this report) carries out systematic analysis of the relevant issues, comprehensively introduces the research process and summarizes and introduces the research findings based on the field work data.

3. Policy Note

On the basis of a systematic analysis of the relevant policies on the involvement of social work in social assistance, the Policy Note mainly provides analysis and proposals on policy adjustment and reform to further promote the involvement of social work in social assistance.

4. Implementation Manual

The Implementation Manual mainly presents specific implementation plans for the involvement of social work in the social assistance system, including the main action programs and methods, and specific measures to strengthen the professional competence of social work agencies and social workers.

Part II: China's current poverty problem in urban and rural areas and the needs of families experiencing hardship for social work services

To study the involvement of social work in social assistance and how social work serves families in need, we should first analyze China's current poverty situation, poverty-stricken people and their need for social work services. To this end, through the analysis of statistical data and the field surveys, this study carries out a systematic analysis of China's current poverty situation in urban and rural areas and the situation of the poverty-stricken population, and makes clear the basic living and employment situation of the beneficiaries of the minimal living guarantee system and other families in need, as well as their needs for social work based on the analysis of the survey data.

I. China's current poverty problem in urban and rural areas, and people living in poverty

1. Overview of China's population living in poverty

As a large developing country, China has a huge poor population. Anti-poverty action has been one of the major themes arousing the concern of the Chinese government and the entire society. Over the past few decades, China has made great achievements in anti-poverty work and the proportion of population classified as poverty-stricken fell from 43% in 1981 to 13% in 2010.⁴ However, there are still many Chinese people living in poverty. Moreover, although many people are not regarded as poverty-stricken according to the official standard, they have rather low income and often live in difficulties.

(1) China's poverty standard and the size of the population of people living in poverty identified by the government

In the general sense, people with living difficulties are regarded as poverty-stricken groups. From the perspective of institutionalized anti-poverty action, however, "people living in poverty" are to be defined with formal criteria. That is, people living in poverty are identified according to the official standard and only those individuals and families meeting the official standard are regarded as "people living in poverty". In this sense, the size of the population of people living in poverty is determined by the official standard to a large extent: the higher the standard, the larger the numbers of people living in poverty. In China, there is no unified national poverty standard: the national poverty standard, rural and urban minimum living standards and the rural Five Guarantee standard were

⁴ Map of "The World's Poor": Proportion of China's poor people fell by 30% compared to three decades ago. Source: China Economic Weekly, Xinhuanet, May 21, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2013-05/21/c_124740255.htm

set according to the needs of the government's anti-poverty action. China's poor residents are defined in accordance with these standards, falling into three categories: recipients of rural PAD, recipients of urban *dibao* and the recipients of LSPED. Table 2 lists various kinds of poverty standards in China alongside the size of the population of people living in poverty under these standards at the end of 2014.

Table 2 China's national poverty standard, average *dibao* standards in rural and urban areas and the size of the population of people living in poverty (2014)⁵

	Rural PAD	Urban <i>dibao</i>	Rural <i>dibao</i>	Rural LSPED
Standard	CNY2300/year*	Average CNY410.5/month	Average CNY2777/year	"Three-no's" people
Size	70.17 million	18.77million**	52.09 million	5.295 million

* Here in terms of the fixed value of 2010

**According to the statistics released by the Ministry of Civil Affair, in the fourth quarter of 2014, 18.802 million people received *dibao* benefits. The figure here is from the Social Services Development Statistics Bulletin 2014 issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, June 10, 2015, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/201506/201506008324399.shtml>

Source of other data: National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, National Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin 2014 of the People's Republic of China, February 26, 2015, downloaded from the website of the National Bureau of Statistics: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201502/t20150226_685799.html

According to Table 2, China now has a population living in poverty of 94–146 million. Assuming 50% of the recipients of rural PAD and rural *dibao* overlap, there are about 120 million people living in poverty in China, accounting for 9% of the total population.

It can be seen from further analysis that there is a large difference between the proportions of poverty-stricken people in urban and rural areas. Among the above-mentioned four types of people living in poverty, three are in rural areas and only the recipients of the urban *dibao* are in cities. Thus, at the end of 2014, there were 18.77 million urban people living in poverty (recipients of the urban *dibao*), accounting for 2.5% of the total number of urban residents, but the number of rural poor exceeded 100 million, accounting for 16.4% of the total number of rural residents. This large gap reflects, on the one hand, the development and income gap between urban and rural areas and, on the other, is a result of the uneven coverage of the anti-poverty actions. The percentage of the

⁵ The following should be noted: First, the standards in Table 1 are all the standards of per capita income of families. Among them, the rural poverty line and rural *dibao* standard is the annual income standard, while the urban *dibao* standard is the monthly income standard. Meanwhile, the rural poverty line is the minimum standard across China worked out in accordance with the 2011 constant price. Plus the price index since 2011, the poverty lines of various regions are actually above this standard, up to CNY2800 per year or so. Many regions (especially economically developed regions) raised the standard on this basis. In Zhejiang Province, one of the surveyed areas of this study, the rural poverty line exceeds CNY4000 per year. Second, depending on the system design, rural poverty reduction and rural development projects and rural *dibao* projects each have different beneficiaries. In practice, however, the beneficiaries of these two programs overlap to some extent. Thus, the total number of rural poverty-stricken people should be larger than the number of the beneficiaries of any of these two programs but smaller than the total of the two.

officially defined urban poor would be higher if the urban *dibao* standard were raised.

- (2) Households on the margin of poverty, households with special difficulties and households with temporary difficulties

Compared to the per capita income, the above-mentioned rural poverty alleviation standard and urban and rural *dibao* standards are rather low, and the rural LSPED targets only the “three-no’s” people.⁶ As a result, put together, the total number of people living in poverty identified by three programs, i.e. the rural PAD, *dibao* and the LSPED system, is relatively small, especially in the cities: people living in poverty identified according to the exclusive official poverty standard (the *dibao* standard) accounted for only 2.5% of the urban residents. In fact, however, in addition to these three kinds of people living in poverty, there are also many families living in difficulties for various reasons. They are not covered by the national anti-poverty programs, but deserve some attention. These people fall into the following categories:

First, *dibao* marginal households. The so-called *dibao* marginal households refer to families that cannot be covered by the *dibao* as their family per capita income is above the local *dibao* standard, but they still live in difficulties due to a low level of per capita income. Characterized by low income, these families are also known as “low-income families” in many cities. At present, most cities have generally set local standards, identified such families with the standards and provided a certain amount of assistance for them. In most regions, the local governments have set the standards for *dibao* marginal households – usually 120–150% of the local *dibao* standards. All the families whose per capita income is higher than the *dibao* standard but lower than the standard for the *dibao* marginal households may be regarded as *dibao* marginal households and may receive some social benefits. Currently, no national standard of social benefits for the *dibao* marginal households has been set. The common practice of various regions is to provide some medical assistance for the special members, i.e. the children, elderly or disabled, in these families, and to provide public housing benefits and one-off subsidies at special festivals for these families.

Second, households with special difficulties. Some families’ income is higher than the *dibao* standard and even higher than the standard for *dibao* marginal households, but they still live in poverty because of some special difficulties. For example, when some family members suffer from a serious or chronic disease, some family members are senior people or seriously disabled, or there are a few pre-school children in a family, the family needs special care or has other special expenses. Already having a limited income, these families have to spend more

⁶ This term refers to people with no working ability, no legal supporters, and no other income source, usually the elderly or disabled without family, or orphans.

money due to their special difficulties. This is, therefore, also called “expenditure poverty”, i.e. their poverty is not caused by lower income, but rather by higher rigid expenditure. Expenditure poverty has drawn the attention of the Ministry of Civil Affairs and local civil affairs departments. Local governments have also added some social benefits for households with special difficulties in the social assistance system, such as special benefits for the disabled, elderly people and children in the *dibao* families. So far, however, expenditure poverty has not become an official poverty standard.

Third, households with temporary difficulties. In both urban and rural areas, there are always some families that fall into serious economic difficulties due to a variety of emergency events. For example, some families with weak risk-resisting ability will fall into financial difficulty in the event of serious loss of life, health or property due to sudden disasters, accidents, or disease in family members, especially serious disease in the family’s main workers. The Chinese social assistance system has developed temporary relief programs to cope with the situation.

(3) Economically and socially vulnerable groups

The above-mentioned people living in poverty, marginal households and families with special difficulties are all identified in accordance with the economic characteristics of the individuals or families. From the perspective of social policy, these standards are set to identify the people and families with special difficulties to facilitate government special assistance. That is what a selective social welfare system needs to do. However, this selective social welfare system usually has a relatively small coverage and thus low social effectiveness, i.e. it does not play a significant role in the anti-poverty action system as a consequence. Especially when we raise the level of anti-poverty strategy from anti-absolute poverty to anti-relative poverty and expanded service assistance, we need to further enlarge the coverage of the anti-poverty action. To this end, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has proposed to establish a “moderately universal social welfare system”. This new approach can first be implemented to relieve “categorical poverty”, i.e. hardship among some vulnerable groups. It is also suitable for service assistance. Therefore, in the study of the involvement of social work in social assistance, it is necessary to further identify the eligibility of social assistance based on people’s actual difficulties. This involves taking the group as a unit and targeting economically and socially vulnerable groups with special difficulties in providing social assistance rather than just identifying households experiencing hardship in terms of income standard. The so-called economically and socially vulnerable groups refer to the groups whose average economic and social capability is weaker than that of others. They have a relatively low level of income or need more care or other services due to physical or social factors.

Based on China's current situation, combined with international common practice, the following groups should be classified as economically vulnerable.

First, the elderly living in poverty, including the elderly in *dibao* families and low-income families and the disabled elderly and very old people with economic difficulties. From the perspective of service assistance, these people need more social services. These are disabled and senior people who have completely or partially lost the ability to take care of themselves because of old age or other physiological factors, and thus need more services.

Second, the disabled living in poverty, referring to the disabled members of *dibao* families and low-income families, as well as the seriously disabled and people with serious mental diseases with economic difficulties. Although not all people with disabilities have economic difficulties, their average income is less than that of the non-disabled. More importantly, all persons with disabilities have mobility impairments to some extent and need more services than the non-disabled. Although universal services for the disabled will achieve good social benefits, at this stage the main task is still providing social assistance to them; it is important to attach importance to the service needs of people with disabilities and take the disabled as the key targets of the involvement of social work in social assistance.

Third, children in difficulties. All children should have access to good living conditions and an environment for growth in line with the local economic and social development level. In China, the living conditions and growth environment of children are usually provided by families and the country has established a universal compulsory education system. For various reasons, however, many children barely still have access to the necessary living conditions and growth environment and thus need social assistance. Specifically, children in difficulties refer to various kinds of children with special difficulties, including orphans (including "social orphans", i.e. those who have parents but parents who cannot provide support), children with disabilities, street children, children affected by AIDS, children suffering from rare diseases and children from poor families.

Fourth, poor migrants in the city. According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2013, there were a total of 243 million migrants in China,⁷ more than one-sixth of the total population, and the vast majority of them were migrants from the countryside to the city. Not all migrants are in financial difficulties, but their average income level is lower than that of urban workers. From the city's perspective, they are low-income groups in general and a considerable proportion of them have difficulties in obtaining equal

⁷ National Bureau of Statistics, "China Statistical Yearbook (2014)", Table 2-3. See the website of the National Bureau of Statistics: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2014/indexch.htm>

employment opportunities and improving their standard of employment, including income; thus they need help by urban society, and some of them actually need social assistance. As their household registration is not in the city, however, they are not covered by the urban *dibao* and most of the other social assistance programs yet, so it is difficult for them to access the assistance of local governments when they encounter difficulties. It is necessary at least to incorporate them into the service assistance system now and provide the services and assistance they need, including social work service.

Fifth, rural people left behind. With the flow of a large number of rural young workers into the city, many women, children and elderly people have been left behind in the countryside; these are known as the left-behind women, left-behind children and left-behind elderly persons. Among them, the left-behind children are facing the biggest problem. According to the survey data of the All-China Women's Federation, the number of left-behind children in rural areas reached more than 60 million in 2013.⁸ In recent years, many studies have revealed many problems facing children left behind. In many regions, suicide, injuries and other serious incidents have even occurred to some left-behind children due to poor care. In addition, there are tens of millions of left-behind women and left-behind elderly people in rural areas nationwide. Some of them are confronted with economic difficulties or need more care, but, more importantly, many of them are facing psychological problems and difficulties in safety and social relationships, etc., and thus could benefit from the intervention of social workers.

2. The causes of China's current poverty and the characteristics of the composition of people living in poverty

After three decades of reform, opening up and rapid economic development, the Chinese people's living standard has been greatly improved and great changes have taken place to the problem of poverty in China. First, as for the cause of poverty, the current problem of poverty in China is no longer a result of universal economic deprivation, but is caused by structural factors, and personal and family factors. In terms of structural factors, the main causes of poverty include: first, unbalanced economic development, which is the cause of regional poverty of some areas; second, fewer employment opportunities and lower quality of employment of some groups; third, the widening income gap, which has a great impact on relative poverty. As for personal factors, unemployment caused by illness, disabilities and low educational level or the lack of economic security due to a low income level and old age is still the main cause of personal and family poverty. In addition, a lack of motivation due to various social factors is one of the important reasons why some people fail to achieve full employment or

⁸ACWF Task Force, "Research Report on Rural Left-behind Children and Urban and Rural Migrant Children of China", May 10, 2013, People's Network, News of All China Women's Federation, <http://acwf.people.com.cn/n/2013/0510/c99013-21437965.html>

obtain an adequate income. Second, seen in terms of the composition of the residents living in poverty, although the middle-aged unemployed and low-income groups account for a high proportion of people living in poverty, the proportion of the elderly, the disabled, children, serious patients and migrants is on the rise. These people are more vulnerable than other social members due to their physical or economic and social characteristics. It is easier for them to fall into poverty or suffer from more damage when poor, so we need to protect and pay special attention to them.

II. Analysis of the needs of urban and rural households experiencing hardship

1. Economic status and needs of urban and rural households experiencing hardship

According to the sample survey in the seven regions of six provinces, the income status of the surveyed urban and rural households in need is as follows.

Table 3 Proportion of per capita income of surveyed households in need in local resident per capita income in the seven regions of six provinces⁹

Province/City	Urban Area		Rural Area	
	Per capita income	Proportion in disposable income of urban residents	Per capita income	Proportion in net income of rural residents
Shanghai	CNY10309.83	23.5%		
Guangzhou	CNY7618.19	18.1%		
Chengdu	CNY7900.77	28.7%		
Wanzai, Jiangxi			CNY3788.88	45.1%
Jiayuguan, Gansu	CNY6799.06	25.3%		
Jiuquan, Gansu			CNY2745.67	39.2%
Jiangshan, Zhejiang	Per capital income of urban and rural residents: CNY9157.04		37.6%	

Source: 1. Questionnaire survey of families in need in the seven regions of six provinces; 2. See Footnote 7 for the data source of the residents' income in the seven regions. Among the surveyed families in need in Jiangshan City, half came from urban areas and half from the countryside, so the per capita income of local

⁹ The ratios of seven cities are all based on local per capita income. Residents' income data sources: 1. Shanghai statistics, <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/sjfb/201401/266445.html>; 2. Guangzhou Blue Paper (2014), Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2014; 3. Shen Tingting, per capital income of residents in Chengdu reached CNY29,968, Sichuan Daily Online, Jan. 27, 2014, http://region.scdaily.cn/jrsz/content/2014-01/27/content_6839785.htm?node=3538; 4. Jiangshan Statistics, "Jiangshan Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin 2014" Jiangshan News Network, March 18, 2015, <http://jsnews.zjol.com.cn/jsxww/system/2015/03/18/019139186.shtml>; 5. Wanzai County Bureau of Statistics, "Wanzai County Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin 2014", website of Jiangxi Bureau of Statistics <http://www.jxstj.gov.cn/News.shtml?p5=6481212>; 6. Jiayuguan Municipal Bureau of Statistics, "Jiayuguan City Economic and Social Development in 2014 and Outlook on 2015", website of Gansu Provincial Bureau of Statistics <http://www.gstj.gov.cn/www/HdClsContentDisp.asp?Id=29558>; 7. Jiuquan City Bureau of Statistics, "Jiuquan City Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin 2014", website of Gansu Daily: <http://jqrbs.gansudaily.com.cn/system/2015/03/27/015454218.shtml>

residents of Jiangshan City is based on the per capita income of urban and rural residents.

It can be seen from Table 1 that, both in urban areas and the countryside, the income levels of *dibao* beneficiaries and marginal households are rather low. As for the absolute income, rural families experiencing hardship have a lower level of income. Seen from the perspective of per capita income, however, the urban families in need have a lower level of income. In addition, urban and rural households suffering hardship have a very low savings rate: only 19% of them have savings – and the average savings level was only CNY26,921.67. On the other hand, 47.2% of these families have debts; the average debt amounted to CNY55,864.23. Taking all the surveyed families in need as the base, the average amount of their deposits was only CNY3,557.89 while the average debt amounted to CNY15,742.34. This shows their debts are much more than their deposits. At the same time, when asked what their current greatest difficulty was, more than two-thirds of the respondents answered “basic living difficulties due to low income”. All these data show that even after receiving *dibao* benefits or other assistance, the economic status of these households is still poor and no fundamental change has taken place to their situation, indicating the low level of *dibao* and social assistance in both urban and rural areas of China. Such assistance aims to guarantee the most basic living standard of the people living in the greatest poverty rather than comprehensively improving the economic status of these families. Thus it is easy to understand why the surveyed families in need still listed economic difficulty among their greatest difficulties.

2. Living difficulties of households experiencing hardship

(1) Basic living difficulty of households experiencing hardship

We found in the survey that most poor families’ basic living was guaranteed after receiving the subsistence allowance and most of these families said they could maintain survival, indicating that the *dibao* played a positive role in solving the food and clothing problems of people living in poverty. The average household income of these families, however, is still much less than that of ordinary families, and the expenditure of most of these families is higher than their income, with the debt rate higher than the savings rate. Moreover, some of the interviewees said that their food and clothing problems were not completely addressed, indicating that the *dibao* standard is still relatively low and the economic difficulties of families in need have not been resolved completely.

