Social Policy Programs: Small Welfare

Cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin in 2008. The rural cooperative medical service system that was rolled out in 2002 has been rapidly expanded recently; its nationwide adoption is scheduled for 2009, with a three-tiered health care network at the county, township, and village levels established by 2010. The government, which neglected the issue for too long, has just seriously started considering how to protect the social rights of the large mobile population within the framework of urban-rural integration, equal rights, and universal entitlement.

The Chinese leadership is expected to continue to push ahead social policy reforms. The global financial crisis that began in 2008 and the havoc it has visited on developing countries serve as a rigorous test for the foundation, feasibility, functions, and robustness of the social safety nets being built in China.

SEE ALSO Poverty; Social Welfare; Standard of Living

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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The Chinese term “small welfare” or “small well-being” (xiaokang) originally referred to an integrated society based on the institution of rituals known in Confucian literature as li (Wang Yubo 1992, p. 62; He Ziquan 2003, p. 20). In its modern usage, the term means that a person is moderately well-off, leading a life above the subsistence level without being really wealthy.

Small-welfare and social-welfare societies have gained currency in China since Deng Xiaoping met the visiting Japanese prime minister Ohira Masayoshi (1910–1980) in 1979. Deng Xiaoping remarked that China’s Four Modernizations were aimed at a small-welfare living standard for the people. Deng also set the target of attaining small welfare in China as measured by a gross national product (GNP) per capita of $1,000 (in U.S. dollars) by the end of the twentieth century. This would amount to quadrupling the 1979 GNP per capita of $250. In 1984 Deng also predicted that once China was a small-welfare society, it would be another thirty to fifty years before China approached the economic standards of developed countries. At that stage, China would have the resources to tackle regional disparities and the rich-poor gap. Small welfare, in Deng’s thinking, was a dynamic concept for national social and economic development.

Since 1979, building a small-welfare society has become a national development goal. At the Thirteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1987, a three-stage approach was adopted for building a small-welfare society (Zhuo Ziyang 1987). Stage one was to double China’s 1980 GNP and provide the material foundation for the satisfaction of basic survival needs. This was not yet small welfare but was achieved in 1987. Stage two was to double China’s GNP again by 2000; then, China would have reached an economic level comparable to small welfare but was achieved in 1987. Stage two was to double China’s GNP again by 2000; then, China would have reached an economic level comparable to small welfare. Stage three was to attain GNP per capita comparable to medium-income countries by the mid-twenty-first century. Then, people would be relatively well-off, and China would basically have achieved modernization.

Stage three was more explicitly elaborated at the Sixteenth Party Congress of the CCP in 2002, when the building of a small-welfare society was conceptually modified to the building of a comprehensive small-welfare society. Not only were higher levels of economic development targeted, but also higher levels of democracy, culture, science and education, social harmony, and people’s standard of living (Jiang Zemin 2002). The target date was set at 2020.

In 1991 national, urban, and rural indicators were established by a small-welfare study team under the State Statistical Bureau. However, indices to progress toward the goal of a small-welfare society were far from all systematically reported, and data is not fully accessible by the public. From the disclosed information, it is known that only three thresholds of the sixteen national indicators—for capita rural net income, per capita protein intake, and rural primary basic health care—were not attained in 2000. The total achievement rate was 96.6 percent (He Qiang 2003, p. 25). Obviously, there were significant regional and rural-urban disparities in terms of small-welfare measures across the country (He Qiang 2003, p. 26).

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The State Statistical Bureau established twenty-five indicators in six areas for measuring the progress of a comprehensive small-welfare society (Jin Zhong 2006). The six areas are: (1) economic development, measured by four indicators, including per capita GNP at 28,000 yuan and a tertiary sector exceeding a 50 percent share; (2) social harmony, measured by five indicators, including a Gini coefficient between 0.3 and 0.4, and an urban-rural income disparity of less than 2.8:1; (3) quality of life, measured by five indicators, including per capita disposable income at 13,000 yuan and an Engels coefficient of less than 40 percent; (4) democracy and the legal system, measured by two indicators, including citizens’ satisfaction with democratic rights and an indicator of security larger than 100; (5) science and technology, measured by five indicators, including research-and-development investment at 2 percent of GDP and 10.5 average years of education; and (6) resources and environment, measured by four indicators, including aggregate fuel consumption at less than 0.84 standard coal tons per 10,000 yuan of GDP, and water consumption at less than 200 cubic feet per 10,000 yuan of GDP. Many of these indicators are objective, but some are subjective and imprecise, especially in the case of democracy and the legal system. In 2006 progress toward the comprehensive small-welfare society nationwide was assessed at 69.05 percent, or by area: 63.82 percent in economic development, 67.89 percent in social harmony, 64.60 percent in quality of life, 88.18 percent in democracy and the legal system, 76.25 percent in science and technology, and 69.05 percent in resources and environment (Study Team of the Statistical Science Research Institute 2007).

In summary, small welfare in modern China is a complex concept, and encompasses more than economic wealth. Deng Xiaoping set the target for building a small-welfare society in stages; the overarching strategy is economic growth first, followed by social equity and other national concerns.

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He Qiang. Suo you xiao kang shui ping he quan mian xiao kang de mu biao li wo men hai you [All indicators for comprehensive small welfare society, measuring how far we have gone]. Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science Edition) 2 (2003): 23–27.


The guiding ideology changed with introduction of the “8.7” poverty-alleviation plan of 1994. The name referred to the program’s primary aim, which was to lift 80 million people out of poverty in seven years. Focus was shifted to generating jobs and improving conditions for farmers to become self-employed. The target became poor areas more than individual farmers or households. Investments were channeled into bigger infrastructural projects, including power grids, and social development, such as primary education, cultural activities, and health care. The central government contributes by designing projects, providing technical support, hiring experts, and buying materials, while village and township committees organize the input. Participation is not voluntary at the individual level. According to official and other sources, farmers are remunerated for their time (Guojia Jihua Weiyuanhui 2005, Tao and Liu 2007), but not always, as other sources claim that

FOOD-FOR-WORK SCHEME

The food-for-work program is one of a large number of poverty-alleviation policies that the Chinese government has set up since the 1980s under different agencies and through different funding channels. It is mainly related to government investment in construction of rural infrastructure in poor areas. The program was initiated in 1994 and was organized and run by the State Planning Commission at central and local levels. It has developed in two stages and is still being implemented in the 592 designated poor counties as of 2008. Until the mid-1990s the focus of the program was to satisfy poor farmers’ basic needs or provide relief to victims of natural disasters by providing households with daily necessities in return for labor. Surplus agricultural labor power was used for building roads, building water-conservancy facilities, or developing local industry on a small scale. The focus was on relief, not on construction. The local government financed purchase of materials and tools, and the central government provided commodities like grain and cotton, which were distributed to the farmers. During this period, basic needs for food and clothing were satisfied for a great majority of the poor by this and other poverty-reduction programs.

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