
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of Rural Elderly Care Strategies: “Policy Guidance-Resource Integration” Pathway

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| ABSTRACT

With the development of China's social economy and the aging population, rural areas are facing increasingly challenging elderly care issues due to labor outflow and economic development lagging behind urban areas. To address this problem, this study collected a large amount of relevant literature, summarized and analyzed existing research, and explored pathways to effectively improve the quality of rural elderly care services. Through interdisciplinary theoretical analysis and practical research, the study proposed the “Policy Guidance-Resource Integration” pathway, confirmed its effectiveness, and elaborated on specific implementation methods and underlying rationale. The research findings demonstrate that the “Policy Guidance-Resource Integration” pathway can effectively address some of the current issues in rural elderly care, offering new insights and guidance for academic research and policy formulation in the field of rural elderly care.

| KEYWORDS

Rural elderly care models, Diversified elderly care, Multi-Center governance system, Policy innovation, spiritual care

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

From December 19th to 20th, 2023, the Central Rural Work Conference was held in Beijing. The conference emphasized the need to prioritize the development of agriculture and rural areas, promote integrated urban-rural development, and accelerate the modernization of agriculture and rural areas to better advance the construction of Chinese-style modernization. Currently, the development of agriculture and rural areas remains a weak link in China's modernization process, with significant disparities in economic development and infrastructure between rural and urban areas and a significant outflow of rural labor to urban areas. Additionally, with the general increase in life expectancy and decrease in fertility rates, the aging population is becoming more pronounced, particularly in rural areas. Furthermore, the health status of elderly individuals in rural areas is not high, and there are many issues in rural elderly care facilities and environments. In general, rural areas face insufficient development, an increasing proportion of the elderly population, and an outflow of the working-age population. In this context, providing high-quality elderly care services in rural areas and making them universally accessible to elderly individuals in rural areas has become an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. This issue has attracted widespread attention and has become a research focus in multiple fields.

According to the Seventh National Population Census, the population aged 60 and above and 65 and above in rural areas of China reached 120 million and 90 million, respectively, accounting for 23.81% and 17.72% of the total population, which is 7.99% and 6.61% higher than in urban areas. The total number of migrant workers in rural areas is over 290 million, with the growth rate slowing down. The degree of population aging in rural areas is higher in central and western regions with significant outflows of population, facing heavier elderly care pressures compared to urban areas. Moreover, rural areas encounter multiple challenges, including significant regional disparities, resource shortages, inconsistent service quality, and insufficient coverage.

Based on the existing research surveys, the following issues can be summarized regarding elderly care in rural areas of China: a) The elderly population exhibits lower levels of health, a higher prevalence of chronic diseases, significant comorbidity characteristics, and inequalities in health status (Lu & Sun, 2024). b) In terms of the environment, rural areas face challenges such as inadequate basic infrastructure and deficiencies in age-friendly features (Lu & Sun, 2024). The degree of age-friendliness is low, and there are many shortages of medical facilities and healthcare personnel (Li & Liu, 2024). Public elderly care institutions have high vacancy rates, and nursing homes often adopt closed management practices (W. Liu, 2024). c) In the aspect of social support, rural areas experience insufficient training for medical service personnel and a low level of social security (Jiang et al., 2023). Medical insurance fails to fully exert its influence (Yao et al., 2014). There are limitations in social security funds and supervision, with low coverage of commercial and other pension insurance, leading to inadequate pension funds for the elderly (Zhang et al., 2021). d) Psychologically, the decreasing importance of the elderly's role due to the transition in traditional social structures hinders their mental development (Zhang & Qin, 2024). Changes in village and family environments lead to superficial social interactions for the elderly, disrupting the cultural ecology of respecting the elderly and significantly impacting their psychological well-being (Liu, 2022). e) Insufficient attention is given to special groups, hindering the integration of relocated elderly individuals into new environments (Liu, 2023). Families of elderly individuals with advanced age and disabilities struggle to provide sufficient economic support and lack professional care (Yang et al., 2024). Empty-nest elderly individuals become disconnected from society, with some being compelled to opt for self-care (Jiang et al., 2024).

1.2 A Review and Critical Analysis of Relevant Literature

1.2.1 The Literature Review

Numerous deficiencies exist in the current elderly care services in rural areas, and a considerable amount of research has proposed improvement strategies and measures for enhancing the quality of rural elderly care services from the perspectives of policy formulation and resource integration. This study has selectively reviewed and summarized some literature as follows:

From the perspective of policy formulation, the vigorous development of inclusive elderly care services is the current policy direction. Some relevant studies suggest that the formulation of local elderly care policies and the allocation of resources need to align with local fiscal capacity, and the most important aspect of an inclusive elderly care service system is to actively respond to the public demands of the majority of elderly individuals as an intermediate layer (Li, 2023). The government should adopt a top-down approach and coordinate the advancement from the perspective of an overall coordinator, focusing on coordinating the synergy among entities, capital, talents, and technology (Li & Tao, 2023). Optimizing the role of fiscal subsidies, establishing an efficient elderly care service workforce, and leveraging information technology to enhance the level of administrative services (Zhou, 2024). It is necessary to strengthen government accountability, enhance the overall governance framework of rural elderly care security, and adhere to a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance mechanism (Wang & Liu, 2023).

