



# Policy Implementation Deviation of Grass-roots Government and Correction Countermeasures from the Perspective of Principal-Agent

**Qiongyang Liu**

School of Business (School of Management), Northwest University of Political Science and Law, Xi'an 710122, Shaanxi, China

**Abstract:** The effective implementation of policies is the key for the government to achieve its governance goals. As the front line of policy implementation, the efficiency and quality of grass-roots governments directly affect the policy effect. However, the grass-roots level is faced with difficulties such as perfunctory, substitution, mechanical implementation and slow implementation, which leads to the deviation of policy results and objectives, and brings difficulties to policy implementation. Therefore, based on the principal-agent theory, this paper aims to analyze the causes and influencing factors of policy implementation deviations of grass-roots governments, and propose targeted corrective countermeasures to promote the effective implementation of policies.

**Keywords:** Policy implementation deviation; Entrusting agent; Grass-roots government

## 1. Introduction

The effective implementation of policies is the key for the government to achieve its governance goals. As the "last mile" main body of policy implementation, the effectiveness of grass-roots governments directly determines the effectiveness of public policy governance. However, in practice, deviations such as perfunctory execution, replacement execution and mechanical execution frequently occur at the grass-roots level, which not only make policies deviate from expectations, but even contradict the requirements of superiors, and become a prominent problem hindering the modernization of China's governance system and governance capacity. China's policy implementation relies on the multi-level principal-agent system of "central-provincial-city-county-township", and the information asymmetry between the superior and the subordinate can easily lead to "moral hazard"[1]. The system defects such as overweight of the superimposed pressure system, heavy punishment and light reward of the incentive mechanism, inadequate supervision and accountability, and factors such as limited resources at the grass-roots level and priority of interests jointly aggravate the deviation. The existing research provides the basis for analysis, but the systematic cracking path of grass-roots deviation under multi-level principal-agent still needs to be deepened. Therefore, it is of great significance to sort out the causes and put forward countermeasures based on the principal-agent theory to promote the implementation of grass-roots policies and improve the efficiency of government governance.

## 2. Deviation behavior of grassroots government policy implementation and its causes

### 2.1 Deviation behavior of grassroots government policy implementation

As the direct subject of policy implementation, the grass-roots government is prone to deviations such as perfunctory, substitution, mechanical execution and slow execution due to objective factors and its own view of political achievements, interests, abilities and team allocation. These behaviors will lead to cumbersome administration and rigid system, reduce the credibility of the government, hinder the application of new ideas and technologies, breed corruption and increase the opacity of decision-making.

#### 2.1.1 Perfunctory execution

Under the pressure-based system in China, after policies are passed on to the grass-roots level by level, the requirements increase and the pressure intensifies, and the grass-roots level are prone to perfunctory implementation due to self-interest psychology, resulting in behaviors such as "face-saving projects" and "failure to work"[2]. For example, in rural revitalization, the grass-roots level invested in building landmark buildings such as cultural squares to cope with the inspection, but failed to implement the policy concept; Under the policy of reducing the burden at the grass-roots level, affected by the "political tournament", local officials are still fiercely competitive and overweight, and the pressure is transmitted to the grass-roots level, making them tired of coping and perfunctory[3]. These deviations mostly stem from the unreasonable performance appraisal system. For their own interests and achievements, grass-roots officials use the asymmetric information between

superiors and subordinates to beautify the image of their jurisdiction, and there are also behaviors such as pursuing task figures and reporting charts.

### **2.1.2 Slow execution**

Nowadays, the policy implementation environment is becoming more and more complicated, and it is no longer feasible to rely on one department alone to implement it, which requires the coordinated governance of the government. It covers vertical and horizontal collaboration between governments and departments, as well as the participation of multiple subjects. Only collaboration can efficiently achieve goals and realize information exchange and resource sharing. However, the grass-roots government still hasn't got rid of the thinking of "fighting alone", and there are some problems, such as fragmentation, imperfect information channels and lack of sense of cooperation. As a result, the grass-roots level can't quickly mobilize resources in policy implementation, and then it is affected by many factors, resulting in the deformation of policy implementation.