As for housing, 54.19% of the families surveyed had their own houses, about 20.35% lived in publically owned houses, and the remaining lived in houses rented or borrowed from employers, relatives or other individuals. The per capita housing area was 20 square meters except for in Shanghai, but a small number of them still lived in rather small houses. As for the quality of housing, 14.8% of the

respondents said the quality of the houses where they live is not up to the standard of officially recognized “dangerous houses”. In addition, compared with ordinary families, the households surveyed had fewer and lower-quality household appliances. In particular, it was impossible for them to have their own cars or other high-grade vehicles.

(2) Health and medical needs of families experiencing hardship

According to the survey, more than one-third (37%) of households surveyed had at least one disabled person, and some families even had two or three persons with disabilities: 41.9% of the households surveyed had at least one family member suffering from a chronic disease (referring to patients with at least one chronic disease), 4.9% had two or more people with chronic diseases, and some families even had five patients with chronic diseases. Nearly one-fifth of the households surveyed had at least one seriously ill member. Relatively speaking, the proportion of children from poor families with disabilities, chronic diseases or major diseases was low. Currently, medical costs remain the biggest expense for poor families, and a major factor leading to debts for households living in poverty. In the year prior to the survey, 94.1% of households surveyed incurred medical expenses. Among them, 81.2% had to bear at least a part of the medical expenses, and the average medical costs paid by these families amounted to CNY4270.72, accounting for 40.8% of the total medical costs. Of the families surveyed, 56.3% of the families were covered by medical insurance and 16% received medical assistance, reducing the burden of the medical costs; 17.2% of the households surveyed would turn to relative, employers and charitable organizations for help to address the problem of medical expenses.

In addition, 62.1% of the respondents believed that the economic burden of medical expenses on their families was “very heavy” or “relatively heavy”; 20.4% of the respondents said this burden was “average”, while only 15.5% believed the burden was “relatively light” or “fairly light”, and 2.1% said that it was “not clear”. It is clear that medical costs have a great impact on most families. These data also show that high medical costs are one of the main factors leading to financial difficulties for families living in poverty. Moreover, in addition to the high medical costs, many respondents complained about the long waiting time for medical treatment; some respondents said that their ill family members needed special care but they did not have any knowledge of such medical care, and a few respondents even said they were once involved in medical disputes. On the whole, poor families have high demands for price cuts in medical care and the reimbursement of medical costs, but the medical care demands of most respondents were diversified, including more convenient medical treatment, the popularization of healthcare knowledge, more moral support and a more harmonious doctor–patient relationship.

(3) Children's education difficulties of families experiencing hardship

Of the families surveyed, 34.09% had children under 18, 4.13% had two children, and 0.87% had three children. The average age of the children was 11.9. Most of the children of the families surveyed received the nine-year compulsory education. According to the law, students are exempted from tuition fee during the nine-year compulsory education, but parents still need to pay a certain amount of educational expenses, and parents with children during the non-compulsory education period have to pay more for their children's education. Survey data show that 33.01% of the families needed to pay tuition fees for their children's pre-school education, high school and college education, on average CNY2446.88/year. In addition, these parents were also required to pay for their children's other schooling-related expenses, including accommodation and meal fees, transportation costs and clothing costs, on average CNY3203.12/year, the expenses for books, stationery and other school supplies of CNY459.47/year on average, and extra-curricular tutoring and counseling expenses of CNY540.48/year. When added to some other consumption, such as mobile phones, computers, pocket money, etc., the parents are confronted with a heavy financial burden. To sum up, while the compulsory education expenses have been reduced significantly, they are still a heavy burden on families experiencing hardship, and those families with children receiving non-compulsory education are facing the heaviest financial burden for education. Many respondents said that children's educational fees are their heaviest financial burden.

(4) Employment difficulties of families experiencing hardship

Employment is an important way to lift families in need out of poverty. The poverty situation of families in need is mainly a result of their poor employment situation. According to the survey, there are many factors leading to employment difficulties for families experiencing hardship. The first is having fewer workers in the family; the second is that the worker cannot find a job; the third is their low quality of employment and low income. The factors of having fewer workers and the low income of the employed are the second and third most important causes of poverty of these families, second only to illness. The main factors affecting the employment of members of these families include poor health, low levels of education, lack of job skills, disabilities, etc. In addition, some people cannot find jobs for subjective reasons. For example, some of them are not willing to work (do not want to seek jobs), do not work hard, or have mental health problems or addictive behaviors (such as gambling or drug abuse), and some people who once had violations of the law or regulations (such as ex-convicts) will encounter difficulties when seeking jobs. The number of these people is small, but their problems are difficult to resolve, creating a long-term dependency on social assistance if not addressed.

(5) Difficulties in life care

Families in need usually have many children and elderly and disabled people, and in some families all the family members are such people in need of good care. Home care often becomes one of their major difficulties: 16.1% of the respondents said it was very difficult or relatively difficult for them to take care of the elderly and children. The families without workers are confronted with direct difficulties in home care, and those with the ability to work can often not go to work normally when their family members need care. Thus, home care is not only one of the most serious difficulties in their lives, but also one of the factors leading to their difficulties in employment and their low income level. Actually, there are home care services available but these are mainly commercial services that these households are not able to access. Therefore, the key to solving this problem is to provide welfare service to households in need.

(6) Mental health problems and difficulties in social interaction

Mental health and social interaction are important factors affecting people's quality of life, but are ignored by the current social assistance system. According to the survey, families experiencing hardship have such problems to varying degrees. First, nearly half of the respondents (49.5%) said their living hardship has a "very serious" or "severe" impact on their mental health; only 27.3% of the respondents said the impact is little or can be ignored, and about one-fifth (19.6%) of the respondents said "their lives were boring and they could not find any fun in their lives". These data show that the family members of households experiencing hardship do have serious mental health problems. On the other hand, some of them have difficulties in social interactions. Among the families surveyed, 9% said they had serious or relatively serious difficulties in social contacts, 10.7% found it difficult to participate in community activities, 13.8% believed that living experiencing hardship would affect family harmony, and a few of the people were confronted with the problem of a bad relationship with their neighbors.

III. The demands of urban and rural families in need for social work services

The demands of urban and rural families in need for social work services can be analyzed from different perspectives. First, what are their demands for general social services? Second, how do the existing community services meet their needs? Third, how do the members of the families in need look at social work and, on this basis, how do they express their demands for social work?

1) The demands of urban and rural families in need for general social

services

In the survey, we asked the members of families experiencing hardship about their demands for various kinds of social services. The detailed information is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Overall demands of poor families for social services (%)

	In urgent need	Need	No need	Unclear	Average score*
Raise <i>dibao</i> standard	75.46	16.14	5.78	2.62	2.72
Improve health care	69.03	24.21	5.13	1.64	2.65
Expand the scope of medical assistance	67.69	23.58	7.10	1.64	2.62
Improve the level of housing security	36.35	24.34	36.14	3.17	2.00
Improve community health services	26.09	40.94	28.49	4.48	1.97
Raise the minimum wage	29.44	14.72	42.64	13.20	1.85
Provide home care	26.06	26.50	43.95	3.49	1.81
Improve the level of education assistance	27.98	17.38	51.80	2.84	1.75
Provide services for the disabled	27.70	11.67	56.82	3.82	1.70
Expand community cultural and recreational activities	13.54	38.54	42.58	5.35	1.69
Provide services for the elderly	20.94	20.61	55.18	3.27	1.65
Relieve mental stress	12.21	28.79	54.42	4.58	1.56
Provide skills training	14.66	23.85	57.11	4.38	1.56
Provide employment counseling	14.94	20.72	60.20	4.14	1.53
Provide psychological counseling	11.14	24.78	58.08	6.00	1.50
Provide legal services	9.71	17.99	64.89	7.42	1.40
Promote interpersonal communication	6.54	23.23	65.21	5.02	1.38
Provide services for children	8.40	12.43	75.68	3.49	1.30
Mediate neighborhood relationships	4.37	12.23	80.24	3.17	1.22
Mediate family conflicts	3.71	8.94	85.06	2.29	1.17
Provide financial and investment counseling	2.94	5.02	86.70	5.34	1.12

* “In urgent need”=3, “Need”=2, “No need”=1

The data in Table 4 show that the families experiencing hardship are in need of a wide range of social services. They are in urgent need of medical care, housing, income and other material security; they also have demands for other services in varying degrees. Most respondents emphasized their “material needs”, i.e. to increase *dibao* benefits, improve the medical assistance level and raise the level of housing security. Only a few of the respondents expressed their need for capacity building services, such as “employment counseling”, “skills training” and “financial and investment counseling”. A small number of the respondents expressed a strong demand for certain “soft services”, i.e. the “social” or “psychological” services, such as “neighborhood mediation”, “family conflict mediation”, “relieving mental stress”, “psychological counseling”, “legal

services”, “promoting interpersonal relationship” and so on. Based on the above data, the families experiencing hardship have more material demands than demands for capacity building, or for social and psychological counseling services. On the one hand, it is probably because many of them still live in poverty and have rather low socio-economic wellbeing levels that their most basic needs are still food and medical services, which they hope the government will provide for them. In addition, many respondents may be more familiar with the material assistance programs of the government and know little about the psychological or social services provided by the government or community, so they cannot express their demands for such services. Nevertheless, some families experiencing hardship still expressed their demands for capacity building and social and psychological counseling services to varying degrees.

Based on the above analysis, families experiencing hardship have demands for a wide range of social services, so the social assistance cannot be limited to cash or material assistance, but should be extended to various service areas. Social work services are important in at least two aspects: first, for those poor families with demands for capacity building training service and social and psychological counseling services; second, after the government’s anti-poverty program altered the focus from “anti-absolute poverty” to “anti-relative poverty”, there will be a larger number of poor families in need of such services.

2. Evaluation of the members of families experiencing hardship on the current community services

At present, many urban and rural communities nationwide carry out a wide range of social service activities, including community administrative public services, a variety of convenient services, neighborhood mediation service, community health, community policing, community environment, community commercial service facilities, community road construction, community greening, community cultural and fitness facilities, etc. Furthermore, many urban and rural communities have launched some service projects for the elderly, children and people with disabilities, and many urban communities have incorporated migrants into the community service system in recent years, but the projects, contents and quality of the community services are quite different. We carried out investigation into the existing community services in the research, aiming to find out whether these projects have been fully implemented and whether they are available to families experiencing hardship. According to the survey results, the families experiencing hardship were most satisfied with the government public service projects in the communities, indicating that these projects played an important role in satisfying their demands. On the other hand, these families’ evaluation of other projects was different, indicating that the situation of these projects varied in various regions and the projects could not meet the demands of all families in need. In addition, there are few special programs designed for

families suffering hardship. In the survey, only 14.3%, 26.8%, and 31.3% of the respondents from families in need said their communities had special social service projects for children, the elderly, and disabled persons from families in need, respectively, indicating that some community service projects are probably not available for people living in poverty in local areas, or that if they are available, the potential service users from low income households are not informed about them.

Due to the wide range of community services and the differences in community services between regions, it is impossible to make a uniform evaluation of the number, quality and effectiveness of the current community services in various regions. Different regions should design service projects based on the actual situation of local communities. On the one hand, we should rely on the existing service programs and, on the other hand, we should extend the services based on the actual needs of people living in poverty, striving to improve the accessibility of a variety of community service projects and to improve the quality of community services through the introduction of social work services.

3. The awareness and expression of demand for social work services among families in need

According to the survey, when people living in poverty in urban and rural communities encounter difficulties or problems, they first turn to the neighborhood committees for help, then to relatives, friends and family members; only 1.3% of the respondents said they would turn to social workers for help. This is because social work has not developed well and many members of families in need do not even know what social work is. The survey data show that in the seven regions surveyed, the proportion of the respondents who “had a good understanding” or “some understanding” of social work was only 1.6% and 10.7% respectively. The situations in various regions are somewhat different, and these two proportions were the highest in Guangzhou, respectively 5.5% and 23.9%. In Shanghai, these two proportions were only 2% and 9% respectively. Even the situations in these large cities, where social work develops well, are unsatisfactory. In the rural areas of Jiuquan, Gansu, for example, almost no family experiencing hardship knows what social work is. In the rural areas of Wanzai, Jiangxi, only 1.1% and 2.1% of the respondents said they were very familiar or relatively familiar with social work.

Families in need know little about social work, but this does not mean they do not need social work services. After the investigators explained to them what social work was, the respondents expressed stronger demand for social work, and more than half of them expressed their demands for certain social work services. To sum up, in most cities and rural areas currently, especially in rural areas, the development of social work is relatively slow, so the families in need know little

about social work. As a result, they expressed little demand for social work and this will probably make them unwilling to turn to social workers for help when needed. The lack of demand expression, however, is a result of the insufficient supply of social work services. It does not mean that the families in need have a low demand for social work. With the increase in the supply of social work services, the actual needs and demand expressed for social work among families in need will continue to increase, which will be clearer after the analysis of the development of the social assistance system and the social work system in the latter part of this report.

To conclude, although many households living in poverty still hope to access increased cash benefits for improving their basic living, medical care, housing, children's education etc., they do have increasing needs for services of various kinds, including: home care for children, people with disabilities or chronic illness, and older people; employment services for a range of people (older people of working age, migrants, people with disabilities, ex-prisoners, people with mental health problems); community rehabilitation and integration/inclusion; and other services for people with disabilities, ex-prisoners, left-behind women, older people and children, etc. Therefore the social assistance system should turn from the current pure "material assistance" to a joint emphasis on material assistance and service assistance. In this process, one of the most important tasks is to increase social work services.

Part III: The construction, development and deficiencies of China's social assistance system

After analyzing the general living conditions of urban and rural families in need and their demand for social work services, we should have a comprehensive understanding of the operational situation of the social assistance system. To this end, through the analysis of relevant policy documents and research literature as well as the field survey results, this part of the report attempts to carry out a systematic analysis of the construction and operational situation of China's social assistance system, focusing on analyzing its deficiencies, making clear the necessity of the involvement of social work in social assistance, and exploring a path for the work to take.

I. Overview of China's social assistance system

1. A brief history of the development of China's social assistance system

The predecessor to China's current social assistance system was the urban social relief system and the rural Five Guarantee System under the planned economy in the 1990s. These two types of systems were designed for the "three-no people" in urban and rural areas – people with no working ability, no legal supporters and no other income resource. After reform and opening up, with the reduction of "three-no people" and the increase in the number of non-"three-no people" with living difficulties, especially with the increase of laid-off workers after the reform of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s and the disintegration of the rural collective economy, the poverty problem of some non-"three-no people" became prominent, and a new system needed to be established to solve the urban and rural poverty problem. In this context, from the early 1990s, some urban and rural areas launched the practice of establishing a new social assistance system.

The urban social assistance system was first the urban *dibao* set up in Shanghai in 1993. With the successful establishment of the urban *dibao* in some cities, the State Council issued a document in 1997 to call for the establishment of the urban *dibao* nationwide. By 1999, the urban *dibao* was almost set up in all cities nationwide. At the same time, the State Council issued the Urban Minimal Living Guarantee Regulations, marking the establishment of this system. In the early stages, restricted by the financial strength of local government, the urban *dibao* had a rather narrow coverage. In 2000, only 4.026 million people were covered by this system.¹⁰ This situation was changed after the central government began to bear part of the financial burden. In 2001 and 2002, the numbers of recipients of the urban *dibao* doubled for two consecutive years. As of the end of 2002, a

¹⁰ Division of Finance and Government Affairs of Ministry of Civil Affairs, "Statistical Report on the Development of Civil Affairs in 2000", website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, April 3, 2001, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/200801/200801000093959.shtml>

total of 20.647 million people were covered by the urban *dibao* nationwide.¹¹

After the establishment of the urban *dibao*, to meet various needs of urban families in need, China set up in cities a medical assistance system, a housing assistance system (a cheap rental housing system), an assistance system for homeless people, an education assistance system and a legal assistance system, initially forming a relatively comprehensive social assistance system.

Due to the dual urban–rural structure, the nationwide rural *dibao* was not established synchronously with the urban *dibao*. As early as the 1990s, a pioneer rural *dibao* project was first set up in Shanxi Province, but the system was not promoted so rapidly in the country after that. Until the early years of the new century, the rural *dibao* was still a local system in some places rather than a national system – the establishment of it in different areas was determined by the local governments. However, since the early years of the new century, the rural social assistance system has gradually developed nationally. The rural destitute household relief system was first implemented nationwide, then the rural medical assistance system was established (2003), and the rural Five Guarantee System was reformed (2006). Finally, the rural *dibao* became nationwide in 2007. In 2010, the natural disaster-relief system was updated. So far, the rural social assistance system has been basically established.

2. China's current institutional system for social assistance

On the basis of the initial establishment of the urban and rural social relief systems, the State Council issued the Interim Measures for Social Assistance in 2014 to regulate China's social relief system. In accordance with the Interim Measures, China's current social assistance system includes the following specific systems:

(1) The urban and rural *dibaos*

The urban and rural *dibaos* are the social assistance systems for the government to provide cash assistance for families whose per capita income is below the local minimum living standard; the aim is to guarantee their basic living standard. Currently, the minimum living standards of various regions are determined and announced by the people's governments of the provinces, the autonomous regions, the municipalities or the cities with districts in accordance with the cost of living necessary for the local residents. The relief funds are provided by local governments, and the central government transfers the payments to the regions with financial difficulties. Urban and rural *dibaos* are means-tested social

¹¹ Division of Finance and Government Affairs of Ministry of Civil Affairs, "Statistical Report on the Development of Civil Affairs in 2002", website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, April 3, 2003, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/200801/200801000093829.shtml>

assistance systems and have relatively rigorous regulations in terms of the application, review and approval process. Only those families meeting the relevant conditions and passing the review process can receive the *dibao* benefits. Under the principle of making up for the income gap, the local governments provide cash benefits for the eligible families to compensate for the income gap between the families' per capita income and the local minimum living standard, aiming to guarantee the beneficiaries' per capita income at a level no less than the local minimum living standard.