From the perspective of resource integration, the key to the development of rural mutual elderly care services lies in the clear delineation of responsibilities among diverse stakeholders, with social forces typically contributing as professional entities to compensate for the lack of expertise in villages (Yang, 2024). Establishing a hierarchical integrated system for the supply and demand of medical and elderly care services will greatly enhance the utilization of resources in rural areas (Sun, 2024). By fully leveraging the power of diverse stakeholders and integrating existing resources through interaction and cooperation, the autonomous governance capacity of rural elderly care can be enhanced, leading to the creation of a new rural elderly care order that is low-cost, high-benefit, and sustainable (Tian & Liu, 2024). The intrinsic logic and optimization path of elderly care resource integration stems from the motivation of the elderly population to exchange surplus resources for insufficient resources, with the supply content influenced by the resource ceilings and floors of government, market, social, and family entities (Li et al., 2023).

1.2.2 An Evaluation of the Literature

In conclusion, enhancing the quality of elderly care services in rural areas has become a focal point of research in various fields. There has been ample research on the current living conditions of the elderly in rural areas, including their health status and economic well-being, which has identified the problems faced by rural elderly individuals and the deficiencies and challenges in the development of elderly care in rural areas. The main issues faced by rural elderly individuals include a) low levels of infrastructure and medical facilities; b) failure of elderly care institutions to fulfill their intended roles; c) neglect of the mental health needs of rural elderly individuals; d) inadequate social security levels, failure of commercial insurance to play a role, and lack of supervision; e) insufficient attention to special groups; f) lack of tailored policies and insufficient participation of stakeholders. These issues are also the key challenges that need to be addressed to enhance the quality of elderly care services in rural areas. In terms of strategies, some studies focus on the positive role of government public policies in improving the quality of rural elderly care services, exploring the relationship between socio-economic development and policy changes, and examining how government public policies can address existing issues in rural elderly care and achieve sustainable development. Another set of studies focuses on the impact of resource integration on elderly care services, emphasizing the importance and rationale behind corporate investment, social capital, and family resource integration in enhancing the quality of rural elderly care services. However,

research on the combined effects of policy guidance and resource integration on enhancing the quality of elderly care services in rural areas is still relatively limited.

1.3 The Research Methods Employed and the Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 Research Methods

Building upon the critical analysis of the above literature, this study, from the perspective of public management, aims to establish a "Policy Guidance-Resource Integration" pathway for enhancing the quality of elderly care services in rural areas by integrating multidisciplinary theories. It aims to conduct exploratory research on this pathway, with a specific focus on the synergistic effects of policy guidance and resource integration. The study will delve into how the government can formulate policies to achieve higher administrative efficiency and how policy tools can be utilized for integrating resources and directing targeted investments in rural elderly care services. Additionally, the research will examine the interrelationships and mutual influences between policy guidance and resource integration in enhancing the quality of elderly care services in rural areas, analyzing possible pathways to achieve a synergistic effect greater than the sum of its parts. The ultimate goal is to provide new perspectives and methods for the improvement of elderly care services and policy formulation.

Given the abundance of existing research on the enhancement of elderly care services in rural areas spanning various fields and directions and the availability of numerous referenceable cases, this study adopts a combined approach of literature review and case study analysis. Through a literature review, a systematic understanding of the current research status, theoretical frameworks, and development trends in rural elderly care can be obtained, providing theoretical support and knowledge foundation for the study. By integrating relevant case analyses, the study aims to uncover the implementation effects and issues of current rural elderly care policies, offering practical references and empirical support for theoretical analysis. This research conducts a comprehensive exploration of rural elderly care issues from both theoretical and practical perspectives, discussing the feasibility and effectiveness of the "Policy Guidance-Resource Integration" pathway, thereby possessing high credibility and persuasiveness.

1.3.2 Research Objectives

In the research on enhancing the quality of elderly care services in rural areas, policy guidance, and resource integration are considered crucial mechanisms for driving improvements. Policy guidance can provide direction and support for elderly care services, guiding and promoting their development. Simultaneously, resource integration can accelerate capital flow, address practical issues through targeted government resource allocation, reduce the costs of rural elderly care services, and enhance resource utilization efficiency.

Currently, research on the combined effects of policy guidance and resource integration on enhancing the quality of elderly care services in rural areas is relatively limited. This study establishes a "Policy Guidance-Resource Integration" model, aiming to explore the expected and actual effects of policy guidance and resource integration in improving the quality of elderly care services in rural areas. By conducting an in-depth analysis of relevant literature on policy guidance and resource integration, combined with practical case studies, the study seeks to provide valuable insights for governments, businesses, and society to formulate more effective policies for continuously enhancing the quality of elderly care services in rural areas. Additionally, this research will serve as a theoretical foundation and reference for future studies, contributing to the sustainable development of elderly care services in rural areas.