### **2.1.3 Mechanical execution**

Grass-roots governments are often tired of coping with policies, ignoring the profound meaning of policies, only mechanically copying superior instructions, ignoring the implementation environment and resources, lacking flexibility, and even "one size fits all"[4]. For example, in the "double reduction" policy, the grassroots did not investigate the current situation of local education or conduct small-scale experiments, so they required schools to reduce the burden across the region, prohibiting assignment of homework or after-school tutoring, and some schools charged for follow-up after-school services, which instead increased the burden of students' families; In the implementation of rural revitalization policies, the grass-roots units are unable to formulate supporting policies and publicize ideas due to insufficient policy awareness, so they can only implement regulations mechanically. Coupled with the lack of appropriate incentives, grass-roots civil servants hold the mentality of "I'd rather not be an officer than have an accident", unwilling to innovate, and still rigidly implement the original policy[5].

### **2.1.4 Replacement execution**

Replacement is a common phenomenon in grass-roots policy implementation, which lies in the contradiction between grass-roots government's own interests and policy requirements. If the policy is favorable, it will be actively implemented, if the cost and benefit are equal, it will be passively implemented, and if the cost is greater than the benefit, it will be replaced with self-interested content or even not implemented[6]. "There are policies at the top and countermeasures at the bottom" is a typical manifestation. The grass-roots level responds to the superior on the surface, but in fact it "sells dog meat with sheep's head", and self-interest regulations may also be added, causing the implementation results to deviate from expectations. However, the information asymmetry between superiors and subordinates makes it difficult for superiors to supervise in an all-round way and gives grass-roots units the opportunity to exploit loopholes.

## **2.2 Analysis of Causes of Deviations in Policy Implementation by Grassroots**

According to the principal-agent theory, the principal and agent are prone to conflicts of interest and information asymmetry, which breeds "moral hazard"[7]. In China's bureaucracy, the superior and subordinate governments have a "principal-agent" relationship, and the superior entrusts the subordinate to implement policies. Because of asymmetric information and imperfect incentive mechanism, grass-roots governments are prone to deviations when implementing policies.

### **2.2.1 Information asymmetry problem**

In the principal-agent relationship, information asymmetry is particularly prominent in policy implementation. The higher-level government subcontracts the policy step by step, and finally it is implemented by the grass-roots government. However, too many levels can easily lead to distortion, omission or filtering of policy transmission, and it is difficult to obtain accurate and complete information at the grass-roots level[8]. More importantly, the entrusting party is at the end of the information chain and can only passively receive information; The agent has one-hand execution information and has an absolute advantage. The implementation of the policy depends entirely on the report of the agent, and the superior has no direct channel to obtain first-hand information. For its own interests, the agent often conceals unfavorable information and transmits favorable information, which becomes an important incentive for policy implementation deviation, and eventually leads to policy results deviating from expectations.

### **2.2.2 Lack or deficiency of incentive mechanism**

Incentive is the key means of organization. Under China's pressure-based system and political championships, the grass-roots level is faced with layer-by-layer overweight, and political promotion is such as step-by-step elimination competition. The superior determines rewards and punishments and shares responsibilities with "political tasks", and the results are included in the assessment[9]. In order to produce a "report card", each level of government raises its goals when publicizing

policies, and the goals at the grass-roots level are too high, which makes the grass-roots level perfunctory implementation to avoid accountability and choose negative responses based on the logic of "avoiding responsibility". Moreover, the incentive system has clear responsibility objectives and joint and several liabilities. If problems occur, relevant personnel will be held accountable. It is also linked to promotion, and the grassroots level bears double pressure. In addition, the positive incentives are insufficient, and the material, spiritual incentives and economic compensation for policy innovation are not in place, which leads to the negative attitude of the executors and the difficulty in stimulating their activities.