(2) Living Support to Persons in Extreme Difficulty (LSPED)

The LSPED grew out of the rural Five Guarantee System. After 2014 which was expanded to cover the urban areas, targeting the elderly, the disabled and minors under 16 who have no ability to work, no source of income, no legal supporter or guardians, or whose legal supporter and guardians do not have the ability to support them. The support includes: providing basic living conditions, and care for those who cannot take care of themselves; providing medical care; and providing financial support for funerals. The support standards are determined and announced by the people's governments of the provinces, the autonomous regions, the municipalities or the cities with districts.

(3) Social assistance for people affected by natural disasters

The basic goal of the natural disaster-relief system is to provide living assistance for the people whose basic living is seriously affected by natural disasters. The main contents include the establishment of disaster-prevention mechanisms by the central and local governments, emergency responses to natural disasters, post-disaster reconstruction and assistance for the victims.

(4) Medical assistance

The basic goal of the medical assistance system is to help people in need to access basic health services. Its beneficiaries include members of the families covered by the *dibao*, those covered by LSPED, and other people with special difficulties identified by the people's governments above county level. Medical assistance modes are, first, to provide subsidies for the individual contributions for the beneficiaries to participate in the basic medical insurance for urban residents or the new rural cooperative medical insurance, and, second, to provide subsidies for the beneficiaries to cover part of their payment of basic medical costs which the individuals and their families cannot afford even after receiving the basic medical insurance, major disease insurance and other medical insurance payments. The medical assistance standards are determined and announced by region-level or higher governments. Strict application and approval procedures have been developed for the medical assistance system. Only those families and individuals meeting certain conditions can obtain the medical assistance. In

addition, the state has established an emergency relief system to provide assistance for those needing emergency treatment, but who cannot afford the emergency treatment fee.

(5) Education assistance

The main objectives of education assistance are: first, to provide education assistance for the compulsory education students from *dibao* and LSPED families; second, to provide appropriate education assistance for high school (including secondary vocational school) and college students from *dibao* and LSPED families, according to their situations. Education assistance patterns include relevant cost reductions, scholarships, living allowances, and work-study arrangements, etc. Education assistance standards are determined and announced by the people's governments of the provinces, the autonomous regions, the municipalities or the cities with districts. There are also relevant application and approval procedures for education assistance.

(6) Housing assistance

Housing assistance targets eligible families with housing difficulties, covering the *dibao* families and supported-at-home LSPED beneficiaries, mainly including the supply of public-rental housing, the issuance of housing rental subsidies, and the renovation of dilapidated rural houses. Housing difficulty standard and benefit level are determined and announced by the region-level or higher governments. The applicants must also pass the application and approval procedures and only the eligible families are provided with housing assistance.

(7) Employment assistance

Employment assistance targets unemployed workers among the *dibao* families, providing loan discounts, social insurance subsidies, position subsidies, training subsidies, fee waivers, public job placements, etc. According to the relevant law, when one or more members of a *dibao* family with the ability to work are unemployed, the local governments should ensure that at least one of the members of this family is employed. The unemployed workers of the *dibao* families should accept the jobs offered by the human resources and social security departments; if they refuse the suitable jobs in line with their health status and working ability three consecutive times without justified reasons, the civil affairs departments of the region-level government should decide to reduce or stop providing the *dibao* benefits for them. In addition, according to the law, the employers accepting beneficiaries of employment assistance are to enjoy a social insurance subsidy, a preferential tax policy and small-sum secured loan policies.

(8) Temporary assistance

Temporary assistance is mainly provided for families with temporary difficulties due to sudden accidents such as fire and traffic accidents or the major illness of family members, or to *dibao* families with serious basic living difficulties due to a sudden increase in living expenses beyond their ability, as well as to other families with special difficulties. The beneficiaries should also apply to the grassroots governmental department; only the eligible families receive temporary assistance after careful verification of the application materials. In urgent cases, the examination and approval procedures can be simplified in accordance with the provisions. In addition, temporary assistance also includes assistance for homeless people, including the provision of temporary accommodation, acute disease treatment and assistance for them to return home, etc.

(9) Legal assistance and judicial remedies

Legal assistance and judicial remedies projects are not listed in the Interim Measures for Social Assistance, but are covered by the Regulation on Legal Assistance issued by the State Council to regulate the legal assistance system. In accordance with the Regulation on Legal Assistance, the main provisions for legal assistance are as follows. Any citizen may apply to the legal assistance institution for legal assistance for the following matters and if he requires agency because he has failed to secure an agent for reasons of financial difficulty: first, a claim for state compensation according to law; second, a claim for social insurance benefits or *dibao* benefits; third, a claim for a pension for the disabled or for bereft family and social relief; fourth, a claim for payment of maintenance for parents or grandparents, children, spouses, or any other dependents; fifth, a claim for payment of unpaid wages; sixth, a claim for civil rights and interests.

In addition, the Supreme Court issued a document in 2010, which set out provisions on the justice system. The main content of this is that the people's court shall implement the litigation expense payment deferment, reduction and exemption policy for the suitors of civil and administrative proceedings with the purpose of safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of people who are in financial difficulties.

4. The main characteristics of China's social assistance system

After years of development, China's social assistance system has grown into a relatively complete institutional system and plays an important role in anti-poverty actions. In general, China's social assistance system has the following characteristics.

(1) Cash benefits based on actual needs

Compared with the social assistance systems of many other countries, one of the most important characteristics of China's social assistance system is that it provides cash benefits based on the basic needs of poor families. Each specific system of the social assistance system is designed for a special difficulty of the families in need, and all these systems form a relatively complete integrated security system which can address the various difficulties of families experiencing hardship. In addition, the vast majority of relief projects provide cash assistance, including direct cash provision, reimbursement in cash, and cash payment reduction and exemption. In contrast, the institutionalized rescue service of the social assistance system is imperfect, and only a low proportion of assistance is in-kind. Cash benefits are relatively simple, but over-reliance on cash assistance will easily lead to irrational welfare dependency. Also, the lack of services and in-kind assistance will restrict the effective use of assistance resources and make it difficult to strengthen the role of social assistance in capacity building and stimulating employment motivation. Therefore, from the perspective of positive relief, institutional arrangements relying solely on cash assistance have obvious limitations.

(2) A low minimal living guarantee standard

The social assistance standard has a great impact on the funding, benefit level and coverage of social assistance. Compared with international standards, Chinese urban and rural minimum living standards have been relatively low. In 2014, the national average urban minimum standard was only 18.5% of the median of per capita income of urban residents, and the national average rural minimum standard was 29.2% of the median of per capita net income of rural residents, i.e. slightly higher.¹² The low minimum living standard directly led to small coverage of the social assistance and a low level of cash benefits.

(3) The comprehensive assistance system based on the *dibao*

China's social assistance system is a comprehensive social assistance system based on the *dibao*, and the *dibao* plays a fundamental role in this system. From a functional perspective, the *dibao* provides basic assistance to address basic living problems while other systems mainly provide specific assistance to address specific difficulties. From the perspective of system design, however, the *dibao* also plays a "gatekeeper" role in the whole social assistance system. It is

¹²Urban and rural average subsistence allowance standard data source: the Ministry of Civil Affairs, "Social Services Statistics (2014)", website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, <http://files2.mca.gov.cn/cws/201501/20150129172531166.htm>. Data source of urban residents' disposable income and the median of per capita net income of rural residents: National Bureau of Statistics, "National Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin 2014 of People's Republic of China", website of National Bureau of Statistics, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201502/t20150226_685799.html

usually only after being covered by the *dibao* that urban and rural families in need and their family members will qualify to apply for other social assistance, with a few exceptions in special cases. Due to this special function of the *dibao*, the vast majority of social assistance resources are centralized on the beneficiaries of the *dibao*, creating the so-called cliff effect (i.e. the beneficiaries of the *dibao* have access to many benefits, but those whose family per capita income is just slightly higher than *dibao* standard have access to very little or even no benefits). As a result, many people strive to qualify for being covered by the *dibao* and those who have been covered by the *dibao* strive to maintain the qualification.

(4) Accurate targeting based on the means-tested measures

Due to the dependence on cash assistance, the *dibao*'s low standard, narrow coverage and high benefits, the *dibao*-based social assistance systems have to concentrate the resources on a small number of beneficiaries, and thus require an accurate targeting mechanism. Almost all the beneficiaries of the social assistance programs are determined in accordance with the *dibao* standard, and the beneficiaries of the *dibao* are determined based on the per capita income of the family, so a strict income verification system should be implemented to check whether the *dibao* applicants are eligible or not. To this end, the government has established an extremely strict and complex family property and income verification system combining the assessment of residents' autonomous organization, primary government audit and public supervision, with household visits, economic situation checking technology and the social announcement system. This accurate targeting only takes into account the dimension of family income, ignoring the actual difficulties of the family. In recent years, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and local civil affairs departments have all emphasized the importance of "expenditure poverty". So far, however, the spending factors have not been incorporated in the index system for the qualification verification of the beneficiaries of the *dibao* yet.

(5) The household registration-based regional responsibility system

From the perspective of overall system construction, China has established a unified national social assistance system. From the management system perspective, however, China's social assistance system is still in the charge of local governments. Each local government has the responsibility to provide various social assistance benefits for eligible families within its jurisdiction – the families with local household registration, rather than those actually living in the local area. That is to say, not all the people living in the area within its jurisdiction may apply for social assistance to the local government, but only those families and individuals with local household registration. Given that there are, at present, more than 200 million migrants across the country, such a system

has excluded a large number of people from the coverage of most social assistance system except temporary assistance.

(6) The financial payment system combining the central and local governments

In accordance with the original design, the *dibao* is funded by the local government. Due to the limited financial resources of many local governments, however, the central government began to provide financial investments for the urban *dibao* in 2001 through special transfer payments. The amount of the governmental expenditure is determined based on the *dibao* burden and the financial strength of local governments, which vary from region to region. After the central government has provided subsidies for the urban *dibao*, other social assistance systems in the regions where local governments have limited financial strength have also been supported by the central government through payment transfer. In accordance with the Social Services Development Statistics Bulletin 2014 issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, in 2014, a total of CNY72.17 billion was invested in the urban *dibao*, of which CNY51.888 billion was from the central government, accounting for 71.9% of the total. CNY87.03 billion was paid to those receiving the *dibao* in rural areas, of which CNY58.26 billion was from the central government, accounting for 66.9% of the total.¹³ This shows that the central government bears the main responsibility for social assistance spending.

II. The operational situation of the social assistance systems

To maximize the effectiveness of social assistance systems, we must first have a good system design, and then have a good policy implementation system. Thus, we carried out field research into the social assistance systems in the areas surveyed. The following analysis is mainly based on the investigation of the operational situation of the social assistance systems.

1. The operational situation of the *dibao*

(1) The *dibao* standards in various regions

As the *dibao* is the “gatekeeper” of the whole social assistance system, all the social assistance systems mainly take the *dibao* standard as their standard for assistance. The *dibao* standard has two levels of meaning: first, the local *dibao* standard set and announced by local governments in accordance with the relevant provisions; second, the standard implemented in practice.

¹³ The Ministry of Civil Affairs, “Social Services Development Statistics Bulletin 2014”, June 10, 2015, website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/201506/201506008324399.shtml>

As mentioned above, the *dibao* standards announced in various regions of China are generally low. Among the seven regions of six provinces surveyed, in this context, Shanghai's *dibao* standard is relatively high and the *dibao* standards of other regions are all rather low. Thus, only very few families in extreme poverty can be covered by the *dibao*. Furthermore, in the practice of *dibao* management, more stringent standards and management tools are usually adopted. First, there is the "deserved income" calculation approach: when calculating the family income of the applicants, no matter whether the family members with the ability to work have real income or not, they are regarded as having a certain amount of income, reducing the possibility for the family to make a successful application for the *dibao*. This prevents able-bodied people from fraudulently concealing their income, but will probably exclude the real jobless from the *dibao*. Another more rigorous approach is quota allocation, which is prevalent in some rural areas. The local governments implement quota control for the *dibao* beneficiaries of various towns, and the town governments may allocate the limited quota to the villages. This controls the expansion of the size of *dibao* beneficiaries on the whole, which is conducive to the control of overall expenses on social assistance and the government's fiscal expenditure. We found in the survey, however, some rural families in real poverty did not receive the *dibao* benefits as there was not more *dibao* quota. Meanwhile, the quota system is in violation of the basic principles of the *dibao*, and so is not conducive to the standardized operation of the *dibao*.

The above problems in the current *dibao* standards and the operation of the *dibao* reflect the contradiction between the low subsistence allowance standard and the narrow coverage of the *dibao*, and the high level of treatment in practice. For this reason, many people apply for *dibao* benefits, so the local governments and grassroots residents' autonomous organizations have to apply some unconventional ways to control the expansion of the *dibao* beneficiaries. To this end, we suggest, on the one hand, raising the *dibao* standard and expanding the scale of the minimal living guarantee, and, on the other hand, reducing the combination between other social assistance systems and the *dibao* to reduce the pressure on the *dibao*. Meanwhile, we suggest that a professional social work mechanism should be developed for the implementation of the minimal living guarantee standard and the qualification certification of *dibao* beneficiaries, and that a more specialized approach to replace the current unconventional method should be used.

(2) The size and proportion of social assistance throughout the country

The low *dibao* standard directly leads to a low level of social assistance beneficiaries nationwide. In the last two years, moreover, the government has adopted some measures to strengthen the management of *dibao* applications and approval, reducing the number of *dibao* beneficiaries in urban and rural areas.

According to the statistical data, the number of the *dibao* beneficiaries nationwide is still relatively small and the proportion of the *dibao* beneficiaries in the total population is relatively low, especially in urban areas. The situations in different regions are quite different, but the number of *dibao* beneficiaries is comparatively small on the whole, making it difficult for social assistance to have a greater social effect. The main reasons for the low level of the *dibao* beneficiaries are as follows. First, the local governments of some underdeveloped regions have limited financial resources and can barely increase financial inputs to social assistance even after receiving transfer payments from higher authorities. Restricted by a limited financial budget, the local government can only restrict the size of assistance beneficiaries. Second, some local governments are afraid that extensive social assistance will lead to welfare dependency. Third, in the grassroots operation, the phenomenon of “welfare comparison” probably occurs. When the assistance size is controlled within a very small range, the boundary of the “eligible” applicants will become very clear, reducing the “fights” for the qualification of the *dibao* and social assistance and reducing the tensions in the *dibao* work. When the coverage of the *dibao* system is expanded, many people will receive *dibao* benefits, and the boundary of the “eligible” applicants will become unclear, increasing the difficulties for grassroots *dibao* workers in the review and evaluation, and increasing tensions between *dibao* application and evaluation. To avoid these conflicts and reduce the operating difficulty, some grassroots staff members tend to restrict the number of the *dibao* beneficiaries.

In our opinion, despite the above problems, the current number of *dibao* beneficiaries is too small and should be expanded. We can take the following measures to address the problems: first, further increase governmental public expenditure on social assistance to lay a financial foundation for the expansion of the beneficiaries of social assistance; second, increase assistance services; third, reduce unreasonable welfare dependency through social work intervention; fourth, enhance the professional level of social assistance administration through the involvement of social work, thereby reducing the tensions, conflicts and difficulties in the current social assistance management.

(3) The actual levels of local *dibao* benefits

The *dibao* mainly provides cash assistance to the beneficiaries. The average cash compensation level is an important indicator to measure the effect of the *dibao*. In 2014, the average cash compensation level of the urban *dibaos* nationwide was CNY286/month, and the average compensation/*dibao* standard ratio was¹⁴ 69.1%. Meanwhile, the average cash compensation level of the rural *dibaos* nationwide was CNY129/month, and the average compensation/*dibao* standard

¹⁴ The “difference compensation/standard” is the ratio between an average subsidy level and the subsistence allowance standard; this is used to measure the actual payment situation of cash assistance under a given subsistence allowance standard of the minimum living security system in a region.

ratio was 55.7%.¹⁵ These data suggest that the cash compensation of the *dibao* is insufficient.

2. The operational modes of the other major social assistance systems

Other social assistance programs are implemented in their own way and play a positive role in social assistance in various fields. The basic situation of these programs is as follows.

(1) The LSPED

The beneficiaries of the LSPED system can obtain more comprehensive protection, but are strictly restricted, so covering a narrow range of people. At the end of 2014, only 5.291 million people were covered by the rural Five Guarantee System, and this system had not been widely implemented in the cities yet. According to the official regulations, the beneficiaries of the LSPED system may choose how they are supported: either centralized support by local support agencies or at-home-support. This system plays a positive role in guaranteeing the material needs of people in need, but needs to be improved in terms of the nursing service and in providing spiritual comfort for such people.

(2) The natural disaster-relief system

Targeting not only the *dibao* beneficiaries and destitute families, this system provides living assistance for all those whose basic living has been seriously affected by natural disasters. According to the official regulations on social assistance system, natural disaster relief, mainly material or in the form of cash assistance, is provided for disaster victims, with the aim of helping them survive. The people affected by sudden natural or social disasters, however, usually need more spiritual comfort, psychological counseling, social support, rights protection, information provision and policy publicizing services, so the involvement of social workers is particularly necessary. After a number of major natural disasters and social disasters, such as the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the involvement of social workers played an important role in social assistance. Currently, the specialized area of disaster-relief social work has been gradually created in social work circles, and the state authorities have also issued documents to promote the further involvement of social work in natural disaster relief.

(3) Medical assistance

¹⁵ The Ministry of Civil Affairs, "Social Services Development Statistics Bulletin 2014", website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2015-06-10, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/201506/201506008324399.shtml>

The beneficiaries of medical assistance include the family members of the beneficiaries of the *dibao*, the beneficiaries of the LSPED system and other people with special difficulties, usually the *dibao* marginal households, identified by the government above the regional level. In general, medical assistance has played a significant role in satisfying the medical needs of poor families, but the coverage is still too small; it includes only the beneficiaries of the *dibao* and the LSPED, as well as some of the *dibao* marginal households, and the level of assistance for *dibao* marginal households is usually lower than that for the former two. Moreover, the medical assistance system provides only subsidies for some medical costs and cannot meet the needs of the seriously ill who have a heavy burden of medical expenses, who still encounter many difficulties after receiving the medical assistance. In addition, the urban and rural medical services still need to be improved. As mentioned above, insufficient health care knowledge, the low quality of primary health care services and the difficulty in seeing a doctor in major hospitals are still prominent problems facing many ordinary people, especially families in need. To address these problems, we should not only provide cash compensation, but also provide more and better services, such as medical social work services.