2. The Theoretical Foundation of the "Policy Guidance-Resource Integration" Pathway

2.1 The Definition of the "Policy Guidance-Resource Integration" Pathway

The "Policy Guidance-Resource Integration" pathway refers to the construction and quality improvement of the rural elderly care service system, where the public management departments take the lead in establishing a decentralized elderly care system. Through policy guidance, the pathway aims to integrate resources from both within and outside the rural areas, attract investments, effectively consolidate resources to address practical issues, ensure their utilization efficiency, enhance the quality of rural elderly care services, and establish a sustainable development pattern.

2.2 The Theory of Public Governance and Administrative System Reform

After the New Public Management movement in the United States in the 1980s, the public governance model, represented by the couple Rose and Ostrom, emerged. Governance in the public governance model is an institutional framework characterized by a multi-centered order. This institutional framework originates from the government, while the governance entities involved in the practical process go beyond the government. Governance cannot solely rely on the government and administrative orders to handle social affairs; instead, the government needs to utilize new technologies and innovative policy tools to provide guidance. Public organizations in the 21st century are faced with complex issues, informed stakeholders, and information flow, necessitating a corresponding open systems leadership perspective (Yeboah-Assiamah et al., 2019). Public policy management exhibits stubbornness, and the institutional complexity of governance further exacerbates its practical dilemmas. Public management

adopts different institutional combinations in different contexts, which can enhance its role in different socio-economic, cultural, and political environments (Singh, 2024).

Developing countries have largely adopted or adapted public sector reform interventions based on the New Public Management (NPM) model (Knox & Sharipova, 2023). Similarly, the public governance model originating in the West also holds significant reference value for public sector reforms in China. Specifically, in the context of rural elderly care, China needs to enhance the quality of elderly care services by establishing a multi-centered order. Due to fiscal pressures and the spiritual needs of rural elderly individuals, the construction of rural elderly care models should not be limited to the government and public policies alone. Instead, the government and policies should serve as guidance, with the government playing a central role in the multi-centered order, directing resource allocation, and integrating and utilizing resources at various levels to enhance the quality of elderly care services.

Public governance theory acknowledges the ambiguity of boundaries and responsibilities in addressing social and economic issues. In rural elderly care, the roles and responsibilities of families, society, and the government exhibit significant ambiguity in their boundaries. On the one hand, due to the influence of traditional culture, older individuals have traditionally been the center of power in the family in traditional societies, and the tradition of respecting and caring for the elderly has been passed down based on self-imposed moral constraints (Zhang & Qin, 2024). Elderly individuals exhibit a strong dependence on their families, and families and descendants are essential avenues for providing spiritual support for the elderly. On the other hand, rural elderly care differs from urban elderly care. The significant migration of the population to cities has led to the absence of the role of “descendants” in rural families, weakening the support from families and resulting in a large number of empty-nest elderly individuals. The current rural elderly care facilities, management systems, and economic foundations are unable to meet the demand of rural elderly individuals for high-quality care. It is imperative for the government to use policy tools and public management methods to improve the current situation and enhance the quality of elderly care services by attracting and managing external investments.

During the transitional period of China's governance restructuring, the theoretical proposition advocates for the transformation of the government from an “omnipotent, omnipresent” entity to one that effectively manages the relationship between the government and the market. In the context of rural elderly care, constrained by limited resources and administrative capacity, the government is unable to achieve comprehensive and meticulous management. Therefore, the government should play a key role in macro-level management, utilizing innovative policy tools to achieve institutional and regulatory governance. The “policy guidance-resource integration” approach involves constructing institutions and rules through policy tools, leveraging policy guidance and leadership, while gradually establishing a semi-marketized elderly care model in rural areas with government-led regulation and deep societal participation.

The government's macro-management and policy guidance provide a favorable environment for the input of social resources by ensuring the safety and profitability of the investment environment through incentive policies and guiding resources to spontaneously flow from urban and resource-surplus areas to areas in need. Under a system where goals are clearly defined, the government avoids excessive intervention. Resource integration involves mobilizing available resources in rural areas and newly introduced external resources. Currently, the main challenge in establishing the rural elderly care market lies in the difficulty of capital mobility in rural areas, where investments do not yield sufficient returns. The first step in resource integration requires the government to consolidate available rural resources, plan for development prospects, utilize natural and human resources in rural areas to develop agriculture and cultural tourism, create more job opportunities and channels for capital flow, provide more asset support for the development of rural elderly care industry by rural elderly individuals and families. Additionally, a diversified rural economic system can reduce the vulnerability of rural society, enhancing its ability to cope with natural disasters and economic shocks. Upon completing the first step, the capacity of the rural elderly care economic investment pool increases, leading to higher-level material and spiritual demands from rural elderly individuals for products and services in the elderly care industry. This signifies that the rural elderly care industry is capable of absorbing more resources and achieving profitability. At this stage, the government needs to integrate external resources, guide the orderly allocation of resources, and avoid waste and redundant construction.

