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Rural Social Governance in the United States: History and Patterns

SUN, Maoran [1*]

[1] South China Institute of Frontier Science (Guangdong), China

***** SUN, Maoran is the corresponding author, E-mail: maoransun86@gmail.com***

Abstract: This article explores the history and patterns of rural social governance in the United States. Since the founding of the United States, rural social governance has undergone an evolution from autonomy to government intervention, and then to community participation. In the early days, rural society mainly relied on autonomous organizations and family networks for governance. With the advancement of industrialization and urbanization, the government has begun to intervene in rural governance and manage it through legal and administrative means. In recent years, community participation has gradually become an important form of rural governance, emphasizing residents' participation and decision-making in rural affairs. This article analyzes the characteristics and challenges of rural governance in different historical stages, and summarizes the patterns of rural governance in the United States.

Keywords: Rural Social Governance, The United States, Pattern.

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1 The Historical Policy Evolution of Rural Development in the United States

In the historical evolution of rural development policies in the United States, they are divided into four stages: preparation period, initiation period, improvement period, and maturity period. During different periods, the federal government adjusts rural development policies based on changes in urban and rural social characteristics, promotes rural social governance, and conforms to the needs of the times.

The first stage was the severe economic crisis that broke out in the United States and even the world from 1929 to 1935. In the context of the Great Depression, farm support and agricultural product support policies were the focus of agricultural policy. The Roosevelt administration promulgated the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act, which proposed a production restriction plan, an agricultural reserve regulation plan, and an expansion demand plan. In the demand expansion plan, a federal surplus relief company was established to address the high elasticity of food demand for low-income families. The Federal Emergency Relief Agency and Farm Safety Administration began providing financial support to rural families to maintain the living standards of farmers. The bill aimed to protect agriculture in rural America during the Great Depression.

The second stage was from 1936 to 1971, which marked the beginning of the rural development policy system in the United States. The landmark event was the Federal Government's Rural Electrification Act of 1936, which promoted rural electrification in rural society, established electrification cooperatives, and provided low-interest loans to rural cooperatives to cope with the economic recession during the Great Depression. The implementation of the Rural Electrification Act has given rural and other rural farmers the right to create and lead the construction and operation of their own electrification systems, accelerating the electrification process in rural areas of the United States. After the end of World War II, the Agricultural Act of 1948 was enacted, stipulating that local and state governments at all levels provided subsidies to farmers. After the enactment of the Act, the US government established various crop insurance and credit systems. At this stage, the agricultural policies of the United States mainly promote rural development through agricultural product supply, electrification construction, direct subsidies, and price support. However, from the perspective of rural social governance, there is less mention of various regulations and policies, and the government mainly considers economic policy support for rural areas, directly promoting rural development.

The third stage was from 1972 to 1989, during which the United States experienced a significant economic and social transition after World War II, with a large number of rural populations flocking to cities. The problems of rural economic backwardness and aging population gradually became prominent, and the development of cities and rural areas was imbalanced. To address these issues, the US government carried out a series of rural reforms, promoting the development of rural society through legislation, and improving the regulations and policies of rural governance. The Rural Development Law introduced in 1972 ushered in an era of institutionalization of rural policies, which clarified the leadership and central functions of the Ministry of Agriculture in rural development. Fundamentally, rural development during this period was led by the government. After 1972, various laws were introduced, giving full attention to issues such as rural infrastructure, services, housing, employment, and assistance to local governments.

The fourth stage is from 1990 to the present, which is a mature period for the development of rural policies in the United States. Economic globalization has brought huge challenges to rural development in the United States, and global trade has been liberalized, posing a risk of marginalization for small farmers. From 1990 to 2000, the role of federal government management was weakened. The 1994 "Rural Development Plan" was jointly undertaken by the Rural Housing, Public Utilities, and Commercial and Cooperative Development Bureau, establishing the organizational structure and management system for rural development functions. In 1993, when President Clinton took office, the United States significantly increased funding for rural development programs, emphasizing local innovation. The All Agriculture Services Agency issued rural development loans and provided sustainable development project support in areas such as rural business cooperation, housing, community public services, communication, water, and waste treatment. Over the past eight years, the poverty rate in rural areas of the United States decreased by 4.8%.

After going through these four stages, rural policies in the United States have formed a framework system led by the federal government, with the collaborative participation of the public, regional organizations, and local governments. It has shifted from a single agricultural product policy to a multi-party policy that supports farmer cooperation, environmental protection, employment promotion, and competitiveness cultivation. It has changed the traditional top-down governance system and instead relies on collaborative governance through top-down interaction. In this process, the center of power is diverse and "decentralized", with different social forces such as farmers, farmers, regional organizations, and local governments achieving rural co governance through collaborative cooperation.