(4) Education assistance

As mentioned above, for the families living in the greatest poverty, education spending is still a heavy financial burden, so education assistance is very important for families in need with school-age children. Currently, compulsory education is basically free of charge in both urban and rural areas, but the problem of the high cost of non-compulsory education is prominent, especially for high school tuition fees, and some surveyed families in need said that it is difficult to receive education assistance for high school education. In addition, the more education assistance projects there are, the more complex the application procedures. Some families in need are not clear about the projects and application procedures for education assistance and thus miss the opportunity to apply for and obtain assistance. Also, many children from poor families face difficulties in learning, as well as difficulties in communication with schoolmates and neighbors; they are even subject to certain discrimination, which has a serious negative impact on their development. These problems can barely be solved by cash assistance, and effective support can be provided only after the involvement of more social work for schools or adolescents.

(5) Housing assistance

Housing assistance also targets the beneficiaries of the *dibao* and the at-home-supported LSPED. In many cities, the *dibao* marginal households and non-locally registered households with housing difficulties may apply for ordinary public-rental houses, for which the rental is lower than the market level.

When needed, the rural *dibao* beneficiaries and at-home-supported LSPED may enjoy a preferential policy for the renovation of dilapidated houses and the government may help them renovate such houses. In fact, however, in some places, the farmers need to pay for the renovation in advance and do not receive the compensation until the renovation is checked by the government. This approach has, in fact, reduced the availability of assistance for many disadvantaged families.

(6) Employment assistance

Employment assistance also targets the beneficiaries of the *dibao*. When the able-bodied members of *dibao* families are unemployed, the government should provide employment assistance to ensure that at least one of the members of these families is employed. Employment assistance does help increase employment opportunities and enhance the employability of the *dibao* beneficiaries, but the system still needs to be improved in its grassroots operation. First, by targeting only the *dibao* beneficiaries, it cannot benefit many other workers with employment difficulties. Second, this system cannot solve the problem of the insufficient motivation of some people living in poverty to find work. Third, the employment assistance services are, in practice, not perfect in providing services in many places and no tailored solutions have been explored for the various categories of people living in poverty, especially for those with weak employability. We found in the survey, for example, that many *dibao* beneficiaries do not have full ability to work due to illness and other factors and can hardly undertake a full-time job. Ordinary vocational training, occupation introduction and public service jobs do not help them particularly. It would be much better if some more flexible and suitable jobs could be provided for them based on their actual situations.

(7) Temporary assistance

The beneficiaries of temporary assistance are not limited to the *dibao* beneficiaries and the “three-no’s” persons for special support. All the people, including the migrants, may apply to local governments for temporary assistance when they encounter special difficulties in living. In practice, temporary assistance is often provided for families suffering from catastrophic events, which demand much of the relief funds. The government cannot always meet all their needs, so they need to apply for assistance from other sources. Moreover, many NGOs are willing to provide assistance for disaster victims, but social workers need to play a linking role and provide an information service and necessary contacts and communication services for people in need. Meanwhile, individuals and families suffering disasters need not only cash assistance, but also spiritual comfort and social support services, so the involvement of social workers is necessary. So far, however, few social workers have become involved

in temporary assistance. Similarly, social assistance for homeless people also needs the involvement of social work services.

In summary, currently, there are relatively complete social assistance programs in China, forming a comprehensive social assistance system, which is running properly in practice and plays an important role in providing social assistance for urban and rural families in need and in guaranteeing a basic livelihood of poor families. From the perspective of a high standard, however, there are some deficiencies in the system design and operation. First, the beneficiaries of various social assistance systems greatly overlap with that of the minimal living guarantee and LSPED. On the one hand, this leads to a narrow range of assistance beneficiaries and makes it difficult for the social assistance systems to create significant social change. On the other hand, it intensifies the centralization effect of the assistance and increases the “value” of the *dibao* benefits. As a result, many people tend to apply for *dibao* benefits and those who are already covered by the *dibao* want to maintain their qualification for a long time, increasing pressure on the approval and management system for the applications. Second, the level and intensity of the assistance need to be improved, as does the targeting accuracy, and the safety network has some deficiencies. Third, the assistance is almost all provided in cash, seldom in kind or services (especially the latter). This will lead to unreasonable welfare dependency and reduce the actual social effectiveness of the applications of social assistance resources. In addition, the social assistance systems are under the administration of different departments and have their own application, approval and management standards and procedures, with high requirements for the grassroots management system. The current grassroots management ability is, however, generally low. Not only management personnel, but professional management and service ability are lacking, as are professional knowledge on approval and management, and the information service, policy advocacy, resource links and active assistance for people in need. Therefore, it is difficult to achieve the expected social effectiveness.

3. Identification and management of social assistance beneficiaries

Social assistance benefits are provided free of charge to people in need, thereby requiring a relatively stringent beneficiary qualification verification mechanism. The eligibility of many assistance programs in China’s urban and rural social assistance systems are linked with that in the *dibao*, so the identification and management of *dibao* beneficiaries plays a fundamental role in the whole social assistance system.

(1) Application and review process of the *dibao*

According to relevant official regulations,¹⁶ the *dibao* must have a relatively rigorous review procedure, mainly including the following.

First, a field survey of the economic status of the applicants, including household visits, neighborhood visits and letter writing for evidence, etc., covering the family income and properties. These are the traditional approaches, which are not always effective under the present situation, and thus are not always able to clarify the real situation completely.

Second, family economic information-checking, covering the family income and the properties of the applicants. This involves, based on the cooperation of different departments, assessing the applicants' personal economic information from some relevant public administrations, and comparing it with the *dibao* standard, to see if the applicants are eligible to the *dibao* benefits. At present, the local governments have all established a family economic information-checking system and such information as the number of family members, the employment situation, and the income and property information of the applicants can be checked through the relevant government departments and financial institutes. In such a way, the necessary information can effectively be obtained but it needs to be agreed and signed by the applicants and requires the cooperation of many departments, so it is sometimes difficult to implement this approach effectively. Especially under the diversified financial system, even if the verified person agrees, it is not easy to comprehensively check residents' bank accounts and other financial assets.

Third, "democratic appraisal": discussion among representatives of local residents about whether the applicant is eligible or not. In many rural areas, democratic appraisal plays a key role in the applicant's succeeding in obtaining the qualification for receiving *dibao* benefits. The reason is that in a community, especially in a rural community, the residents know one another well and democratic appraisal can help accurately determine whether a family is poor. This approach, however, also has some shortcomings. It cannot avoid the impact of interpersonal relationship on the qualification verification. Moreover, we found in the fieldwork that some areas have expanded the coverage of this approach and organized democratic appraisal in a larger range, leading to some problems in the appraisal accuracy and reasonableness as the appraisals do not have an in-depth understanding of the daily living situation of each applicant. To make up for this deficiency, some places allow the applicants to make a statement at the meeting, but this still cannot completely make up for the above deficiency. It also increases the mental stress of the applicants and may lead to inaccurate appraisal results due to poor statements by some applicants.

¹⁶ The basic documents for this issue at national level is the "The Methods of Reviewing and Approving of the Minimal Living Guarantee (Provisional)", issued by Ministry of Civil Affairs, December 12, 2012. Source: MOCA website: <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/zwgk/fvfg/zdshbz/201212/20121200394637.shtml>

Fourth, public announcement by posters. At least two public announcements are required in the process of *dibao* beneficiary qualification verification and approval. The purpose of publicity is to make the qualification verification and approval transparent, opening it up to the public to prevent a “black-box operation” and possible irregularities. This system does play a certain role in promoting public supervision, but its role in urban areas is not as important as in rural areas because urban residents do not know one another as well as rural residents. At the same time, the negative impact of publicity is such that it may easily apply a poverty “label” to some people and create negative psychological pressure on the members, in particular, the minors of the families in need.

The integrated use of the above several approaches establishes a very strict *dibao* beneficiary eligibility verification system. However, these approaches all have some deficiencies and cannot completely guarantee an in-depth understanding of the applicant’s real situation; they also have some negative effects. The integrated use of these methods will further reduce the deficiencies, but it will significantly increase the operating costs and the negative impact on the applicants. To reduce the costs, some regions have taken some other measures in addition to institutional reform. For example, they strive to reduce the review and approval work by extending the time interval. Some regions organize the qualification verification only once or twice a year. Another approach is that the higher levels of government allocate a certain quota to limit the numbers of beneficiaries of the *dibao*. These practices have objectively increased the difficulty in applying for *dibao* benefits, achieving a high degree of targeting at the expense of the social achievements of the *dibao*.

In short, in order to improve its targeting accuracy, the *dibao* has formed a series of relatively stringent review and approval procedures and, on this basis, local governments have added some special practices. In general, these practices are generally not professional approaches and are implemented by non-professional institutions. Despite some positive effects, they have a larger immediate or potential negative impact and a high comprehensive cost. To evaluate the reasonableness of the *dibao* beneficiary qualification verification system, it is necessary to carry out analysis from at least three directions: first, the accuracy of the materials verified for the qualification for receiving the *dibao* benefits, i.e. the accuracy of the targeting; second, the negative impact of its operation, i.e. its role in helping the *dibao* programs to have a social impact; third, the costs of its management. The *dibao* system’s ideal goal is to improve the targeting accuracy, reduce the negative impact and achieve a high social impact, and thus have to pay relatively high administrative costs. At present, the administrative cost is mainly shared by a low-cost labor force of grassroots organizations such as grassroots neighborhood committees and villagers’ committees, and the government does not invest a great deal. The hidden cost of this approach,

however, is fairly high, and the performance–price ratio is rather low. In this context, it is difficult to achieve high targeting accuracy, low negative impact and strong social effects. In the past, the poor management of *dibao* qualification verification has led to some problems in targeting people in need. In recent years, governments at all levels have put more emphasis on improving the accuracy of targeting, which will certainly increase the negative impact of the *dibao* management and reduce the positive social effect without increasing administration costs.

To sum up, it is suggested to strengthen the management and services of the *dibao* and the social assistance work. On the one hand, this involves strengthening the management and service cost accounting and increasing capital investment in management and services. On the other hand, it involves improving the professional level of the management and services. Professionalization appears to enhance the cost, but in fact, it just makes the existing hidden costs apparent, and the high “performance–cost ratio” of professional management will help us achieve a multiplier effect – it will improve the targeting accuracy, reduce negative impact and increase the social effect. Moreover, introducing social assistance administrators who have some basic social work training and skills can mean that several issues can be addressed at once: means-testing and accurate targeting; prevention of abuse and violence in the family; direct provision of counseling and support to the family; and assessment and referral for a range of services, including health, education, employment, child protection etc. This approach could limit the scope for cash transfer programs in the future and support the expansion of social services. The costs may not be less in the short term, but could lead to savings in the long term as well as stronger results in terms of social cohesion, improved wellbeing and inclusion.

(2) The dynamic management of the *dibao* beneficiaries

After strict qualification, verification and approval by the relevant department, the applicants become *dibao* beneficiaries. The grassroots government is obliged to issue the benefits in full to the *dibao* beneficiaries on time. The grassroots government and the autonomous organizations of urban and rural residents it utilizes are responsible for the management of the *dibao* beneficiaries. The main content of the management involves asking the *dibao* beneficiaries to report changes in their family members, income status and properties to the grassroots government. If the *dibao* beneficiaries no longer meet the conditions for receiving *dibao* benefits after changes have taken place in their situations in these aspects, they should no longer be covered by the *dibao*. In practice, the grassroots governments do not always passively wait for the *dibao* beneficiaries to report changes in their family situation. Instead, according to the official

regulation,¹⁷ they should implement “dynamic management” of the *dibao* beneficiaries. In other words, they should organize regular examination and inspection on the situations of the *dibao* beneficiaries to determine whether or not to keep their qualification for receiving benefits. The operation modes and time intervals of the dynamic management are different for different *dibao* recipients. In addition, according to government documents, among the *dibao* beneficiaries, those with the ability to work should participate in social welfare work. In practice, however, this requirement is not strictly implemented in many areas. Local governments usually do not have other management measures in addition to these two measures.

3. Actual effects of the social assistance system

The social assistance system has three prominent features: first, it is a one-way grant given to people living in poverty by the government/community, and the recipients do not need to pay or make any contribution to it; second, it is a subsidy for people living in poverty after careful investigation into the economic status of the applicants, so the applicants will not receive social assistance until they provide conclusive evidence of poverty or inability to work; and third, social assistance is a low level of subsidy under a “low-level principle”. In addition to the above three features, the social assistance system in China is also characterized by cash payment. Based on these characteristics and the survey results, we analyze the actual effects of the social assistance system in the following section.

(1) The role of *dibao* benefits in alleviating poverty

The *dibao* is implemented to ensure that the income of the *dibao* beneficiaries will reach the minimum standard required by the local government. Among the surveyed families living in poverty, 85.1% received the *dibao* benefits, CNY7377.08 per household per year, equivalent to CNY223.5 per person per month. Their income levels all reached or even exceeded the minimum standard after they received the *dibao* benefits. Thus, from the perspective of the most immediate goal, the local *dibaos* all achieved the goal of guaranteeing the basic living standard of the families in need. Moreover, under the current comprehensive social assistance system, the families in need also enjoy many other social benefits, such as various subsidies. *Dibao* marginal households cannot receive *dibao* benefits, but they can receive some other benefits from the local government to improve their living conditions to some extent.

The low standard of *dibao* benefits and the low level of coverage mentioned

¹⁷ MOCA, “The Methods of Reviewing and Approving of the Minimal Living Guarantee (Provisional)”, issued by Ministry of Civil Affairs, Dec 12, 2012. From the MOCA website: <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/zwgk/fvfg/zdshbz/201212/20121200394637.shtml>

above are also reflected in this survey. We found in the survey that 14.72% of the respondents do not believe they have enough money to buy food and nearly half (47.46%) of the respondents said they did not have enough money to buy clothes. This shows that *dibao* benefits can only address the basic food and clothing problem and cannot lift them out of poverty. After receiving the *dibao* benefits, many poor families still face many difficulties. Meanwhile, due to the narrow coverage of the *dibao*, it is difficult to increase the social impact of the anti-poverty actions.

(2) The role of other social assistance in alleviating poverty

As a comprehensive social assistance system, China's social assistance also plays an important role in other fields.

First, medical assistance plays a positive role in improving health status. First, medical assistance helps families in need to participate in the basic medical insurance for urban residents or the new rural cooperative medical insurance, laying a foundation for the medical security of families in need. Second, in the event of a large level of hospitalization or outpatient medical expenses, deducting those not covered by the reimbursement system, the medical costs to be covered by the families in need after the reimbursement of the medical insurance or the new rural cooperative medical insurance can also be reimbursed to a certain proportion to further ease the burden of the medical costs on families in need. We found in the survey that many families receiving medical aid are very grateful for the assistance. However, the medical assistance also has its deficiencies. The first is narrow coverage. Medical assistance covers only the *dibao* beneficiaries and the destitute persons for special support. In many regions, the officially identified *dibao* marginal households (low-income households) may enjoy a lower proportion of the reimbursement of medical costs, or some of their family members with specific difficulties (such as the elderly, children and persons with disabilities) are covered by the medical assistance and other family members have no right to the medical assistance. Second, medical assistance still leaves a certain percentage fee for individuals in the reimbursement of medical expenses and the families in need have to pay some of the medical expenses, which is a significant difficulty for the seriously ill with a heavy burden of medical costs, especially for patients in need of the medicines not listed in the drug directory for reimbursement. In the survey, therefore, a considerable number of the members of families in need called for further improving the reimbursement rate of medical expenses. Faced with the expensive health care system, the medical assistance system also needs a cost-control mechanism and it is also not reasonable or feasible for the medical assistance system and the government to pay all the medical expenses of the families in need. Under the existing system, it is difficult to find an effective solution to this problem for the moment.

Second, education assistance has played an important role in enabling access to education. It is a social assistance program to meet the needs of children from poor families for education, usually manifested in the form of cash assistance. There are now many education assistance programs of different channels, including governmental, school and financial agency social assistance programs, social donation programs, social assistance for students and various kinds of schools at all levels, as well as assistance provided in different ways, such as scholarships, grants, student loans, tuition remission, work-study programs, living allowance, transportation subsidies and so on. According to the China Student Aid Development Report 2014,¹⁸ in 2014, education assistance was provided to a total of 85.4378 million students of pre-school education (early childhood), compulsory education, vocational schools, high schools, colleges and universities (not including free textbooks for compulsory education and financial aid for nutrition improvement); a total of CNY142.128 billion was invested in the program, of which CNY98.943 billion was from the government, accounting for 69.62% of the total. Not all the students aided are from families in need, but the numbers include children from poor families. These data show that many efforts have been made in terms of education assistance nationwide. We found in the survey that many children from families in need received some education assistance, but many such families are still facing a heavy burden of educational expenditure because they have not received enough education assistance and some families receive no education assistance for their children in non-compulsory education. Poor families, especially those in rural areas, have difficulties accessing relevant information and do not know where and how to apply for education assistance. Moreover, due to problems in administration, some local governments are not active in promoting the student loan program in areas where students come from, making it difficult for families in need to receive education assistance for their children in non-compulsory education. In view of these problems, we should optimize the education assistance system through reform, and also provide better services for families in need through social work intervention to facilitate their application for education assistance.

Third, housing assistance has played a positive role in improving housing conditions. Specific ways of housing assistance include, in the city, providing public-rental housing and issuing house renting subsidies for low-income families with housing difficulties, and, in the countryside, providing housing assistance through the renovation of dilapidated houses. In the survey, 12.2% of the respondents said they received housing assistance over the past year of CNY2562.51 on average per household.