2.3 Theoretical of Social Security Reform

The level of social security is mainly determined by three factors: the stage of economic development, demographic structure, and economic cycle fluctuations. Among them, the stage of economic development and demographic structure are long-term factors, while economic cycle fluctuations are short to medium-term factors. Rural areas in China generally have lower economic development levels compared to urban areas, indicating a lag in the economic development stage. Looking at the demographic structure of rural areas, the aging population in rural areas is more severe than in urban areas. Additionally, due to the migration of young and middle-aged labor force to cities, rural areas exhibit a population distribution with more at the extremes and fewer in the middle, characterized by a higher proportion of juvenile and elderly populations and a lower proportion of young and

middle-aged populations. Furthermore, some rural elderly individuals also bear the responsibility of caring for the younger population. In terms of economic cycles, the macroeconomic cycles are mainly influenced by the complexity of the international situation and the slowdown in China’s economic growth. Rural economies are also affected by factors such as unstable agricultural product prices and frequent natural disasters resulting from climate change. Considering the above three aspects, rural areas face disadvantages compared to urban areas, leading to a significantly lower level of social security in rural areas. The level of social security in rural areas and its influencing factors are illustrated in Figure 1.

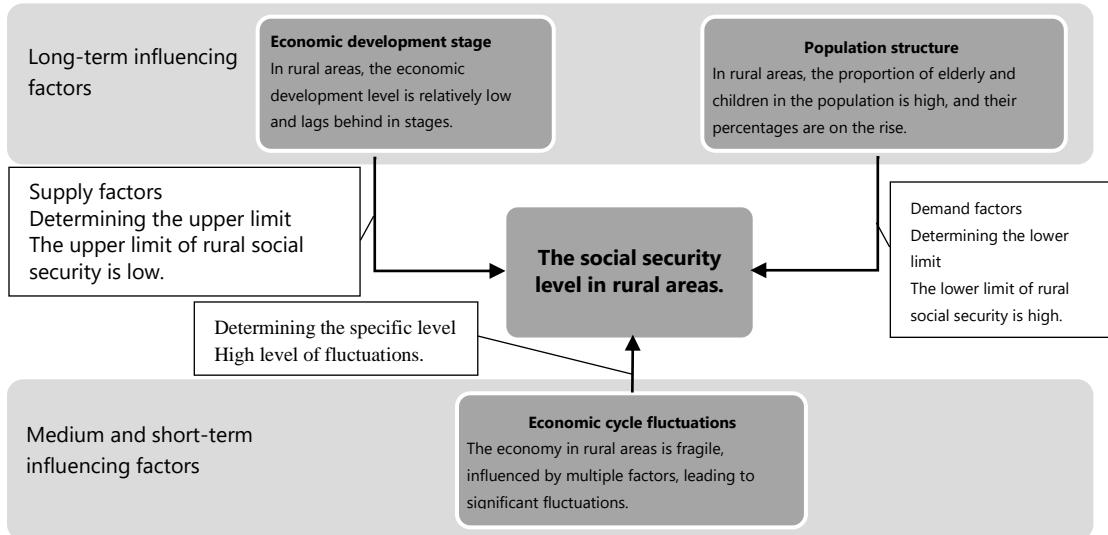


Figure 1. The level of social security in rural areas and its influencing factors

In rural areas, a prevalent phenomenon is the low level of social security and the low level of commercialization. A survey reveals that the average monthly total amount of pensions, various types of old-age insurance, and subsidies received by rural elderly individuals is 528.84 yuan, which is 1616.03 yuan less than that received by urban elderly individuals (Jiang et al., 2023). A significant proportion of elderly individuals in rural areas rely on the minimum living allowance, with over half of unmarried elderly individuals considering the minimum living allowance as their primary source of livelihood (Jiang et al., 2023). The current situation of a low upper limit and high lower limit of social security levels in rural areas restricts the allowable fluctuation range. Given the instability of economic cycles in rural areas, characterized by significant fluctuations, there is a risk of breaching the lower limit, which could have a substantial impact on elderly individuals dependent on social security for their livelihood. Discrepancies and imbalances in social security levels between rural and urban areas have the potential to influence social stability.

In order to improve this situation, reforms to the social security system are necessary to enhance the level of old-age subsidies for rural elderly individuals. The impact of population aging on social security expenditures is primarily manifested in the rapid expansion of pension payments due to the increasing number of retirees. This can lead to financial stress on pension funds, making it challenging for the government to allocate sufficient funds to provide higher levels of old-age subsidies to the large population of rural elderly individuals. In the current practice of social security reform, key measures in the field of elderly care include the implementation of a multi-pillar system, increasing tax rates, lowering payment levels, reforming funding models, enhancing eligibility criteria (such as contribution years and retirement age), and introducing long-term care insurance. From the perspective of the “policy guidance-resource integration” pathway, social security system reform represents a specific practice within this pathway. In terms of policy guidance, it involves the development of innovative policies to achieve fairness and solidarity in social security, reforming funding models, and implementing a series of measures to increase revenue and reduce expenditure. Regarding resource integration, it primarily involves the construction of a multi-pillar system, increasing the involvement of commercial insurance, attracting social capital, and directing investments. Therefore, the “policy guidance-resource integration” pathway serves as a feasible strategy to enhance the level of elderly care services in rural areas.