2 Developed Grassroots Agricultural Mutual Aid Organizations in the United States Participate in Rural Social Governance

2.1 American Agricultural Cooperative

The American Agricultural Cooperative can provide us with some typical successful cases and lessons that can be learned. The American Agricultural Cooperative adheres to the purpose of serving farmers and safeguarding their interests. Its organizational structure is complete, functional, and widely distributed, and it strengthens interaction with the government. It plays an extremely important role in promoting rural agricultural integration and modernization of rural governance.

As an intermediary, agricultural cooperatives connect farmers with rural society, providing them with a wide window of contact with the outside world. At the same time, the cooperatives' own capabilities are constantly enhancing, not only enhancing their autonomy, but also effectively combating the infringement of industrial and commercial monopoly capital to a certain extent.

The American Agricultural Cooperative is a non-profit enterprise that does not aim to make money. It is a collective organization of agricultural workers, but there are also a small number of agricultural activities. For example, when there is a shortage of materials, the cooperative sells oil and food to its members at the original price, and its distribution principle is "profit sharing and risk sharing". The surplus distribution of the cooperative usually adopts a "patronage return" method.

The operation of agricultural cooperatives has four characteristics:

One is that cooperatives are supported by government policies and protected by laws. As early as 1937, the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act approved the organization of farmers through cooperative associations to enhance industry self-discipline through collective movements. The Agricultural Fair Trade Act recognizes the need for farmers to voluntarily join cooperative organizations, and any intervention in farmers' rights is contrary to public interest. The United States promptly modifies agricultural related laws based on changing agricultural situations, and numerous agricultural laws provide comprehensive legal protection for agricultural cooperatives in the United States.

The second is based on household management by farmers. Agricultural cooperatives are established on the basis of family management, and the means of production and property ownership of members who join the cooperative remain unchanged. Family farms are still independent economic entities that bear the responsibility for self profit, and their land or means of production are privately owned by farmers.

The third is to strengthen communication and cooperation among cooperative members. By holding various forms of seminars, exchange meetings, and visiting activities, cooperatives and members regularly exchange information, timely exchanging information on production technology, industry legislation, industrial policies, market fluctuations, international trade, and other aspects.

Cooperatives will collaborate and participate in public utilities in their respective fields, engage in import and export trade negotiations, participate in federal legislation and industry standard formulation, etc, This exchange and collaboration has promoted the development of agricultural cooperatives in the United States.

The fourth is the diversification of funding sources. The main sources of funding for agricultural cooperatives include membership subscription, financing based on patronage transactions, and bank loans. Another term for member subscription is the stock raising system, where members of a cooperative purchase corresponding stock based on their delivery volume; The financing of patronage trading is distributed through trading volume, and the surplus distributed by members with high trading volume also increases accordingly, which greatly increases the enthusiasm of members to invest in stocks; Bank loans are also known as borrowing capital, and the United States has a specialized agricultural credit cooperation system that provides loans to eligible cooperatives.

2.2 Rural Power Cooperative in the USA

The Rural Power Cooperative of the United States was born in the 1930s, mainly providing electricity to rural areas. Developing rural electrification was a major issue for rural residents' production and life. During the Great Depression, 90% of household farms faced the problem of no electricity available. The federal government provided concessional loans to cooperatives to help rural areas build and operate their agricultural electrification systems. A non-profit "shared power" model has emerged, where members of the cooperative purchase generators, transmission lines, and other equipment together to connect their family farms to each other.

Rural power cooperatives are grassroots organizations in rural areas of the United States. All rural cooperatives in the United States are non-profit enterprises and are exempt from income tax by the state. Their characteristics include:

One is strong political support. Congress and government departments have strengthened their support for the rural electrification movement by establishing specialized federal government agencies to continuously provide funding and technical support for the development of rural electrification, providing long-term low interest loans for power construction projects, and establishing and improving a standardized cooperative financial system.

The second is the long-term low interest policy. The government's provision of long-term low interest loans ensures the economic rationality of the rural power system providing electricity services to sparsely populated rural areas, eliminates the drawbacks of market economy neglect of rural electrification, and is a necessary prerequisite for the development of the rural electrification movement in the United States.