Fourth, the current employment assistance is obviously not enough for the urban

¹⁸ The Ministry of Education, "Report on the Development of National Financial Aid for Students in 2014", portal of the central government, August 18, 2015: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-08/18/content_2914619.htm

poor. According to the survey, people with the ability to work from urban families in need have strong demands for employment assistance, including general skills training, specialized technical training, the provision of employment information and jobs, the elimination of discrimination, and support for self-employment; they also need assistance with “helping coordinate personal relationships”, etc. Meanwhile, we also found that in the survey, only 0.6 percent of the respondents said they had received employment assistance. This shows that the coverage of the employment assistance is still very small. Employment assistance needs to be strengthened: it is not suitable for many families covered by the *dibao*. Also, the employment assistance is not linked to motivation incentives.

In addition, other special assistance programs, such as the Living Support program to Persons in Extreme Difficulties (the former Five Guarantee program), temporary assistance, legal assistance, social assistance for disaster-affected people, etc., have also played a role but they also have some deficiencies.

III. Deficiencies of the social assistance system in terms of service assistance and the need for social work intervention

1. In the *dibao* system

China’s current professional social work has only a short history. Before the reform and opening up, relying on enterprises and institutions in the city and the collective economic organizations in rural areas, China set up a series of effective social work systems. At that time, the social work system was a work unit-based system combining full-time and part-time workers, and the leaders of the work units undertook certain social responsibilities and had to solve various problems encountered by the workers; they were equipped with labor unions, women’s federations and the Communist Youth League committees, which all undertook certain social responsibilities. At that time, the social workers were mainly non-professional working teams and social work was regarded as non-professional work that everyone who had a certain enthusiasm, a sense of responsibility and some experience could do.

After the reform and opening up, great changes have taken place in Chinese society. First, the initial reform and opening up led to the disintegration of the original rural collective economic organizations and changes in the functions of urban state-owned enterprises, weakening the social management and social service function of rural collective organizations and urban enterprises and institutions, forcing the government to explore the establishment of a new system to undertake the function of social governance and social services. Second, after the reform and opening up, with the changes in the social structure, the increased population mobility and the rapid economic and social development, the difficulties and problems faced by people gradually changed and became more complex, so the previous non-professional social work could no longer meet the

public and government needs. For these two reasons, the government both wished to transfer the function of social governance and social services through strengthening community construction and services and through promoting the “societalization of social welfare”, and learned from the mature international professional social work system to establish a domestic professional social work system to meet the new requirements of the populace and the government under the new situation of economic and social transition.

At the initial stage, professional social worker training programs were developed to boost the development of professional social work. In 1987, Beijing University and other universities took the lead in setting up an undergraduate program of “social work and administration” to develop social work education. In the 1990s, however, China entered the “universal business” stage, when all circles of society attached importance to economic growth and the government and society paid little attention to social work. The newly established social work programs in universities developed slowly. In the late 1990s, only a dozen universities nationwide had established social work programs, and this situation did not change until the early 21st century. Facing many social problems arising from the market-oriented reform and rapid economic development, the government began to pay attention to social development and began to increase inputs in social affairs. At the same time, the enrollment expansion of colleges and universities from the beginning of the 21st century stimulated the establishment and development of new teaching programs such as social work, and social work education in universities entered a stage of rapid development.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese professional social work entered a new period of development. Social work education developed rapidly in colleges and universities and social service departments strengthened the construction of social work teams promoted by civil affairs departments and other governmental departments. After 2003, the former Ministry of Labor, the former Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry of Civil Affairs stepped up the professional development of social work in different ways. On July 20, 2006, the former Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly issued the Interim Provisions on the Evaluation of Social Workers’ Professional Levels and the Implementation Plan on Professional-Level Examinations of Assistant Social Workers and Social Workers, forming a national system to promote the development of professional social work and incorporating social workers into the rank of professional occupations. This marks the official establishment of a professional-level social worker evaluation system in China. Since then, the social workers’ professional-level examination has become a primary means for social workers to obtain a professional qualification.

In December 2006, the Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Major Issues Concerning the Construction of a Harmonious Socialist Society,

adopted by the 6th Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, clearly proposed the construction of a grand social work team, injecting new impetus into the development of professional social work. After that, great progress has been made in professional social work. First, the central government included professional social workers among the list of six major types of Chinese “talents”, i.e. competent professional with a high level of training, indicating that the central government attaches great importance to the construction of social work teams. Under the guidance of this principle, 18 central and state organs jointly issued the Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Professional Social Worker Teams in 2011, making clear the objectives, principles and specific measures for the construction of professional social worker teams. After that, 19 state and central organs jointly issued the Mid- and Long-term Plan on the Development of Social Work Professionals (2011–2020) in 2013, making clear the objectives, requirements, specific measures and key actions for the development of professional social work in the decade.

The issuance of the above government documents played a strong positive role in promoting the development of professional social work nationwide. On this basis, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and other relevant departments have successively issued relevant documents to promote the development of social work, including documents to boost the development of non-governmental social work agencies and the government’s purchasing of social services, and to promote the intervention of social work in various fields, including community social work, disaster-relief social work, and social work for community correction, and social work for youth and women. In 2015, the document Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Social Work in the Field of Social Assistance (MOCA, May 2015) was issued to promote the involvement of social work in social assistance.

With the implementation of relevant policies developed by the central government, local governments at all levels have also done a lot of work to boost the development of professional social work. Since the beginning of this century, Shanghai has accelerated the construction of a professional social work system and actively promoted the development of social work institutions, relying on the participation of universities. Since 2007, Shenzhen of Guangdong has begun to explore practice patterns of the governmental purchase of social work posts from social work institutions. From August 2007 to May 2009, the municipal and district governments of Shenzhen successively purchased more than 700 social work posts from the non-governmental social work service agencies,¹⁹ covering social work in the field of civil affairs, school social work, social work for judicial correction, social work for the people with disabilities, community social work, social work for women, social work in the field of family planning, social

¹⁹ Xiang Muiyang, “Practice of Shenzhen Mode for Government Purchasing of Social Services”, “Social Work in the First Half of Month (Practice)”, 2009 No.8, downloaded from: <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal-SHXS200908005.htm>, November 22, 2015

work for young people, medical social work, social work for drug rehabilitation, social work for petition services and social work in labor relation services. Subsequently, Shenzhen's practice pattern was promoted in the whole province of Guangdong and played an exemplary role in stepping up the development of social work in many other provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. Under the influence of the Shenzhen model, and with the issuance of the document for the government to purchase social services, in recent years, professional social work in various regions has witnessed rapid development.

(2) Basic situation of China's current social work

After the above development, China has made significant progress in expanding the size of its social worker teams and building the social work system, including achievements in the following aspects. First, significant progress has been made in the development of social work professionals. According to the latest data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, as of mid-2015, a total of 208,000 social work professionals had passed the social work professional-level exam and there were a total of 400,000 other types of social workers.²⁰ The development of these social work professionals is both a result of the national social workers and assistant social worker professional-level exams, and is also a result of the development of social work education. Second, the social work agencies and positions in urban and rural areas nationwide have witnessed initial development. According to the latest data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, there are more than 3,500 non-governmental social work institutions and more than 110,000 professional social work positions across the country.

Furthermore, significant progress has been made in China's social work education. Currently, more than 60 colleges have set up a three-year social work program, more than 310 undergraduate colleges have set up an undergraduate program in social work, 104 universities have set up a master's program social work, and some universities have even set up a doctorate of social work. These data indicate that China has made initial progress in cultivating professional social workers and establishing a social work system, and has achieved the desired goal in the development scale of professional social workers, institutional establishment and post creation, and social work education and training, laying an important foundation for the involvement of social work in social assistance.

II. China's current social work mechanisms

To get social work involved in social assistance, we need not only professional social workers, related agencies and positions, but also suitable institutional mechanisms. To this end, this section will focus on analyzing the institutional

²⁰ The source of the latest data of social worker team building is the Social Work Department of the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

mechanisms for the development of social work.

1. Understanding and dealing with the relationship between professional social work and non-professional or para-professional social work

As mentioned earlier, China's current professional social work system was established on the basis of relatively well-developed non-professional social work. Currently, in addition to professional social workers, the para-professional community workers, and the workers in labor unions, the Youth League, women's federations and the disabled persons' federations in urban and rural communities, as well as the tutors and other political workers in schools and some other units, are also doing similar work. The staff members of these units and institutions assume the tasks assigned by higher authorities, and many of them also provide a wide range of social services for special groups and conduct social governance, overlapping with the professional social work services. In its development process, therefore, the new professional social work has had to face the relationship between these traditional non-professional social workers and their organizations. In a long run, the non-professional social workers of these sectors and institutions will probably be replaced by the professional social workers who graduate from universities as social work professionals, but slow progress has been made in this field because, on the one hand, the staff of the labor unions, the Youth League, the women's federations and the disabled persons' federations who have certain government background can hardly be replaced and it is difficult for university graduates majoring in social work to join these organizations in a large scale for the moment; on the other hand, the low wages of community workers are unlikely to attract university graduates. In recent years, however, with the professional-level exams of social workers and assistant social workers, more and more community workers and employees of labor units, the Youth League, women's federations and the disabled persons' federations have obtained the professional social work qualification, enhancing the professional social work service capability of these organizations.

In recent years, to enhance the professional competence of community workers, some regions have set up the local social work professional-level examination to provide a local professional qualification for those who have failed to pass the national exam. However, not having received the systematic training of a university, the workers who have obtained the social work certificate through one examination still have a relatively low professional competence and are unlikely to make full use of social work knowledge and skills in practice, so they can only be said to have reached a "quasi-professional" level.

Currently, therefore, there are three different levels of social workers in this country: first professional social workers; second, non-professional social workers; and third, quasi-professional social workers. These three types of social

workers each have their strengths and weakness and play a different role in practice, and should all be included in the strategic system for the involvement of social work in social assistance; they should be assigned different tasks accordingly.

2. Three different institutional models for the development of professional social work

Currently, there are three different institutional models for the development of professional social work in China, and their different features were found in the interviews and focus group in the field work of this project. The first is the community model: establishing social work positions in urban and rural communities, or cultivating the existing social workers into professional or quasi-professional social workers through training and the professional qualification exams, and then allowing them to serve as professional social workers and accomplish the tasks of professional social work. Rooted in the community and based on the autonomous organizations of community residents, such social workers have a close relationship with community residents and direct contact with government departments, and thus have a good grassroots foundation and high public authority. In addition, they are engaged in social services for a long time and are familiar with the relevant laws and regulations as well as the policy system. Their weakness is the low professional level. As most of these workers have not received the formal education of professional social work, they do not have enough professional knowledge and skills. In addition, they have to do a lot of administrative work in their main daily jobs, and thus do not have enough time to provide professional services to the residents.

The second is professional social work agency model: establishing and developing professional social work institutions. Professional social work organizations are generally run by professional social workers. Their core staff members usually have rich social work knowledge and skills, and the main employees are professional social workers. Therefore they can provide high-quality social work services in a professional manner and have a strong ability to solve complex problems. Their weakness is the weak contact with community residents and the lack of public authority. Many of the workers of such agencies are relatively young and do not have rich social experience and work experience. In addition, the social work institutions newly established in recent years are mainly non-governmental agencies and non-profit social organizations. Social work services cannot obtain sufficient financial compensation directly from the service, so the newly established non-governmental institutes must rely on governmental payments to maintain their existence and development. In other words, the government's financial payments have a crucial impact on the development of non-governmental social work agencies.

The third is the “embedded” model: establishing professional social work departments and positions in various kinds of organizations in need of social work services. For example, the medical social work departments and positions established in hospitals, the enterprise social work departments and positions in enterprises, the school social work departments and positions in various kinds of schools and the old-age work-related social work departments and positions in old-age welfare agencies. Such social workers in various types of organizations can access support from the organizations. Moreover, professional service areas require a high professional level, so they have advantages in terms of organization resources and professionalization. The establishment of the social work departments and positions in these organizations and the professional performance of relevant social workers, however, depend on the recognition and attention of the organizations’ leaders or the department heads of their higher authorities.

3. Exploration of the links between the “three mechanisms”

The above three kinds of social work system each have their advantages and disadvantages, so we should give full play to their strengths, ensure that they complement one another in the operation process, and strive to reduce their negative impacts. Also, as there are different modes, we should coordinate the relationship between the systems so that the practitioners under different systems will cooperate and avoid unhealthy competition or mutual tension caused by poor system coordination. It is found in the survey, however, that, as a result of the uncoordinated system, the relationship between community organizations and professional social work institutions in some urban areas is not so good. For example, they do not support and cooperate with each other particularly well and complain about each other in government purchasing of social services. The main reason for this is the institutional problem, indicating not only the difference in values and action patterns between emerging professional social workers and the traditional non-professional social workers, but also the competitions and conflicts between the social workers who have obtained the social work qualification through examinations and the social workers in relevant social work agencies. Therefore, the key to promoting grassroots social work is that we must further define the functions of these two forces and, on this basis, form the institutional coordination between them, thereby eliminating tension and promoting cooperation.

The action of “linkage mechanism of community, social organization and social work (CSS linkage mechanism)” recently promoted by the Ministry of Civil Affairs²¹ in urban areas reflects the efforts being put into the system

²¹ “Ministry of Civil Affairs: Deeply promoting the ‘CSS linkage mechanism’ and innovating local social governance”, China’s central government website, October 22, 2015:

coordination. The so-called CSS linkage mechanism refers to the system coordination and action cooperation between three action areas – community, social organization and social work. The main purposes are, on the one hand, to promote the development of communities and social organizations through system coordination and cooperation to form a cooperative relationship between the two for mutual support, and on the other hand, to promote the involvement and development of professional social work in communities and social organizations, and to enhance the professional level of social work services.

4. The development of professional social work in the context of government purchasing of services

Social work services are public services, for which the government should provide the necessary financial support. Under the previous system, however, the government could not provide financial aid for non-governmental social service agencies, seriously hampering the development of non-governmental social work service organizations. Since 2007, Shenzhen City has taken the lead to implement a mode of governmental purchasing services from non-governmental social work agencies and has achieved initial success, not only helping the government complete the relevant social service tasks, but vigorously boosting the development of non-governmental social work agencies. Governmental purchasing of services from non-governmental social work agencies has been recognized by the state and has gradually become a national policy. On November 14, 2012, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the Guiding Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Finance on Government Purchasing of Social Work Services.²² This commented on government purchasing of social services, including the discussion of the need to fully understand the importance and urgency of government purchasing of social work services, the guidelines, working principles and main objectives for government purchasing of social work services, the beneficiaries, the organizations for delivering services, the scope, procedures and supervision and management of the government purchasing of social work services, as well as the policy recommendations and guiding opinions on strengthening organizational leadership for government purchasing of social work services. In 2013, the General Office of the State Council issued the Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Governmental Purchasing of Social Services from Social Forces,²³ which put forward policy requirements and give guidance on the purchasing of social

http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-10/22/content_2952137.htm

²² The Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Finance: “Guiding Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Finance on Government Purchase of Social Work Services” (Min Fa [2012] No. 196), website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs: Social Work Network, November 27, 2012: <http://sw.mca.gov.cn/article/tzgg/201211/20121100383168.shtml>

²³ “Guidance of the General Office of the State Council on Government Purchasing of Services from Social Forces” (The General Office of State Council [2013] No. 96), September 26, 2013, the Chinese government network: http://www.gov.cn/xxgk/pub/govpublic/mrlm/201309/t20130930_66438.html

services by government at all levels nationwide in the broader context. It made clear that it is important to fully understand the significance and to make clear the correct direction of the government purchasing of social services, to promote the governmental purchasing of social services in an orderly manner, and to steadily encourage the local governments at all levels in purchasing services from social forces.

The introduction of the above two documents vigorously promoted local governments' purchasing of social services from non-governmental agencies, provided new resource conditions and development space for the non-governmental social work agencies, and boosted the development of professional social work. The resource strategy for the involvement of social work in social assistance services studied in this report also requires government purchasing of social services. There are still, however, many problems in the government purchasing of social services in the following respects. First, the progress situation in the governmental purchasing of social services is different in various regions, and slow progress has been made in some areas; in many poor rural areas especially the government's expenditure on purchasing public services from social organizations has been very limited. Second, the institutionalization level for the government purchasing of social services needs to be improved. Currently, no national laws or regulations have been formulated for the work, and many local governments have not yet incorporated the purchasing of social services into the regular budget and have no stable public expenditure in this area. Third, there is no long-term planning for government purchasing of social services, in which does not help to promote the guiding of the long-term development of social work agencies. Fourth, no solutions have been explored in terms of how to maintain and enhance the independence, professionalization and creativeness of social work agencies under the pattern of the government purchasing of social services. To this end, the policy suggestion section of this report will make constructive comments on how to solve this problem.²⁴

5. The role of social work education in promoting social work practice and its limitations

In China, the development of social work education is an important part of the development of professional social work and is an important force to promote the professionalization of China's social work. Currently, there are approximately

²⁴ In recent years, there has been much research into this issue. The main ideas can be seen from these papers: 1. YANG, Tuan, "The main purpose of government's purchase of services should be to strengthen social organizations", *Academic Association*, No.1, 2016; 2. XU, Jialiang, "Some problems in governments' purchasing of public services", *Academic Journal of State College of Administration*, No.1, 2016; 3. JIANG, Xiaoping and CHEN, Chaobing, "The domestic governments' purchasing of public services in the last five years: A literature review", *Economic Exploration*, No.3, 2016; 4. SUN, Yuxia, "A countermeasure research on the problems and risks in governments' purchasing of services", *China State Finance*, No.22, 2015; and many other examples.

30,000 social work graduates every year from universities and colleges in the country. In terms of scale, China has established the world's second largest social work education system, only second to the USA, and China's social work education has played a significant role in promoting the professionalization of the country's social work. On the one hand, the main teaching contents of China's professional social work education was first introduced from abroad, mainly from developed countries, so the social work was very professional even at the very beginning. On the other hand, tens of thousands of social work professionals are trained every year in China, providing strong professional personnel support for the development of China's professional social work practice. In addition, social work teachers in Chinese universities have participated in and contributed to the professional social work practices nationwide, from participating in the social workers and assistant social workers' professional-level exams at national level, managing, assessing and evaluating social work at local level, to directly running and managing individual social work institutions. So far, in the regions where social work has developed well, a large number of university teachers have participated in social work services and played a key role in the work.