### **2.2.3 Imperfect supervision and accountability mechanisms**

At present, China's accountability procedure is not perfect, the channels of public supervision are not smooth, and communication is blocked. It is difficult for the government to know the true opinions of the public and the opinions cannot be effectively fed back. At the same time, there is a lack of unified supervision and evaluation mechanism, which makes it impossible to evaluate the government's public opinion management behavior and use it as the basis for rewards and punishments, resulting in the government's weak sense of responsibility and poor sense of cooperation, and only focusing on its own responsibilities and interests. Without a legal and reasonable supervision and accountability system, it is difficult to judge the process and results of policy implementation. Coupled with information asymmetry, superiors can only rely on the data reported by subordinates, and cannot grasp the real situation. Reasonable supervision needs to cover before, during and after the event, but at present, the supervision is mostly incomplete, and the goal is achieved only by accountability afterwards. Although it can warn officials, the damage to public interests has often been caused and is irreparable.

### **2.2.4 Conflict between local interests and central interests**

In the principal-agent relationship, it is very common for the principal and the agent to have conflicts of interest. Because people are rational self-interested people, they will try their best to seek the greatest interests for themselves in the process. Sometimes their own interests will conflict with those of their superiors, which will lead to a game between the central and local governments. Grass-roots cadres are usually guided and entrusted by multiple clients from different levels at the same time, such as the central government, local governments, and other stakeholders. Different clients will have different goals, interest preferences and responsibilities, etc. In multiple entrustment relationships, grass-roots governments may have conflicts of interest when facing contradictory clients[10].

## **3. Corrective countermeasures from the principal-agent perspective**

Based on the principal-agent theory, the superior gives the subordinate autonomy to implement policies, which gives birth to informal behaviors at the grass-roots level; Combined with the assumption of rational self-interested people, the grass-roots level balances the accountability of superiors, local and self-interests through games, and seeks low-risk logic, resulting in deviation in policy implementation. This paper analyzes the four causes, and puts forward corrective measures accordingly.

### **3.1 Improve the information transmission mechanism**

Policy formulation, implementation and evaluation are complex and systematic tasks, and information is the core resource. It is very important to establish suitable information communication channels. At present, the higher authorities mostly rely on the information reported by them to assess the grass-roots level. Because of information asymmetry, the grass-roots level is easy to conceal unfavorable content. Superiors should use big data, cloud platform and other technologies to supervise grassroots implementation and break through closed information paths; Establish a feedback mechanism for citizen participation, broaden horizontal communication channels, and rely on big data systems to collect and publish information and public opinions. Information disclosure should follow the principles of unity, truthfulness, timeliness, continuity and citizen orientation, which not only helps superiors to grasp the truth, but also protects the public's right to know and opens the channels of public opinion communication.

### **3.2 Build an effective incentive and restraint mechanism**

Local officials in China have the dual characteristics of "economic participants" and "political participants", and are often caught in fiscal and taxation competition and promotion game[11]. However, the government incentive mechanism includes clear joint and several liability, and relevant personnel who have problems in the field are punished. In addition, the number of external promotion places is limited, resulting in officials passively avoiding and unwilling to take risks[12]. In designing the performance appraisal mechanism, it is necessary to reduce the negative impact of promotion incentives, establish a reasonable system, not assess the superficial content, focus on the ability and satisfaction of serving the public, and change the indicators from "rigid" to "flexible"; Strengthen positive incentives, reward policy innovation, encourage independent and flexible implementation at the grassroots level, ensure that innovation is unfettered, provide human,

financial and financial support, and stimulate the enthusiasm and creativity of implementation.

### 3.3 Strengthening supervision and accountability systems

It is very important to establish and improve the supervision, evaluation and accountability mechanism. It can not only help the government judge whether the behavior meets the public's expectations and reflect on the shortcomings, but also investigate the responsibilities of various departments and personnel in the incident response, optimize their functions and enhance their sense of responsibility. It is necessary to establish a bottom-up supervision and evaluation mechanism, improve communication and opinion expression channels, and ensure the accurate transmission of public opinion; At the same time, we will improve the accountability mechanism, clarify the responsibilities of all subjects, treat those who make mistakes equally, put an end to "back-pot men", and reward outstanding ones as the basis for promotion. In addition, it is necessary to strictly supervise the executors, clarify the implementation contents and objectives, strengthen their sense of service and responsibility, and improve the ability of grass-roots policy implementation.