3. The Empirical Basis of the “Policy Guidance-resource Integration” Pathway

3.1 The Shortcomings of the Traditional Rural “Government-household” Elderly Care Model

In rural China, the commercialization level of elderly care services is low, with the majority of areas relying on the “government-household” elderly care model. Typically, families bear the majority of the elderly care responsibilities, providing material and emotional support to the elderly, while the government plays a supportive role. However, in cases where families are absent or unable to fulfill their responsibilities, the government assumes a significant portion of the elderly care duties, with the remaining

responsibilities falling on the elderly themselves. Due to factors such as population mobility and the increasing aging population, this model faces numerous challenges, manifested in the following three aspects:

3.1.1 Public Expenditure

Based on the microeconomic model of public growth by Brown and Jackson, income level, population density, population size, and aging level all influence public expenditure. With the rapid development of the Chinese economy and society and comprehensive poverty alleviation, residents' income levels have generally increased, leading to a corresponding increase in demand for public goods and services. Regarding the product of rural elderly care services provided by the public sector, the impact of population size on public expenditure can be summarized by the following congestion function:

$$A_k = \frac{X_k}{N^\alpha} \quad (1)$$

The formula is as follows: A_k represents the utility services of public products for rural elderly care; X_k denotes the activities used in producing rural elderly care products; N represents the population size, and α is the congestion index. Since rural elderly care services are neither pure public goods nor private goods, the value of α falls between 0 and 1. As the population ages, the demand for social security expenditure in society will significantly surpass that of general society.

Furthermore, in the exploration of the impact of population aging and fiscal pressure on public expenditure, studies have shown that in regions with a high level of economic development, an increase in the aging population significantly raises basic public service expenditure, while a nationwide increase in fiscal pressure notably decreases basic public service expenditure (Tian et al., 2021).

Currently, with China's economic growth rate slowing down, complex international situations, and increasing government fiscal pressure, the aging population in rural areas is gradually deepening. Continuing to maintain the traditional "government-household" elderly care model in rural areas may lead to further increases in government fiscal expenditure or a reduction in the level of public goods and services provided.

3.1.2 Intergenerational Support

Due to the decrease in the birth rate, future young and middle-aged populations will generally bear greater elderly care pressure. In rural areas, factors such as an increase in the migrant workforce, labor shortages, inadequate coverage of elderly care insurance, and rural-urban population mobility may lead to a decline in the ability and willingness of descendants to provide support. Some families with only one child will face heavier elderly care pressure, exceeding the capacity of the "government-household" elderly care model.

On the other hand, rural elderly individuals typically have a strong attachment to their hometowns, and a certain proportion of rural out-migrants choose to reside in urban areas, posing a question of where the elderly should receive care. For descendants, urban living offers higher economic income, and relocating elderly parents to urban areas can provide them with a higher standard of living and better medical services. However, for rural elderly individuals, the urban environment is unfamiliar, and they tend to be more conservative and find it difficult to adapt to city life. Meeting the spiritual needs of rural elderly individuals in urban areas is challenging: firstly, their skills may have no outlet, leading to feelings of uselessness; secondly, the economic and cultural differences between urban and rural areas make it hard for elderly individuals to integrate; finally, urban areas lack the public spaces and social interactions needed for the spiritual care of the elderly. However, if elderly individuals choose to stay alone in rural areas, their spiritual care needs may go unmet due to being far from their descendants.

3.1.3 The Scope of Services and the Level of Service Provision

Due to constraints in administrative capacity and administrative costs, the government's coverage of rural elderly care services is limited, with low levels of personalization and inadequate support for special groups such as elderly people who have been relocated and those with advanced age-related disabilities. The government lacks sufficient financial and human resources to establish a comprehensive service scope and a detailed service network. Additionally, the bureaucratic and hierarchical structures within the government hinder its flexibility. The lack of professional and large-scale service teams makes it difficult for the quality of elderly care services provided to rural areas to meet the requirements for high-quality development, leading to high vacancy rates in publicly operated elderly care institutions. Some government-provided rural elderly care services prioritize aesthetics over actual needs, focusing primarily on material aspects and failing to effectively address the spiritual needs of the elderly (Q. Liu, 2024).

Delegating excessive social functions to the government can lead to overexpansion of government size, resulting in overstaffed and low administrative efficiency, weakening the government's macroeconomic regulation capabilities and falling short of the requirements for modernization of national governance capabilities and governance systems. Moreover, the government assuming too many social functions may lead to budget expansions and excessive resource allocation and utilization without fully leveraging its role, thereby reducing the efficiency of resource utilization.