However, there are still some problems in the development of social work education in colleges and universities in China. On the whole, the professional level is not high enough. Many universities still do not have enough social work teachers, and many teachers have majored in other professionals originally and do not have a strong professional foundation in social work theory and methods, especially the practical methods, and it is difficult, as a result, to ensure a high teaching level. It is a key problem that the teachers have not practiced as social workers, and the students cannot access enough high-quality supervision in placements. In addition, there is still a problem facing China's social work education of how to combine the Western social work theory and methods with the domestic experience well to establish a social work theory and practice system more suitable for domestic practice.

III. Problems in the development of China's social work system

China's social work has witnessed rapid development in recent years and has now established a certain basis, but still faces some problems. While formulating the strategy for the involvement of social work in social assistance, we should pay attention to avoiding some difficulties and further promoting the development of professional social work in the action. We have therefore carried out a brief analysis of the problems in social work in the country based on the survey in relevant areas.

1. Uneven development of social work

At present, the development of professional Chinese social work is very uneven,

varying mainly between urban and rural areas and various regions, but also between similar cities. Meanwhile, the uneven development is manifested not only in the scale and level difference, but in the difference in institutional mechanisms.

First, there is a large difference in the development of professional social work between urban and rural areas. According to the situation in the six provinces surveyed, the social work in major cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu has developed better than that in small cities and rural areas, as in Jiangshan of Zhejiang, Wanzai of Jiangxi and Jiayuguan and Jiuquan of Gansu Province. Wanzai of Jiangxi once did very well in rural social work and created the “Wanzai Model” of Chinese rural social work. Currently, however, the social work is developing slowly here due to insufficient government investment.

Second, the development of professional social work is also showing regional differences. Seen nationwide, there are basically east–central–west gradient differences: the developed eastern regions have witnessed the most rapid development of professional social, followed by the central regions, and then the western areas. According to our survey, among the major cities, the southeast coastal cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai have witnessed better development of social work than the western city Chengdu in terms of the number of professional social workers, social work institutions, and government expenditure on social work, etc.,²⁵ although the latter is among the list of western cities with the most rapid development of social work. Seen from the situation of rural areas and small and medium cities, the difference is more obvious. The small and medium cities in the southeast coastal areas have achieved initial results in social work and witnessed rapid urbanization of rural areas, boosting the development of social work, and the social work is well done in some rural areas like the city. In the small and medium cities and rural areas of the central and western regions, however, social work has developed very slowly. In two regions of Gansu covered by our survey this time, there are few non-governmental social work agencies, and even fewer social work positions have been created in the traditional public social service institutions.

Third, there are also some development gaps between similar cities in the area of professional social work, mainly in the social work development pattern. Guangdong and Shanghai, for example, have mainly developed non-governmental social work agencies and promoted the development of professional social work agencies through government purchasing of social services from non-governmental social work agencies. In some other cities, however, due to a strong service capacity within the traditional institutions, the

²⁵ For example, in 2014, the number of social workers with a national qualification in Shanghai and Guangzhou was 9,408 and 8,542, respectively, but only 1,752 in Chengdu. The figures are provided by the local departments in charge of social work development.

relevant government departments are accustomed to mobilizing “activists” with the traditional non-professional approaches rather than purchasing services from social organizations.

2. The lack of investment in social work

The development of professional social work, particularly in the non-professional social work agencies, and the establishment of professional social work positions in the community all require strong public financial support. We found in the survey that although many local governments support the development of social work to some extent, the government investment in social work is far from enough and there are large differences in government support between various regions. The main problems mainly lie in the following aspects.

First, there are large differences in government investment in social work between various regions. In most developed urban areas, the government purchasing of social work services has become a common practice. In many underdeveloped regions, especially in rural areas, however, the program of government purchasing of social work services has not yet been launched or is in the preparation stage. The situations of the regions surveyed in this study show large differences in this aspect.

Second, the central government and local governments at all levels have not yet generally incorporated the social service purchase fund into the regular budget as a separate budgetary accounting item. Thus funds needed for social work must be issued through other distributed items, possibly leading to unstable sources of fund for social work. Moreover, for social work agencies and business activities in various areas, services must be purchased by different government departments. Thus when some government departments do not attach great importance to social work or do not do a good job in service purchasing, it will hinder the development of social work in these areas.

Third, government purchasing of social work services has played a positive role in promoting the establishment of social work positions and the increase in social workers in many cities. Due to insufficient budget investment, however, the social work positions are not stable and the development of social work is restricted to some extent. For example, in many cities, the governments have not invested so much in social work, leading to the low salary level of social workers. Although they can also hire some professional social workers, it is difficult for them to maintain the long-term services of the social workers. In a long run, this is not conducive to the development and improvement of social work.

3. Slow development of social work agencies and inadequate social work positions

It is one of the key tasks of social worker team construction to cultivate social work agencies and develop social work positions. Currently, however, the outlook for the development situation of social work agencies is not bright. According to the recent statistical data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, there are more than 3,500 non-governmental social work agencies and more than 110,000 social work jobs across the country. It should be said that significant progress has been made in the area, but the progress is far from enough from a nationwide perspective. Due to the inadequate number of social work institutions and jobs, it is impossible to accomplish the task of social work services, reducing the opportunities for social work graduates to find jobs in this area. As a result, the country lacks social work talents and cannot provide sufficient social work services, and, in addition, a large number of social work graduates cannot find jobs in this area.

4. The professional level of social work needs to be further enhanced

Professional social work can address complex problems that cannot be solved effectively in other ways and can provide better services given its high professional standard. To sum up, to be recognized by society and to access better conditions for development, professional social work must be seen as irreplaceable or have a high “performance/price ratio”. The core of social work specialization is its professional theory, professional methods and skills and professional values, but there are now many problems in these respects. For different types of social workers, the problems have different features. University social work graduates have a high theoretical level and strong ability to use professional methods, but lack social experience and cannot always make good use of their expertise. The social workers with years of experience and the social work certificate are experienced in social practice, but do not have a solid theoretical basis or sophisticated implementation techniques. Therefore, it is necessary to further strengthen the training and practice of these two kinds of social workers, to give full play to their respective roles and to enhance their professional levels. One of the ways to do this is by introducing in-practice education programs that can eventually build up into a professional qualification that is equivalent to a degree in social work, but takes into account strong practice. In addition, for the people newly engaged in social work, it is very important to cultivate their values. Only people adhering to the values of social justice and social care, with a high sense of responsibility to society, a high degree of sympathy for vulnerable groups, a spirit of utter devotion, and who are willing to help people experiencing hardship can do social work well. Comprehensively, we should emphasize social workers’ competencies. Competencies is a combination of knowledge, skills and behavior, including the ethical codes that govern their behavior. When recruiting social workers, their job descriptions should reflect the competencies (knowledge, skills and behaviors)

that are required to fulfill the roles.

To sum up, China's social work system has witnessed initial development, and the country's social worker teams and social work system is beginning to take shape and to play a role in various areas of social services. The social work system and personnel can provide institutional, mechanism and personnel support for the involvement of social work in social assistance. Meanwhile, we also see that there are still many deficiencies in the current social work system. While formulating the action program for the involvement of social work in social assistance, we should make relevant suggestions on the improvement and development of the social work system.

Part V: Paths for the involvement of social work in social assistance

The main task of this study is to develop strategies for the involvement of social work in social assistance. Based on the analysis of the needs of urban and rural poor families, the construction and operational situation of the social assistance systems and the construction and development situation of China's social work system, it is the main task of this part to set out specific paths for the involvement of social work in social assistance. The main contents include the main action areas, the institutional mechanism, capacity building and policy analysis for the involvement of social work in social assistance.

I. The basic objective of the involvement of social work in social assistance

1. Social work serves people living in poverty and vulnerable groups

The involvement of social work in social assistance aims to serve people living in poverty and satisfy their needs for services. According to the above analysis on the members of families in need and their needs for social work, including social and psychological needs as well as the needs for capacity building, to involve social work in social assistance and serve people living in poverty, it is necessary first to make clear the specific needs of each service beneficiary and provide related services according to their needs. Meanwhile, the involvement of social work organizations in social assistance aims to provide "active assistance". On the one hand, social work can play to its strengths in social communication, social support and psychological counseling, providing people living in poverty with professional counseling services, helping people in need to complete the behavior correction, meet their needs in social relation adjustment and mental health improvement, and thus improve quality of life. On the other hand, under the principle of "helping people to help themselves", social workers should strive to tap into the potential of people living in poverty and take various measures to enhance their capital and practical skills, including human capital, social capital and cultural capital, so as to enhance their ability to shake off poverty by themselves.

2. Enhancing the level of social assistance

Another objective of the involvement of social work in social assistance is to enhance the level of social assistance, i.e. to support the social assistance systems to achieve their goals and perform their functions. First of all, as mentioned above, China's current social assistance system is designed mainly to address the food and clothing problem of people living in poverty and can barely meet the requirements of building a moderately prosperous society. To improve the goal level, we cannot rely merely on the current system and must increase the social

assistance available. Social work intervention can play this role. Currently, most of the *dibao* recipients lack working ability: they cannot work because of old age, disability or illness, caring responsibilities at home, or other ‘reasonable’ reasons, but if the social assistance coverage is enlarged, there will be more able-bodied applicants and beneficiaries, and some of them do not work not because of the incapability, but because of low skill, low working motivation or a lack of working opportunities. Only through social work services is it possible to effectively resolve the conflict between the enhancement of the assistance level and the reduction of unreasonable welfare dependency, and to help the social assistance system achieve a transition towards a more positive social assistance system that is responsive to individual need. Second, social work involvement in social assistance management can comprehensively enhance the level of this management, achieve an effective combination between this management and services and overcome the current lack of people-oriented management. All in all, to promote the development of China’s current social assistance, we must enhance its service level, overcome unreasonable welfare dependency, improve service assistance, strengthen and improve the management, and allow more social forces to participate. The involvement of social work can address these problems. Therefore, the involvement of social work is of great significance to the development of the social assistance system.

II. Beneficiaries and fields of action of the involvement of social work in social assistance

The involvement of social work in social assistance should involve a wide range of actions in two major areas: first, social work services for people living in poverty; second, social work involvement in social assistance management. These two action areas are different but related to each other.

1. The beneficiaries of social work services for people living in poverty

Social work services for people living in poverty should target a range of beneficiaries, including:

(1) Recipients of the urban and rural *dibaos*

The urban and rural *dibaos* now have more than 70 million recipients; these are the most basic beneficiaries of the social assistance system and individuals and families with the lowest level of income in urban and rural areas. It is found in the survey that for most of them, the *dibao* benefits did not completely solve their difficulties. They need not only further cash benefits, but also service assistance, especially social work services.

(2) People in extreme difficulties (the “three-no’s” or the LSPED recipients)

There are now more than five million “three-no’s” people who are recipients of the LSPED program nationwide. With the expansion of this program to urban areas, this figure will continue to grow. As “three-no’s” persons, in addition to common material support and living care, they also need spiritual comfort and social support, so social work service is particularly important for them.

(3) Low-income families (*dibao* marginal households)

Although their income level is above that of *dibao* beneficiaries, they still live in poverty due to their low income level. In addition, they cannot receive other benefits for more wide-ranging assistance like *dibao* beneficiaries, so some of them will probably encounter more serious difficulties in some respects than the *dibao* beneficiaries. Moreover, most of the family members of *dibao* marginal households have some basic, but inadequate, working ability, and thus relatively low quality of employment and a low level of income. For them, therefore, enhancing their working ability is one of the key areas of social work services to improve their level of employment and increase their income.

(4) Various kinds of groups with special difficulties

In addition to the above service beneficiaries, the involvement of social work in social assistance should also pay special attention to some groups with special difficulties and some people with high economic and social risks, and who thus easily fall into poverty, including the following categories.

First, children experiencing hardship, including orphans (including “*de facto* orphans”, i.e. children whose parents cannot take on their guardianship duties and provide support), children with disabilities, street children, abandoned children, children affected by AIDS and children suffering from rare diseases, etc. The common characteristic of these children is that they live in hardship and need social assistance, especially social workers services.

Second, elderly people in difficulties, including the elderly in *dibao* families and low-income families (*dibao* marginal households), especially the very elderly, the lonely elderly, elderly people without supporters, elderly people suffering from serious or chronic diseases and the elderly who cannot take care of themselves. These elderly people need not only economic support but also all kinds of social services, including social work services.

Third, the disabled in difficulties, mainly referring to the disabled in *dibao* families and low-income families (*dibao* marginal households), single disabled

persons, seriously disabled persons (identified as Class I and II disabled persons), unemployed disabled persons and elderly disabled persons. Facing various kinds of difficulties, they need various kinds of help and need social workers to provide care, rehabilitation, psychological counseling, social support, capacity building services and job opportunities as well.

Fourth, unemployed people. The unemployed are one of the beneficiaries of social work services in all countries, and China should be no exception. In general, many of the unemployed will face certain psychological pressures and have re-employment needs. They need more social support and services. To this end, social workers can provide them with psychological counseling, social support, information services, referral services and other related services.

Fifth, parents experiencing hardship whose only child has died. Families whose only child has died are a special kind of families experiencing hardship after the implementation of the family planning program in the country. Many lonely parents are facing great mental anguish, and some of them may face heavy economic hardship when they get old. This problem has drawn significant attention from the government and society, and social workers should also play an important role in serving them.

Sixth, ex-prisoners in difficulties. Former prisoners are also a special group in urban and rural communities. Many of them have difficulties in finding jobs due to physical problems, mental problems and social discrimination, etc., and thus a high chance of falling into poverty. Some of them are covered by the *dibao*. Social work services can help them solve not only the current living difficulties, but also mental problems and social relation problems and obstacles, and help them return to society.

Seventh, single-parent families experiencing hardship. The economic situation of various single-parent families is quite different. Some single-parent families are poor and need social services. Moreover, many single parents, especially single mothers, encounter the challenge of combining employment and child rearing and need social services. Social workers can provide them with psychological counseling, social support, information service and services links to help ease their living and psychological pressures.

Eighth, homeless people. Homeless people are a major problem facing urban governance in various countries. These people each have different situations, such as living difficulties and misconduct, so we need to provide services for them and strengthen the management of these people as well. Social work services mainly help them solve their psychological problems and social discrimination, provide motivation incentives and behavior-modification services for them, help them overcome psychological problems, enhance self-esteem and

enhance work motivation and ability.

Ninth, the floating population experiencing hardship. A large floating population is currently a major social phenomenon in China. Although the vast majority of migrants do not have economic difficulties, they are vulnerable and have high risks in terms of employment and economy. Due to migrant work and living, they are confronted with many difficulties and problems in various areas, including marital relationships, child care and education, culture and entertainment, social interaction, community integration, rights safeguarding, capacity building, and access to employment information and other public service information; they therefore need social work services. Currently, in all cities, some public services are also provided for the floating population, but not completely, and it is impossible to make all the public services available for migrants in the near future. In this case, social worker services for the floating population are of great importance to meeting their needs and improving the quality of their employment and lives.

Tenth, the rural people left behind. Another consequence of China's massive population movement is a large number of rural residents left behind, including left-behind children, left-behind elderly and left-behind women. Most of these people do not have serious economic difficulties, but they are in urgent need of psychological counseling services, care, physical protection, social interaction and conflict-mediation services, so social work services should be provided to meet their needs.

2. The main action areas of social work services for people living in poverty

To address the difficulties of the above service beneficiaries, based on the current development situation of China's social work, we can establish a working system involving social work in social assistance in the following main areas to serve people living in poverty.

(1) Community social work

Community social work involvement in social assistance is to provide a variety of social work services for people living in poverty in the community who rely on the community's organizational platform. As a comprehensive social work service system, community social work should have a wide range of service beneficiaries and contents, including all families in need and individuals and their needs in various aspects. In addition, community social work can also act as an integrated service platform, through which the community's social workers can directly provide services for people living in poverty in the community, and more professional social work agencies can be introduced to provide more professional social work services for the residents in need. Meanwhile, schools,

hospitals, enterprises and public institutions, as well as the government departments of civil affairs, health, education, human resources and social security can all carry out their work through the community and provide a variety of specialized services for people in need.

(2) Medical social work

Medical social work mainly refers to medical- and health-related social work services for patients and their families. It plays an important role in alleviating psychological pressure on patients and their families, providing medical and health information, and medical service assistance, and coordinating the patient–doctor relationship. Medical social work can be a kind of universal service for all patients and their families. In view of the special difficulties facing people living in poverty and other people experiencing hardship, medical social workers should establish the principle of a priority service for groups with special difficulties and develop specialized service programs and contents to satisfy their special needs.

(3) School social work

This is a kind of social work for educational agencies, aiming at improving students' learning environment and conditions, helping poor students improve their learning and living ability, preventing and resolving a variety of personalized problems of students and creating a harmonious social environment for students' healthy growth. Many poor students face a large number of problems in learning, social interaction and growth and need the help of school social workers. School social workers also should target students experiencing hardship in providing social work services.

(4) Enterprise social work

The main objective of enterprise social work is to help workers and coordinate labor relations in order to increase employee welfare, improve social environment in the workplace, and enhance the efficiency of enterprises. Specific actions can include: by using the theories and methods of social work, it is possible to help employees improve their ability to adapt to the industry environment, strengthen the coordination of industry organizations, and assist enterprises in providing welfare and provide counseling services to the employees for their career development. Enterprise social work should play a significant role in protecting workers in difficulties, improving their social environment and enhancing their professional ability.