### 3.4 Enhance policy transparency and public participation

The traditional government control mode should be changed, so that the government can become the "helm" rather than the "paddle"[13]. Under the background of diversification of social governance subjects, it is necessary to attract non-governmental organizations and other forces to participate in policy implementation. The government's continuous coordination ability is crucial, and good coordination can reduce the impact of external environment. It is necessary to break the division of departments, compartments and regions to avoid fragmented management; It is also necessary to ensure smooth communication channels, establish an open and transparent information platform, improve the public accountability system, and encourage the public to intervene in public affairs in an orderly manner. In the implementation of policies, target groups should be involved, express their demands and opinions, urge policy optimization, and promote their passive acceptance to active participation and cooperation.

## 4. Conclusion

The effective implementation of grass-roots government public policies is very important. On the one hand, it faces the people directly, and its behavior represents the image of the country; On the other hand, the implementation of policies is the embodiment of the will of the state, and if there is a deviation, it will directly affect the people. In practice, the grass-roots level faces difficulties such as perfunctory, replacement, mechanical implementation and slow implementation, which leads to the deviation of policy results and objectives and hinders the implementation of policies. Therefore, based on the principal-agent theory, this paper aims to analyze the causes and influencing factors of policy implementation deviation of grass-roots government, and put forward targeted corrective countermeasures. At the same time, it is necessary to establish a reasonable mechanism and group an excellent team to maintain the authority and effectiveness of policies and correct the deviation in time.

## References

---

- [1] Dong Le. Research on the implementation deviation of Guangzhou's online ride-hailing policy [D]. South China University of Technology, 2023.
- [2] Zhou Xueguang, Lian Hong. The governance model of the Chinese government: a "control right" theory [J]. Sociological Research, 2012, 27 (05): 69-93 +243.
- [3] Zhou Li'an. Research on the promotion tournament model of local officials in China [J]. Economic Research, 2007 (07): 36-50.
- [4] Zhang Longhui, Zhao Zequan. Changes, hidden worries and efficiency improvement paths of urban risk governance under the technical governance paradigm [J]. Qiushi, 2022, (03): 43-58 +110.
- [5] Yang Zhongtai, Lu Xuteng. Grassroots government public policy implementation deviation and correction mechanism in rural revitalization [J]. Liaoning Economy, 2022, (03): 15-20.
- [6] Xia Guanlan. Research on improving the execution power of township governments [D]. Hunan Agricultural University, 2017.
- [7] Yang Hongshan, He Muyu. Incentive compatibility and value co-creation: the action logic of platform-based social governance [J]. Southeast Academic, 2025, (05): 205-215
- [8] Meng Tianguang, Zheng Siyao. Information theory of national governance: a theoretical perspective of information politics [J]. Political Science Research, 2023, (06): 117-130 +233-234.
- [9] Li Yanzhong, Zhang Xinxin. Four-dimensional analysis of grassroots governance from the perspective of overall gov-

ernance [J]. Journal of Wuhan University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition), 2025, 27 (03): 45-57.

[10] Xiao Di. The generation mechanism and governance strategy of grassroots formalism from the perspective of principal-agent theory [C]//Hebei Province's key high-end think tank "Hebei Province Public Policy Evaluation Research Center", Hebei Province Public Policy Evaluation Research Base, Hebei Province Science and Technology Innovation Think Tank. Proceedings of the 13th Public Policy Think Tank Forum and "Xiongan Construction and Development International Symposium". School of Public Administration, Yanshan University, Hebei Province Public Policy Evaluation Research Center, 2023:668-673.

[11] Xue Wenjian. Research on the generation logic and operation of strong and weak incentives in public sector performance management [D]. Lanzhou University, 2025.

[12] Wang Jianqin, Gui Tao. Using the reform of cadre and personnel system to drive the improvement of grassroots governance efficiency [J]. Journal of Party and Government Cadres, 2025, (05): 3-14.

[13] Li Xiaobing. Analysis of the role of the government in the high-quality development of public cultural services--Taking Shenzhen as an example [J]. Special Zone Practice and Theory, 2025, (04): 120-128.

## Author Bio

Qiongyang Liu (October 2000-), female, Han nationality, native of Huating City, Pingliang City, Gansu Province, Northwest University of Political Science and Law, master's degree, research interests: social governance and community governance, public crisis management.