3.2 The Drawbacks of the Enterprise-led Model

The enterprise-led model, in which enterprises provide the majority of rural elderly care services and facilities in an industrialized manner with a profit-oriented goal, is implemented in limited regions. The main drawbacks of this model include the following points:

3.2.1 The Enterprise-led Model is Characterized by High Costs

From current practices, it is observed that in the enterprise-led industrialized model, aimed at profitability, the charges for elderly care services are generally high, making it unaffordable for some rural elderly individuals and their families. Some enterprises exhibit certain levels of waste in facility construction, advertising, and promotion, which increases the overall service costs. Moreover, some enterprises fail to adequately consider local conditions when providing elderly care services and facilities, resulting in services that surpass the needs of rural elderly individuals and exceed local consumption levels. For instance, in existing studies, “Sunset Red” in District W, Changde City, Hunan Province, is a privately-run elderly care institution catering to a larger scale of individuals with higher economic incomes, with a planned total investment of 120 million RMB. On the other hand, “Jiale Yuan Shouxing Apartment” is a public welfare project initiated by the municipal government, serving as a universal elderly care institution, with a total investment exceeding 26 million RMB. The majority of elderly care institutions charge self-care elderly individuals over 1500 RMB per month and charge disabled elderly individuals over 3000 RMB per month. However, the majority of rural households surveyed in this study can only afford caregiving costs for fully disabled elderly individuals that do not exceed 2000 RMB per month (Yin & Ban, 2023).

3.2.2 The Enterprise-led Model Fails to Meet the Spiritual Needs of the Elderly

The enterprise-led industrialized elderly care model tends to emphasize material conditions and facility investments, focusing on economic benefits while neglecting the spiritual needs of the elderly. The services provided are oriented towards standardization and homogenization, failing to meet the diverse spiritual needs of the elderly; the recreational activities offered may not align with the preferences of the elderly; the sense of “being needed” is not adequately addressed for the elderly; and due to the presence of caregivers and other staff, social interactions for the elderly tend to remain superficial due to considerations such as avoiding suspicion.

3.2.3 The Enterprise-led Model Exhibits Uneven Resource Allocation and Low Efficiency in Resource Utilization

Due to its profit-driven nature, the industrialized elderly care model tends to prioritize providing services in economically developed regions. Rural families and elderly individuals in economically developed areas have higher purchasing power and can afford higher prices, allowing enterprises to generate higher profits. Economically underdeveloped regions are not attractive to enterprises as they are not profitable, making it difficult for these areas to access the resources provided by enterprises for elderly care services. This model leads to further concentration of resources, exacerbating regional inequalities. Additionally, due to the high fees charged by this model, there is a high vacancy rate and poor operational performance. For example, in Zone H of Zhoukou, Henan, there are 14 privately-run elderly care institutions with a total of 1123 beds, but only 623 elderly individuals are actually residing, resulting in a bed vacancy rate of 58.6% (Yin & Ban, 2023).

3.4 The Practice of the “Policy Guidance-resource Integration” Pathway

In the research conducted by Tian and Liu (2024) on the construction of rural elderly care communities, Z Town, under the mobilization and guidance of the town party committee, achieved the organic integration of three types of resource allocation modes: government input, village collective resource integration, and entry of social capital. Through the establishment of a multi-dimensional cooperative win-win model, ensuring the sustainability of mutual elderly care.

Zhou's (2024) empirical study on integrating resources to promote the high-quality development of rural elderly care services indicates that the integration of rural elderly care service resources relies on the coordinated efforts of the party and government, policy support, collaborative cooperation, and pilot demonstration. Under the coordination of the party and government, various resources are mobilized to participate in the development of elderly care services, with relevant policies and systems providing support for the construction and operation of elderly care service carriers, as well as policy guarantees for the participation of various entities and resources.

The above two studies and their cases demonstrate that through the establishment of a multi-centered system with public management departments as the main body and the integration of resources using policy tools and targeted investments, the quality of rural elderly care services can be effectively enhanced. This indicates that the “policy guidance-resource integration” approach is a feasible path in practice.

4. The Synergistic Effect and Logical Pathway of “Policy Guidance-resource Integration”

4.1 The Synergistic Effect of “Policy Guidance-resource Integration”

The “policy guidance-resource integration” pathway for rural elderly care represents a collaborative innovation model. In this pathway, public management departments occupy a central and commanding position. In practice, the government, as a policy maker and macroeconomic regulator, adjusts tax policies and formulates and implements supportive policies to guide and regulate the development of rural elderly care services. With a strong governmental attribute in China, the general public tends to trust the government while harboring some distrust towards other social organizations. Therefore, the integration of resources from all parties must be government-led, with the government playing a directing role in the implementation process of the “policy guidance-resource integration” pathway.

The government needs to integrate financial resources, social organizations, and corporate resources to form a multi-party cooperation sharing mechanism. It is essential to manage the relationship with the market and utilize this collaborative innovation model to maximize the integration of resources from all parties, leverage their respective strengths, and achieve resource complementarity and synergies, thereby realizing a cooperative effect where “1+1>2”.