(5) Disaster-relief social work

Disaster-hit people are one of the beneficiaries of social assistance, and disaster-relief social work targets people affected in disasters, providing the social work services they need. Disaster-relief social work is one of the areas that witnessed the rapid development of social work in China in recent years. According to the document the Guiding Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Accelerating Disaster-Relief Social Work Services, issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2013, “targeting the affected people, families and communities, disaster-relief social work is a professional service to help the victims recover their damaged social relations, improve development capacity, enhance their social functions and lift them out of poverty, and it is an important part of social work services”.²⁶

(6) Social work in long-term care agencies

Social work in long-term care agencies is an important part of social work for elderly people. Targeting the elderly, it makes good use of the professional knowledge and methods of social work to help elderly people improve their social functions and quality of life, develop the ability to better adapt to society and increase their wellbeing. From the perspective of the involvement of social work in social assistance, elderly-oriented social work should mainly serve the elderly in difficulties. Thus the social work for the elderly can be done not only at the level of the community – such as creating community social worker services for the elderly in general, and those for the elderly living in poverty more specifically – but also create social work positions in long-term care agencies because many elderly here are usually more difficult lonely elderly people, senior people who have lost the ability to take care of themselves and disabled elderly people, who need social work services more urgently than other elderly people. In recent years, therefore, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has actively accelerated the establishment of social work positions in long-term care agencies, and many local governments are also actively developing social work in old-age service agencies and implementing the standardized construction of social work for old-age service agencies. Beijing, for example, issued the Regulations for Social Work for the Elderly Support Institutes on November 5, 2014, which has standardized regulations on the service personnel, service processes, service methods, and quality control of the social services of elderly support institutes.²⁷

(7) Social work of homeless people assistance agencies

²⁶ The Ministry of Civil Affairs, “Guiding Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Accelerating Disaster-relief Social Work Services” (Min Fa [2013] No. 214), December 26, 2013, website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs: <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/zwgk/fvfg/shgz/201312/20131200570002.shtml>

²⁷ Reported by Social Work Network, “Beijing Announced the ‘Regulations on Social Work Services of the Elderly Support Institutes’”, website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, August 21, 2015: <http://sw.mca.gov.cn/article/dfdt/201508/20150800866318.shtml>

Homeless people assistance agencies (rescue stations) are the main departments that provide rescue services for homeless people and play a key role in the assistance work. We should rely on the rescue stations to set up social work positions for homeless people and hire relevant social workers for the roles.

(8) Social work related to youth affairs (including children's affairs)

Based on social work theory and values, youth affairs-related social work refers to the services provided for young people by using professional methods and the skills of social work according to the physiological and psychological characteristics as well as the growth needs of the youth. To carry out youth affairs-related social work, the local government should not only create platforms in community and school, establish professional youth affairs-related social work agencies, but also combine professional social work with the youth work of the Communist Youth League organizations, and establish a youth affairs-related social work system characterized by multi-party cooperation, and a combination of societalization and professionalization. In 2014, six central organizations, including the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, jointly issued the Opinions on Strengthening Professional Team Construction for Youth Affairs-related Social Work, and stressed the need to provide support for the youth experiencing hardship: "Help the disabled young people and the adolescents from poor families to access government relief and security as well as social support and assistance, and cultivate a life attitude of self-reliance."²⁸

(9) Social work for women

Targeting women, social work in this area mainly promotes gender equality, women's rights protection and safeguard with the theories and methods of professional social work, covering women's mental health, family harmony, promoting women's employment and social contacts, as well as increasing women's welfare in all aspects. Its main platforms include community platforms, professional women's social work agencies, the introduction of professional social work into the work of women's organizations and the creation of women-related social work positions in women's federations at all levels and their subordinate organizations. Such social work must target all women, especially women with special difficulties, including the women with economic and employment difficulties, poor single mothers, elderly and disabled women and girls experiencing hardship. Professional social work services should be provided for the women with these special difficulties.

²⁸ Six departments including the Communist Youth League Central Committee, the Central Comprehensive Management Office and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, etc. "Opinions on Strengthening Social Worker Team Building for Juveniles Affairs" (Zhong Qing Lian Fa [2014] No.1), January 10, 2014, website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs: <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/zwgk/fvfg/shgz/201401/20140100577800.shtml>

(10) Social work for the disabled

Social work for persons with disabilities refers to comprehensive professional services provided for the disabled with social work theory and methods, covering rights protection, psychological counseling, social support, the elimination of social barriers, promoting equal participation and helping the disabled improve their education, employment, rehabilitation and environment-friendly conditions. The main platforms include community social work platforms, professional social work organizations for persons with disabilities, the introduction of professional social work into the work of disabled persons' federations, and the establishment of social work positions in disabled persons' federations at all levels and their subordinated organizations. Also, such social work should be provided for all persons with disabilities, mainly targeting the disabled with special difficulties, including persons with severe disabilities, children with disabilities, elderly persons with disabilities, disabled people with economic and employment difficulties and disabled people with mental illnesses.

3. Main action tasks of social work services for people living in poverty

The involvement of social work in social assistance and the professional services for people experiencing hardship should have a wide range of tasks. Based on the needs of people experiencing hardship and the characteristics of social work found in the survey, this study presents the following key service tasks of social work.

(1) Difficulty investigation and need assessment

Households and individuals of various kinds living in poverty face quite different problems and needs in their actual living, including current difficulties and needs, and latent difficulties and needs, and even some difficulties and needs that people living in poverty themselves are not aware of. Before providing services to people living in poverty, it is necessary to have exact information about their difficulties and needs, including latent, unexpressed and unaware needs, which will be helpful for social worker services as well as for government social assistance and other social services for people living in poverty.

(2) Direct services in daily life

Poor families and individuals have extensive service needs in their daily lives. The first is the services for basic necessities. Therefore, the first kind of services should be to provide personalized services for basic living to meet the different needs of various poor families and individuals, such as purchases, meal delivery and maintenance services for individuals with movement difficulties. The second

is to help families and individuals in need to effectively use the internet and e-business for shopping to improve their quality of life. Social work intervention in the daily life of people in need can be carried out in a variety of ways. Social workers can offer direct and indirect services, including organizing and guiding service networks, mobilizing and coordinating volunteer services and providing information services and referral services.

(3) Social care

Many of the families and individuals in need covered by social assistance are in need of care, especially children, the elderly and people with disabilities. Many poor families have difficulties in the care of family members and need social care. Therefore, it is one of the main objectives of social work services to provide social care services for families and individuals in need. In social care services, the role of social workers should be as project sponsors and organizers. First, the community social worker should actively advocate the significance of social care, mobilize resources of the community and related organizations, and coordinate the relevant departments and agencies to set up social care service programs. Second, professional social work organizations should provide more targeted, high-quality professional care services for families and individuals in need based on their actual needs. Third, social workers in professional social care institutions (elderly service agencies and child welfare agencies, etc.) should make suggestions for relevant agencies to provide more targeted care services for the families and individuals in need based on their actual needs, and assist direct caregivers to accomplish their tasks.

(4) Health services (including mental health services)

People living in poverty and vulnerable groups often have health problems and health care needs, covering general physical health and mental health. To improve their health status, it is necessary, on the one hand, to provide better medical care and, on the other, to provide more extensive health services, including social workers' services. Social workers can assist community health services in health knowledge popularization and provide medical social work services in hospitals. Another important task of social workers is to provide mental health services for various kinds of people. Compared to other mental health workers (such as hospitals' psychological outpatient service doctors and general psychological counselors), social workers pay more attention to integrated services in mental health care, combining mental health services with other diagnosis services to address actual problems, aiming to achieve better therapeutic outcomes. At the same time, as a kind of public welfare service, social work pays more attention to services for people living in poverty and other people experiencing hardship, focusing on alleviating the mental pressure of these people and improving their mental health and physical health levels. Social

workers can provide health services on many platforms, including communities, social work agencies, schools, hospitals, enterprises, professional institutes and other social service agencies. Meanwhile, health services provided by social workers target a variety of people, including community residents in difficulties, students and young people experiencing hardship, the elderly and the people with disabilities in difficulty, single-parent families experiencing hardship, poor workers, migrants and people left behind, ex-prisoners experiencing hardship and other types of people with difficulties.

(5) Rights protection and safeguarding

Another important task of the involvement of social work in social assistance and services for people experiencing hardship is to protect and safeguard the legal rights of families and individuals in need. First, in terms of rights protection, people experiencing hardship and vulnerable groups often suffer rights violations but cannot safeguard their legal rights due to inabilities, so they need external support to safeguard their rights, and social workers should provide assistance for them. On the one hand, social workers can provide direct services to safeguard the legal rights of families and individuals in need. In other words, they can directly intervene in simple cases when individuals in need suffer rights violations, provide legal consulting services, or directly act as the legal representative of people experiencing hardship and for vulnerable groups. On the other hand, social workers can provide indirect services to safeguard the legal rights of families and individuals in need. In other words, they can provide referrals, resource links and information provision to help people in need suffering rights violations. Second, in many cases, people with impaired legal rights need certain direct protection. For example, some of the children in difficulties, abused children, battered women and abused elderly need temporary shelter services. Social workers should also play a role in these aspects, and establish appropriate mechanisms in communities and relevant institutions.

(6) Dispute resolution and social relationship mediation

There are often a lot of conflicts and disputes between people experiencing hardship and members of vulnerable groups, so social workers should play a positive role in dispute resolution. Dispute resolution can be carried out on a variety of platforms. Currently, China is establishing a diversified range of dispute resolution mechanisms, and social workers may play a key role in the mediation of family disputes and neighborhood disputes, and play a supporting role in dealing with medical disputes, labor disputes, consumer disputes, etc. To this end, social work training should be provided for the existing mediators, and more social workers with relevant qualifications should be allowed to join the dispute resolution teams.

In addition, some members of poor families and other vulnerable groups often have problems in social contacts. These problems have a negative impact on their quality of life and are one of the causes of their poverty to some extent. Thus, in addition to dispute resolution, social relationship mediation for these people should be a part of our social work. Social workers can provide counseling services for them through a variety of methods, provide psychological and social support for them, implement behavior modification and help them develop good habits to better integrate into society and increase their social capital.

(7) Risk prevention and crisis intervention

In contemporary society, especially in the urbanized social environment, various risk show an increasing trend. In general, due to differences in various conditions, social risks are unevenly distributed among various social groups. People living in poverty usually bear more risks because they have a relatively weak sense of risk prevention and relatively weak ability to resist risk. Thus, social workers should provide more risk prevention services for people living in poverty and other vulnerable groups, including the prevention of natural disaster risks, accident risks, a variety of risks in family life and community environments, man-made damage risks, as well as special protective measures for children, elderly people and persons with disabilities.

Risks sometimes occur in people's lives, such as crises arising from disasters, psychological crises caused by psychological pressure or other social factors, conflict crises arising from social conflict or worsening interpersonal relationships, etc. At present, China has set up a temporary assistance system covering emergency relief. But it is only an economic instrument to cope with various financial emergencies. In addition, it is necessary to provide social work services to cope with psychological and social emergencies. To this end, recognizing the importance of such services, the leaders of the Ministry of Civil Affairs have proposed to "effectively strengthen the professional function of social work in emergency relief".²⁹ The probability for people living in poverty and vulnerable groups to suffer crises is higher. Because they have a relatively weak ability to respond to crises, it is usually difficult to resolve their crises, leading to serious consequences. Therefore, in the process of establishing the crisis-responding mechanisms on various platforms, social workers should pay more attention to people living in poverty and vulnerable groups and provide more active crisis intervention services for these people.

(8) Cultural and entertainment services

²⁹ Gong Puguang, "Giving full play to the important role of social work in social assistance", *Guangming Daily*, downloaded from the website of Guangming Daily, July 20, 2015: http://news.gmw.cn/2015-07/20/content_16348418_2.htm

People living in poverty often face social and cultural difficulties. On the one hand, people living in poverty are often excluded or marginalized and even stigmatized by mainstream culture, making it difficult to address their problems of poverty. On the other hand, people living in poverty are likely to take the initiative to separate themselves from mainstream culture, forming their own “culture of poverty” and falling into deeper poverty, thereby creating conditions for the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Moreover, due to the gentrification of the production and the spreading of social culture and entertainment, people living in poverty often cannot meet their cultural needs effectively, thus exacerbating their mental anguish and spiritual sterility. In this case, social workers should become involved in the provision of cultural and entertainment services to people living in poverty. Community social workers and enterprise social workers should contribute to the strengthening of community culture and corporate culture, and mobilize poor residents and workers in need to participate in community and corporate cultural activities to promote their cultural integration. They should also coordinate the media and entertainment units to promote pro-poor production and dissemination of cultural and entertainment products, which would not only help to meet the cultural and entertainment needs of people living in poverty, but also actively promote the integration of people living in poverty into the mainstream of society. In addition, social workers should provide counseling services for all kinds of people in difficulties, help them eliminate their cultural split from mainstream society and prevent them from forming a sub-culture of poverty. It is also important to prevent the forming of a “digital gap” between people living in poverty and mainstream society, so it is necessary to provide “digital assistance” to help people living in poverty keep up with the pace of the internet age.

(9) Capacity building and incentivizing motivation

According to the survey, a considerable number of poor and disadvantaged people have a certain ability or potential, including physical and mental ability. The reason why they fall into poverty includes the failure to give full play to their ability. Therefore, from a perspective of active social assistance, it should be one of the important tasks of social worker involvement in social assistance to strengthen capacity building and motivation incentives for people living in poverty and for vulnerable groups. First, capacity building covers actions in many aspects, including providing training and human capital development services, providing jobs and employment information, asset building services (such as helping people living in poverty manage financial affairs), and social capital construction services (such as helping people living in poverty build and expand social networks, etc.). These are all important means to tap the potential of people living in poverty and to enhance their abilities.

In addition to a lack of capacity, people living in poverty often also have the

problem of insufficient motivation. Some people living in poverty are unwilling to change their difficult circumstances through hard work but look to the government and society for help. In a sense, the lack of motivation has a greater negative impact on people living in poverty than the lack of capacity because it not only restricts the actions of people living in poverty, but is also likely to lead to or aggravate the social exclusion of people living in poverty by mainstream society. Moreover, under the current management system, some practices have a significant negative pressure on people living in poverty. These practices can play a certain role in controlling the number of *dibao* applicants and managing *dibao* beneficiaries, but do not have a significant effect in motivating people living in poverty. Thus, social workers should pay attention to the establishment of a motivation incentive mechanism to help people living in poverty. In this regard, under the principle of “helping people help themselves”, based on the theory of “strengths perspective”, social workers should provide psychological incentives for people living in poverty to stimulate their ambition, make clear the problems of the service clients through various methods, tap their potential and fully mobilize their competencies.

(10) Auxiliary services among government inclusive public services

Over the past decade, in both urban and rural areas, the governments have strengthened public services for the masses, forming a relatively complete public service system to provide public services for all aspects. According to the survey, however, some people living in poverty still have some problems in accessing public services in some regions. Due to their weak capacity to obtain information, people living in poverty know little about public services in some cases, and cannot completely understand the relevant rules, so they find it very difficult to utilize the public services provided by the government. Additionally, some universal public services are provided by the government under certain conditions. In the renovation of dilapidated houses in some rural areas, for example, the beneficiaries having to bear a certain proportion of construction costs themselves before they receive government subsidies. In some cities, to give another example, the public working positions provided by local governments have high requirements for the beneficiaries and many people in need cannot meet the conditions and fail to get the jobs. Some social service projects provided by enterprises and social organizations show a similar situation.

To improve the accessibility of government’s public services for people living in poverty, on the one hand, it is necessary to reform the government’s public service delivery pattern and give priority to people living in poverty. On the other hand, it is also necessary to provide social work services and information for people experiencing hardship to support access to credit services and to coordinate government departments, communities, enterprises and various kinds

of social organizations. This provision of links to resources can help to remove the “last kilometer” obstacles in accessing governmental public services.

4. The main tasks of the involvement of social work in social assistance administration

Another main task of the involvement of social work in social assistance is the involvement of social work in social assistance administration. To promote social work involvement in social assistance administration, we should first address the deficiencies of China’s current social assistance administration system and strive to improve its efficiency by providing professional services.

(1) The characteristics and problems of the current social assistance administration and the need for the involvement of social work

The basic characteristics of China’s current social assistance administration system can be summarized as follows. First, the basic system combines governmental administration with the administration of grassroots residents’ autonomy organizations. Under the current system, social assistance is under the administration of region-level civil affairs departments as well as the town governments and sub-district offices, covering the procedures of application, verification and approval as well as the dynamic management of social assistance recipients. We found in the fieldwork that the grassroots sub-district offices or rural town government offices often have only one or two civil affairs staff members, who are not only responsible for social assistance, but also takes charge of many other affairs and so do not have enough time for the management of social assistance. Therefore, the grassroots administration responsibility is usually given to urban neighborhood committees and rural village committees. The neighborhood committees and rural village committees have the relatively advantage of understanding the local residents well, but they do not have sufficient expertise and the cadres are usually also very busy. Meanwhile, they usually live in the same communities and are easily affected by personal relations in dealing with social assistance affairs.

The second characteristic of social assistance administration is the non-professional manner of its administration. Social assistance administration involves the verification of applicants’ situations and the supervision of applicants’ and recipients’ behaviors in the process. It is necessary not only to make clear the qualifications and conditions of the applicants and recipients, but also to protect them effectively and encourage their active working motivation, so it should be a kind of professional work with high requirements. At present, in various regions, this work is usually under the responsibility of non-professional personnel, and most of the household surveys, mass appraisals and poster announcements are non-professional methods. In recent years, local social

assistance administrations have implemented the mechanism of family economic situation checking and increased the technical factors, but this approach is also not always effective. From the control perspective, these non-professional administration approaches can also achieve some results, but no strict professional evaluation has been conducted on their actual social effects and negative impacts.

The third characteristic of social assistance administration is the separation of administration and services. Administration agencies and personnel usually focus on the administration and ignore the methods to provide the necessary services for the social assistance applicants and recipients. As a result, insufficient services have been provided and the actual effectiveness of social assistance is not ideal.

The above characteristics of the social assistance administration significantly restrict the social achievements of the social assistance system. To this end, we suggest pushing forward social work involvement in social assistance administration and improving the quality of social assistance administration and social achievements of social assistance through the reform of the social assistance administration system and methods. The main reasons are: first, to change the existing administration system and establish the administration system characterized by specialized agencies' operation under the government's charge and through the involvement of professional social work; second, to introduce more professional approaches for investigations, audits and dynamic management to improve the humanization level and efficiency of the administration; and third, to combine administration with services to improve administration efficiency and provide better services to the social assistance beneficiaries.