The third is the unique organizational form of cooperatives. 95% of rural power systems have established cooperatives for users to build, manage, and use themselves. This characteristic of cooperative organizations provides more opportunities for many farmers, affects their lives, and motivates them to actively participate in various activities of cooperatives. The basic aspects of cooperative organization form include: "one member, one vote system", where members own and manage themselves. The latter aspect is reflected in the election of the board of directors among members.

The fourth is to have the most representative organization. The National Rural Power Cooperation Association (NRECA) is a non-profit organization that represents industry interests. Its original intention was to establish an electricity system for rural areas in the United States, promote rural electrification, improve the livelihoods of rural farmers, solve household farm electricity problems, promote agricultural production efficiency, and provide technical guidance and talent training. And it will publish some professional magazines for reference by different professional and technical personnel within the association, carry out application research in important fields, strive for industry interests for agricultural cooperatives to the greatest extent, and provide suggestions and services to the rural power system in areas such as energy, environmental protection, economic and community development.

3 The Digital Strategy of Rural Governance in the United States

Based on the above historical evolution and research on grassroots organizations, the author supplements the digital aspect of rural governance in the United States.

The rural society in the United States is integrated with urban development, guided by public services, and adopts a governance model of urban-rural integration. Most of the rural areas are farmers' families, and the progress of rural society mainly relies on the construction of small towns. Rural areas in the United States are key to promoting agricultural prosperity and economic development, and rural governance is also an important link in highly integrated urban areas.

In this context, rural electronic connectivity in the United States has received strong support from the United States Department of Agriculture, which relies on public service telecommunications projects to invest over $700 million annually in providing or strengthening broadband services to communities with less than 5000 people. The agricultural cooperatives and rural power cooperatives mentioned above also collaborate in this link to expand high-speed electronic communication services to rural areas in the United States.

The United States is actively undergoing digital transformation in rural areas, and digital policies have been introduced to accelerate the promotion of digital rural governance. The strategic plan for the informatization construction of social public services, represented by public education and medical services, also promotes the development of digital rural governance from the perspective of digital rural public services.

The coverage of digital governance in rural areas in the United States is relatively broad, involving multiple aspects such as rural e-government, rural education, rural healthcare, and rural food safety.

In terms of rural e-government, rural governance in the United States relies on the country's mature national government processing system to establish a digital resource sharing system. Rural residents can easily access information through Data.gov, which is a public open data platform. At the level of rural governance, not only the federal government, but also rural private enterprises, rural grassroots organizations, and rural farmers are involved, effectively improving the efficiency of rural governance.

In terms of rural education, a rural digital education model has been formed, represented by online blended learning for rural K-12 school students. State virtual schools provide various teaching types for rural students, mainly including online courses and other services, course selection projects, fully online schools, alliance projects, and regional service institutions. The curriculum design is personalized and diversified, providing customized education services for rural adolescents.

In terms of rural healthcare, the US government has established the Office of Remote Medical Development (OAT), which is specifically responsible for the application of remote medical technology in rural and other remote areas, with a focus on developing remote healthcare. Despite the popularity of digital medical care by the U.S. government, the overall medical level in rural America is average. This is because 20% of the population of the United States lives in rural areas, and rural doctors account for 9% of the total number of doctors in the country. The allocation of medical resources is not coordinated, and most American doctors are unwilling to stay in remote areas. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 in 2019, the rural medical system in the United States is on the verge of collapse under the circumstances of imbalance in income and expenditure and the continued deterioration of the epidemic.

4 What is the step?

This article explores rural development policies in the United States from two perspectives: historical evolution and participation of grassroots agricultural mutual aid organizations in rural social governance. The rural development policy in the United States has gone through four stages, constantly adjusting to meet the needs of the times. In terms of rural governance, grassroots agricultural mutual aid organizations such as the American Agricultural Cooperative play an important role, with the purpose of serving farmers and safeguarding their interests. The organizational structure is complete, functional, and widely distributed, and interaction with the government is strengthened to promote the integration of rural agriculture and modernization of rural governance.

Firstly, the government should strengthen its guidance and support for rural governance, promote the development of rural society by formulating policies, providing funding and technical support, and encourage and support farmers to participate in rural governance, establish their own organizations and institutions, and enhance their discourse and decision-making power. Secondly, it is necessary to strengthen multi-party cooperation in rural governance, including the forces of the government, enterprises, social organizations, farmers, and other aspects, to form a collaborative governance situation and jointly promote the development of rural society. Finally, implement a digital strategy to improve the efficiency of rural governance.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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About the Authors

SUN, Maoran

Director of the Social Science Research Centre at South China Institute of Frontier Science (Guangdong), with research interests in sociology, classical philosophy, ESG, and digital transformation systems.

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