In the “policy guidance-resource integration” pathway, the main participants include the government, enterprises, social organizations, rural families, and the elderly themselves. These five key participants need to play their respective roles effectively, working in synergy under the government's overall coordination.

4.1.1 The Role of the Government in This Pathway

The role of the government mainly manifests in the following four aspects:

Policy Formulation: By formulating relevant policies, the government leads and regulates the direction and standards of rural elderly care services. Utilizing institutional and regulatory management to establish a sound rural elderly care service system, such as setting up standards for elderly care services, relevant occupational certification examination rules and professional standards, subsidies for enterprises providing elderly care services in different regions, and different regions' elderly care service fee standards, in order to promote the high-quality development of elderly care services.

Financial Support: By providing financial support for the construction and sustainable development of rural elderly care services, including funding for the construction of elderly care institutions, using financial investments to prevent monopolies and guide the healthy development of the elderly care industry; providing subsidies for elderly care industries in remote areas, training and work subsidies for elderly care service personnel, and elderly care subsidies for rural elderly people.

Resource Integration: Leading the integration and sharing of resources from all parties, establishing and regulating mechanisms for multi-party cooperation involving social organizations, enterprises, etc. Playing a coordinating role to promote the effective integration and collaborative cooperation of resources from all parties, achieve optimal allocation and complementary advantages of resources, and make targeted investments based on integration.

Supervision and Evaluation: The government needs to supervise the operation of this collaborative mechanism, focusing on supervising fund management, elderly care institutions, and the services they provide to ensure quality and safety and safeguard the rights of the elderly. In the implementation of policies, regular evaluations of the policy implementation effects are necessary to prevent policy failures.

4.1.2 The Role of the Enterprises in This Pathway

Enterprises play the following roles in this study, categorized into elderly care enterprises, investment enterprises, and technology enterprises:

Elderly Care Enterprises: Engage in providing and constructing rural elderly care services, offering specialized and diversified elderly care products by leveraging their strengths, innovating service models, enhancing quality and standards, expanding service coverage, and meeting the diverse needs of the elderly.

Investment Enterprises: Provide financial support for rural elderly care services, invest in driving the development of related industrial chains, supplement government finances, and accelerate industry development and competition.

Technology Enterprises: Technology enterprises can introduce advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, big data, etc., to enhance the intelligence and aging-adaptability of elderly care services and improve service efficiency and quality. Through technological means, they can provide elderly people with more convenient and personalized elderly care services, bridge the "digital divide" for the elderly, improve their quality of life, and enhance their adaptability to social development.

4.1.3 The Role of the Social Organizations in This Pathway

Social organizations, such as non-profit organizations and volunteer groups, play a vital role in providing community-based and caring elderly care services, including companionship, psychological counseling, cultural and entertainment activities, etc. They complement the shortcomings of the government and enterprises in the service sector, offering elderly people more warm and humane services.

By adopting a win-win cooperation model, social organizations and enterprises jointly participate in the construction and development of rural elderly care services. Through collaboration, they establish a virtuous cycle, achieve synergies in resource utilization, and contribute to the overall improvement of elderly care services.

4.1.4 The Role of the Rural Families in This Pathway

The role of rural families is to provide economic and emotional support to the rural elderly, playing a crucial role in companionship and alleviating the mental stress of the elderly, building upon the traditional "government-household" elderly care model.

4.1.5 The Role of the Rural Families in This Pathway

From the perspective of the rural elderly themselves, they can make full use of their skills to engage in activities or work within their capabilities, which not only helps improve their living conditions by earning some economic rewards but also provides them with a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

4.2 The Logical Pathway of "Policy Guidance-resource Integration"

The specific implementation logic of the "policy guidance-resource integration" pathway is illustrated in Figure 2.