(2) The main tasks of social work intervention in social assistance administration

The main tasks of social work intervention in social assistance administration are as follows. The first is social assistance application acceptance and verification. Entrusted by the region-level civil affairs offices, professional social work institutions and social workers can take the responsibility that the non-professional towns and street offices (sub-district offices) currently have to accept social assistance application, conduct primary means-tested verification, and then make a judgment as to whether the applicants are eligible to receive social assistance. The social work institutions should submit the application materials of those who meet the conditions to the region-level civil affairs offices for approval, and provide other services for the families and individuals in need who do not meet the requirements for social assistance. Second is the dynamic management of social assistance. For the individuals or families that have obtained *dibao* benefits or other social assistance benefits, the social work

agencies and social workers should manage their beneficiary behaviors according to the relevant law. The third involves combining social assistance administration with social work services, providing a variety of services in the management process, implementing strict management while providing services and further optimizing the management through various kinds of services. Fourth is promoting the combination of social assistance and other social security and social services. Social work institutions and social workers should help social assistance beneficiaries and other people in need comprehensively use the public services through referrals, resource integration and resource links, and should strive to achieve coordination between systems and projects under the social work mechanism. In the case of any discordance (overlapping or loopholes) between systems, social work institutions and social workers should develop professional proposals for reform.

(3) The main approaches and modes for the involvement of social work in social assistance administration

There are three modes for basic institutions. The first is to establish the institutional system for the government to entrust social workers to set up non-governmental social assistance administration institutions. It is a relatively complete reform: to entrust non-governmental professional social work institutions for management through government purchasing of social services. In such a way, the professional level of social assistance management can be significantly improved, and both the community/village-level and street/town-level work and responsibility in the social assistance administration can be released and transferred to the professional social work institutions. But one of the conditions for this approach is establishing a regional system of social assistance institutes within one area rather than establishing scattered institutes in individual locations, because only after the establishment of specialized institutional system can it give better play to its professional management efficiency. While establishing this management model, we must also pay attention to the combination of professionalization and mass participation and accomplish the task through effective cooperation between professional agencies and neighborhood/village committees, especially the cooperation between professional social work institutions and the community social workers.

The second mode involves relying on the existing system to strengthen the current social assistance administration and their personnel, and to strengthen the social work training of the relevant staff. It is found in the survey that among the social assistance workers in the sub-strict office/town or neighborhood committees/village committees, few are college graduates who have majored in social work. In developed regions where social work is more advanced, a number of grassroots workers have attained social work qualifications through examination, but they still need to take part in training sessions to improve their

expertise and capabilities. In such a way, we do not need to significantly change the existing institution model, and thus it is relatively easy to promote the work. This system can also retain the advantage of the mass participation of social assistance administration. However, it cannot enhance the professional level rapidly. Comparing these two models, the former requires reform and is more in line with the future development direction of social assistance, and is more suitable for urban areas, especially for developed regions where social work has been well developed. The second model is more stable and more in line with the actual conditions of many regions; it is more suitable for rural areas and the regions where social work has not been well developed.

The second mode is to establish an integrated management system. The so-called integrated management system refers to the social assistance administration system integrating various social assistance administration systems to achieve the management of all social assistance work. The various social assistance projects are made by different government sectors, and have their respective systems and procedures. Currently, the social assistance programs of various sectors are usually under the management of the same grassroots department and personnel, and an integrated mechanism is thus needed in practice. Without the integration of agencies and systems, the grassroots officers do the administrative work relying merely on their experience, and it is easy for them to make mistakes. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a unified social assistance administration system at the grassroots level, including unified institutions and unified agencies, so that the management and service outlets can work in accordance with the same specifications. This unified and integrated management system can either be implemented by non-governmental professional social work institutions or by the existing sub-district/town governments and communities through strengthening professional social work training.

The third mode is to establish the institutional norms for the combination of management and services. All social assistance institutes should be established and run according to the requirement of combining management with services, and follow the principle of combining management and services in all links, including institutional establishment, staffing, work content, operation procedures, examinations and evaluation.

III. Institutional mechanisms for the involvement of social work in social assistance

The involvement of social work in social assistance is a series of institutionalized actions and must be implemented under a certain institutional mechanism. Therefore, the establishment and improvement of appropriate institutional mechanisms is an important condition for the successful involvement of social work in social assistance.

1. Institutional system for the involvement of social work in social assistance

The institutional system for the involvement of social work in social assistance refers to the rational arrangement of the division of labor and cooperation between professional social work and non-professional social work, between different types of professional social work, and between community social work, professional social work organizations and embedded social work positions.

(1) Professional social work, non-professional social work and the voluntary service system

In China, professional social work is not the only social work service system. Prior to the development of the professional social work, various organizations had established non-professional social service systems to provide a variety of services for poor residents, poor workers, students in need and other persons with difficulties, and such services are still being provided in communities and by many other organizations now. The development of professional social work and its intervention in social assistance do not mean simply replacing the existing service systems. Instead, it means re-establishing the professional social work and non-professional social service positions through institutional construction and job opportunity creation to form systems for the co-existence and division of labor. Specifically, it is necessary to rationally establish a system of the reasonable division of labor for professional social work agencies and social workers and the existing community organizations and their working staff, relevant staff members of various people's organizations (trade unions, the Communist Youth League, women's federations, disabled persons' federations, etc.), and the "ideological and political workers" in schools, enterprises and public services. At the same time, attention should be paid to the coordination and cooperation between professional social work and voluntary service system, and to establishing a professional social work-oriented social service system covering other types of non-professional social service agencies and personnel as well as volunteers.

(2) Post establishment mode for community social work, professional social work agencies and embedded social work

It is one of the important conditions for promoting the involvement of social work in social assistance to establish social worker for social assistance (SWSA) positions in the relevant departments and organizations. There are three ways to institutionalize SWSA position establishment. The first is the community social work pattern: to establish social work positions in community organizations to support the involvement of social work in social assistance in communities. The second is to develop professional social work organizations: to establish appropriate SWSA positions in professional social work institutions engaged in

the involvement of social work in social assistance. The third is the embedded social work position setting mode: to establish relevant social work positions in schools, hospitals, enterprises and institutions, as well as in other relevant organizations. As for the above three modes, we should first establish SWSA positions in the professional social work institutions engaged in the involvement of social work in social assistance, followed by the establishment of social work positions in the communities with certain conditions. Except in some professional social assistance agencies (such as rescue stations), however, it is still difficult to establish the embedded SWSA positions in many organizations. But it is necessary to provide specialized SWSA training for the social workers of these organizations so that they will be able to provide professional social assistance services while assuming their social responsibilities.

(3) Cooperation and division of labor between two kinds of professional social workers

As mentioned above, there are now two kinds of professional social workers in urban and rural areas of China, especially in the city: university/college graduates with social work majors, and the professional social workers who have obtained the social worker qualification by passing the social workers' professional-level examination. With different strengths and weaknesses, these two types of professional social workers should fulfill their roles in different ways. The social workers who have passed the professional-level examination should mainly work in communities as community social workers, work on the frontline in the involvement of social work in social assistance, provide initial services for the service application of people in need, and transfer the service beneficiaries with complex needs to professional social work institutions through resource links or referral. The more professional SWSA should then provide more professional services.

2. Operating mechanism for the involvement of social work in social assistance

The operating mechanism for the involvement of social work in social assistance refers to the institutionalized operation mode of social work institutions and social workers in all links of their intervention in social assistance. To take a hand in social assistance services, social work institutions must solve the problem of financial compensation and resource mobilization, establish a task delegate relationship with the government, communities, relevant enterprises and institutions, establish a reasonable, feasible service delivery mode, and conduct effective quality monitoring. In these areas, effective operational mechanisms should be established.

(1) Financial compensation and resource mobilization mechanisms of social work institutions

To achieve the involvement of social work institutions in social assistance, it is necessary first to address the financial compensation mechanism problem. In general, the financial compensation for social work institutions has the following sources of funding: government subsidies, social donations, service purchases and service charges. For the involvement of social work in social assistance targets families in need, a service charge is not practicable. Therefore, it is necessary to establish the financial compensation mechanism of social work institutions in the former three ways. The first is to establish social assistance work positions in communities etc. by governmental investment. The second is to support the social assistance work position establishment in the social work institutions by governmental, enterprise or community purchasing of social work institution services according to actual need. The third is to vigorously mobilize various social forces to donate to the development of social assistance.

(2) Task delegation mechanism of social work institutions and government/community

To become involved in social assistance, social work institutions usually should be entrusted by relevant government departments such civil affairs department or community organizations. Civil affairs departments can entrust professional social work institutions to undertake the task of social assistance administration and services. Community organizations can also use their own resources to hire or entrust some professional social work institutions to provide professional social work services for the residents experiencing hardship. Currently in some cities, communities can access a certain amount of general public service funds from the government and determine themselves how to use the funds. Thus, it is possible for communities to develop social work service programs for residents in need through “community purchasing of services” and to invite some social work institutions to undertake the task.

(3) Social work service delivery mechanism for families and individuals in need

To provide social work services for families and individuals in need, the relevant social work institutions and social workers must deliver a whole set of services, including the identification of service clients, investigation and assessment of families and individuals in need, service program design, standardized requirements for service activities, service activity implementation, service quality control and service effect evaluation. To design the social work service delivery mechanism for families and individuals in need, a complex design process is needed. It must target the correct beneficiaries, optimize the services,

control the quality and strive for high efficiency.

(4) Service quality control and evaluation mechanisms of social work institutions

As a public service activity, social work services for families and individuals in need also require the necessary work quality management, so it is necessary to design a quality control mechanism. The quality control mechanism should have internal procedures for quality control and requires external quality monitoring, including service recipient feedback mechanisms, expert evaluation mechanisms and governmental/public monitoring mechanism. Due to the special nature of services for people living in poverty, their quality feedback mechanism for the free service is usually weak, so it is necessary to attach more importance to expert evaluation mechanisms and public monitoring mechanism.

IV. Capacity building for the involvement of social work in social assistance

Social work service for people living in poverty and social work involvement in social assistance management are both based on the sufficient capacity of social work institutions and social workers, so in the design of the involvement of social work in social assistance, it is necessary to analyze and evaluate their capacities and, on this basis, strengthen capacity building. Part IV of this report has analyzed the lack of capacity in the development of social work. In this part, some suggestions on strengthening capacity building for social work institutions and for social workers are proposed.

1. Capacity building of social work institutions

Capacity building of social work institutions mainly includes the institutes' capacity building for financial affairs, social resource mobilization, professional social work team, innovation and management, etc.

(1) Financial capacity of social work institutions

Financial capability is an important foundation for the operation and development of social work institutions, and thus the financial capacity building of social work institutions should be strengthened. First of all, social work institutions should undertake the task of becoming involved in social assistance, and the government should assume the responsibility of strengthening financial capacity. To strengthen financial capacity of social work institutions, the government can purchase social services, but should not rely on generalized service purchase, especially not merely on the "project system" to purchase service, but should invest in the long-term sustainable capability of the social work service institutes that undertake social assistance task, because only after having a long-term stable funding sources can the institutes achieve long-term

sustainable development and improvement of service capacity and quality. Therefore, long-term sustained government investment or the purchasing of services of social work institutions is essential to the development and service quality improvement of social work institutions. Second, social work institutions themselves should strengthen their financial capacity building in two dimensions. The first is to attach importance to quality and efficiency and thus improve the ability to obtain governmental and social investment and service purchase. The second is to strive to open up financial resources and access supplementary financial resources through a wide range of services and a variety of methods.

(2) Ability to mobilize social resources

Under the current social system and public service system, social resource mobilization capacity is also an important condition for the operation and development of social work institutions. To serve poor families and become involved in social assistance, it is necessary to mobilize the social resources of various areas, including the administrative resources of government departments, the material resources of enterprises and institutions, the human and financial resources of communities and various social organizations, the information dissemination resources of mass media, the expert resources of academic institutions, residents' support and the volunteer service resources, etc. An excellent social work institution should be able to bring together various resources. The social resource mobilization capacity depends on the professional competence and social skills of institute heads and professionals and on the institute's size and strength. Therefore, to accelerate the long-term sustainable development of social work institutions, attention should be paid to the scaling merit of the institutes. A number of large-scale social work service institutes with strong service capacity and resource mobilization ability should be gradually established. Only in such a way can the tasks of social assistance service and management be undertaken in a wide range of areas, and the tasks be accomplished successfully.

(3) Professional working team of relevant institutions

Like other professional technical organizations, the professional team is the core competence of social work institutions. The capability of its professional team determines the service level of a social work institution. Thus, the construction of a professional social worker team is the core task of the capacity building of a social work agency. All social work institutions should have sound mechanisms for professional personnel recruitment, use, evaluation and promotion to attract professional social workers and make good use of them. Currently, social work institutions all over the country have some problems in this aspect. Even in the regions where social work is well developed, and where it can only be said that the problem of professional personnel recruitment has been basically solved, it is

still problematic to make good use of professionals and there is a long way to go to keep these professionals. To construct professional social worker teams, institutes should make great efforts and require strong support from the government and society.

(4) Innovation capability

The involvement of social work in social assistance is still new in China and there is no ready-made template for use, so the relevant institutes should make innovations in many respects. In this area, social work institutions should become the most important innovation makers, like enterprises in a market economy. It should be noted that, at present, many of the domestic social work institutions still have a long way to go in developing innovation capacity. To improve the creativity of social work institutions, it is important first to give them autonomy, encourage them to improve the awareness of innovation, provide better conditions for their innovation and provide some pressure to them to force the institutes to seek development through innovation.

(5) Management capabilities

Like enterprises, social work institutions also need good management skills. As a kind of social organization, social work institutions have a more complex management system, so management capacity building is important and complex. Social work institutions should attach importance to management capacity building and improve service quality and operation efficiency through better management. In particular, the social work institutions involved in social assistance should design their management systems based on the needs of clients and their work nature in order to make the management more effective.

2. The capabilities of social workers

In addition to the social work institution capacity, the ability of social workers is also crucial to the involvement of social work in social assistance, including their professional knowledge, service skills, experience, familiarity with the regulations and policies, social support and value levels.

(1) Professional knowledge

Professional social work service is based on professional competence. In a general sense, social work professional competence includes not only the knowledge of sociology, psychology and other basic disciplines, but also the knowledge system of professional social work and various sub-sectors. For social assistance workers, in addition to general knowledge, they should understand the theory of contemporary poverty, the development of poverty at home and abroad,

the economic and social characteristics and psychological characteristics of people living in poverty and vulnerable groups, the knowledge of the operation of communities, social organizations and government operation, as well as the general operational situation and development situation of social policies, especially the social security systems and social assistance systems. Currently, however, the universities in China do not attach importance to poverty theory teaching and poverty-related issue discussion, and not much social assistance knowledge is reflected in the professional-level examinations taken by professional social workers. Therefore, to strengthen the professional competence of social assistance workers, it is needed to further increase knowledge related to poverty and social assistance in the education and examination system.

(2) Social work methods and service skills

Service skill is another important part of social work specialization. Social workers' working methods are based not only on training and practice but also on the service experience, and service skills are mainly gained from continuous learning in practice, innovation and accumulation. For social assistance workers, their social work methods and skills must adapt to their service clients, i.e. people living in poverty and members of various vulnerable groups, so it is necessary to develop suitable social assistance methods and service skills. To improve the work methods and skills of social assistance workers, the university education and professional-level exams should put more emphasis on specialized methods and skills training, and should increase targeted method and skills trainings for those who have obtained a social work qualification. Of course, the most important thing is that the social assistance workers must strive to understand the importance of their service methods and skills from the perspective of their career development needs and the perspective of improving the quality and level of the involvement of social work in social assistance, and must raise their awareness of method improvement and skills accumulation.

(3) Practical experience

Practical experience is an important indicator to measure the professional ability of a social worker. Social work is a kind of practical work. When other conditions remain unchanged, the more practical experience a social worker has, the stronger his professional competence will be. At present, China's community social workers have some advantages in practical experience. The social workers in social work institutions are usually very young and have just graduated from university, and so have little practical experience, which is the weakness of this group. As time passes, this situation will become better, but the requirement here is that a large number of social workers engage in professional social work in social work institutions for a long period of time. On the other hand, practical

ability cannot be simply developed with time passing. In addition to the factor of time, work position, efforts, work performance and experience will all have significant impacts on practical ability. Furthermore, in addition to professional practice experience, personal experiences will also have an impact on their professional competence. Thus, young social workers still have huge potential to take the initiative to accumulate experience.

(4) Familiarity with the regulations and policies

Social work is done under the government policy system according to national and regional laws and regulations. The ability to fully understand and make good use of laws, regulations and policy system is another part of the ability of a social worker. Many laws and regulations and all levels of government policy documents have been implemented in the areas related to poverty and social assistance and are often amended. It was found in the survey that, on average, community social workers have a better understanding of the relevant laws and regulations than social workers in professional institutes. In whatever organization, social assistance workers should make great efforts to understand the relevant regulatory documents and make good use of them. Only in such a way can they help the service clients more effectively and avoid deviations in their work.

(5) Social support

Social support for social workers is another important aspect of the ability of social workers. The so-called social support refers to all kinds of support obtained by professional social workers in their work independently from other organizations and individuals. As professional personnel, social workers should have the ability to mobilize the resources of other institutes and should not rely on their work units to provide the necessary working conditions for them. Social support for social workers comes not only from the professional groups they belong to, but also from their personal social relations, as well as their ability to communicate with government departments, social organizations, enterprises, public services, academic institutions, news media, community-based organizations and residents' organizations, etc.

(6) Values and ethics

Values and ethics are an important indicator to measure the professional competence of social workers, especially for social assistance workers. Social workers should agree with the inherent values of social justice, equality and social care and, in addition, should comply with the professional code of ethics of social work. Also, it is very important for a SWSA to uphold the values of social justice and social care, show a high degree of compassion and

understanding to people living in poverty and vulnerable groups, be willing to contact these people at the bottom of society and to listen to their opinions, and actively help them. It should be noted that at present, the mainstream values of Chinese people are not conducive to the development of these values needed for young students to become involve in social assistance work. As a result, many young social work professionals, especially those in social assistance field are facing great challenges. In this regard, it is necessary, starting from school education, to strengthen the development of values of social workers at all stages and strengthen the values of social workers through government policy support and social support.

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