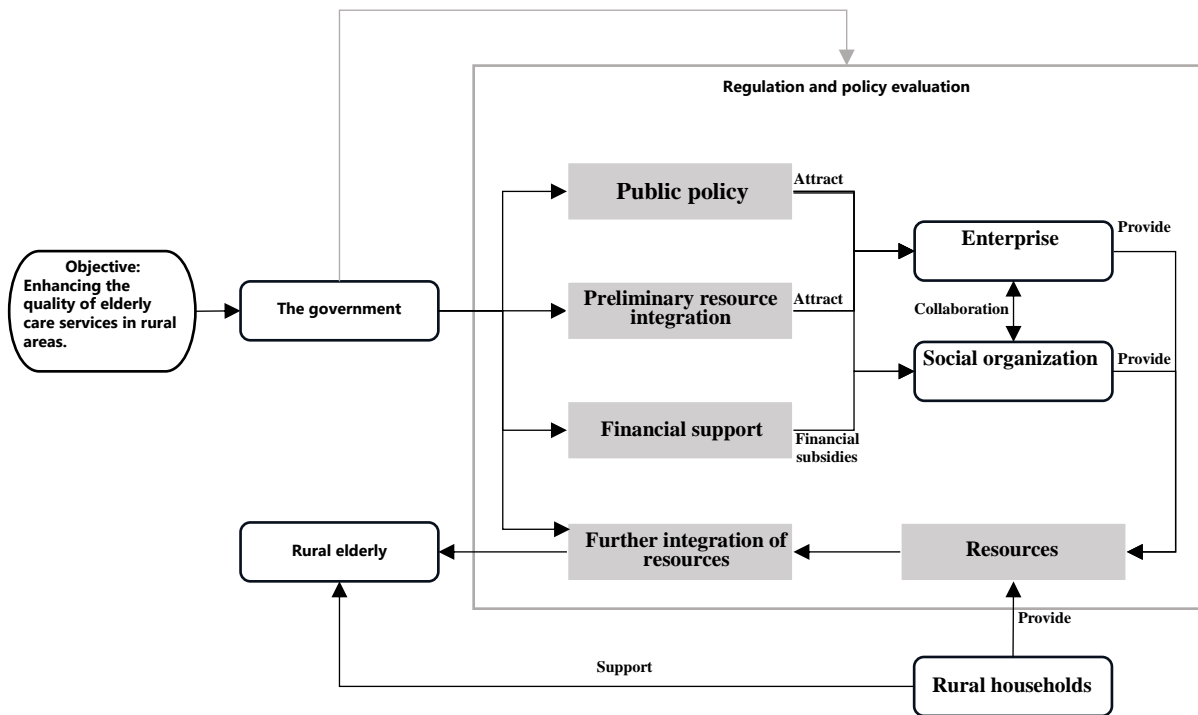


Figure 2 "Policy Guidance-Resource Integration" path

The government first formulates relevant policies and clarifies the development direction, goals, and standards of rural elderly care services, laying the foundation for the entire development path. Subsequently, the government provides financial support to

promote the construction and development of rural elderly care services. The government needs to develop available rural resources, complete initial resource integration, promote overall rural economic development and make the development prospects of the rural elderly care industry attractive to a certain extent.

Enterprises and social organizations participate in the provision and construction of rural elderly care services under the incentives and guidance of government policies. The government attracts various resources from external enterprises and organizations in rural areas, including funds, technology, manpower, etc. At the same time, some family resources from rural households are also incorporated into this resource pool.

Under the leadership of the government, resource integration and sharing are carried out; all parties cooperate to form a multi-center governance system, establish smooth channels for information and material exchange, jointly promote the development of rural elderly care services, and achieve efficient utilization of limited resources. After integration, diversified and difficult-to-directly-use resources are transformed into targeted and directly usable resources, which are provided to rural elderly individuals after integration, improving the quality of elderly care services.

Finally, government supervision and evaluation implement the entire process of policy guidance-resource integration path.

5. Conclusion

This study comprehensively analyzed the current situation of elderly care in rural areas by synthesizing multiple literature and research analyses. Combining theoretical knowledge, the study proposed the "policy guidance-resource integration" path, demonstrating the feasibility of this path from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The study also discussed the specific implementation methods of the "policy guidance-resource integration" path.

The government, through policy guidance, can provide direction and direct or indirect support for elderly care services. By implementing incentive measures and regulatory feedback mechanisms, combined with emerging information technology, the government can visualize the layout of rural infrastructure and public services, enhance the economic level and socio-economic resilience of rural areas, accelerate the interconnection of urban and rural infrastructure to enable urban areas to support rural development and narrow the urban-rural gap. This can facilitate the bi-directional flow and integration of factors such as talent, capital, and equipment between urban and rural areas, promoting the development of the rural elderly care industry. At the same time, resource integration can bring more resources from both inside and outside rural areas to the government. By integrating government funds, corporate investments, social capital, and household capital, among other resources, and processing them, affordable and high-quality elderly care services can be provided to rural elderly individuals, achieving high-quality and sustainable development of elderly care services in rural areas.

Achieving a universal improvement in the quality of rural elderly care services through the "policy guidance-resource integration" path also requires the following:

- 1) Public management departments need to break rigid boundaries, flexibly allocate resources across regions, and reduce the differences in the quality of rural elderly care services caused by imbalanced development between regions.
- 2) Promote administrative system reforms and transform government functions to meet the requirements of the new era, establish a service-oriented government, introduce social resources into public management, and manage them scientifically, efficiently, and transparently.
- 3) Enhance the sense of responsibility of entrepreneurs, encourage enterprises to develop products for the elderly, promote the age-friendliness of smart devices, and stimulate the enthusiasm of enterprises to participate in the construction of rural elderly care services.
- 4) Adopt a gradual decision-making model to gradually improve the quality of rural elderly care services, reducing the impact of environmental changes on conservative elderly individuals.
- 5) Pay attention to the spiritual needs of rural elderly individuals, encourage children to extend their companion time, provide sufficient public space and social interaction environments for the elderly, and transform elderly care facilities so that the elderly can contribute their own value and feel needed.

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