

# New Rural Community Governance: Analysis Framework and Comparative Case Study

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## Abstract

The new rural community is the end node of the new urbanization system. It is a brand-new area for farmers' production and life in rural revitalization. The governance of new rural communities is an important aspect of promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. This paper proposes a definition and characteristics of new rural community governance, presents an analytical framework of new rural community governance based on embedding theory, and classifies various types of new rural community governance practices into four types: in-embedded, out-embedded, de-embedded, and mutually embedded integrations. From the perspective of dynamic development, different new rural community governance types may transform into each other. We investigate three new rural community governance cases in Zhejiang China, analyze their implementation processes, and discuss the problems faced and trends of development. The case studies exemplify the new rural community governance analysis framework proposed in this paper.

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## Keywords

New rural communities, community governance, comparative case study, embedding theory

## Introduction

In 2017, the Chinese government report pointed out that the issues of agriculture, rural areas, and farmers are fundamentally related to national planning and people's livelihood,

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and that the solution to the "three rural issues" must always be the top priority of the whole country, and the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy was proposed for the first time. In October of that year, it was also proposed to give priority to the development of agriculture and rural areas, and to comprehensively promote the revitalization of the countryside (CNR, 2017). In 2021, the No. 1 document of the central government was released under the title "Comprehensively Promoting the Revitalization of the Countryside and Accelerating the Modernization of Agriculture and Rural Areas." That document became the 18<sup>th</sup> No. 1 document guiding the work of the three rural areas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Subsequently, the National Bureau of Rural Revitalization of the State Council was officially authorized to strengthen the guidance and coordination of rural revitalization. In implementing the rural revitalization strategy, new rural community governance, as the basis for promoting the development of rural revitalization, has become an important driving force for farmers in the new era to build a prosperous society in all aspects (Chaina – cer, 2021). From the practical results, the new rural communities have changed farmers' lifestyles, and farmers' demands for social public services are becoming more and more diversified. The result is that traditional social management methods can hardly meet the needs of social development. New rural community governance has also become a frontier issue in rural community governance.

The so-called new rural community refers to the new or rebuilt community, with farmers as the main body in urban-rural integration and the implementation of rural revitalization strategy. It is different from traditional rural villages and urban communities and introduces revolutionary changes in farmers' production methods, lifestyles, and public services for farmers. Therefore, new rural communities are considered the end node of the new urbanization system and a new field for farmers' production and life in rural revitalization. New rural community governance is an important aspect of promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. New rural community governance refers to the activities of government organizations, community autonomous organizations, resident units, non-profit organizations, and community members in new rural communities to jointly manage community public affairs, maintain good running order of the community, and promote the healthy development of the community. Zhuang (2018) summarized that rural communities are gradually transforming from decentralized to empowered governance. Zhang (2019) and Zhao (2017) combined governance theory and self-organization theory to construct rural community consultative governance mechanisms and cooperative governance mechanisms in rural communities, respectively, to study the issues. They pointed out that, on the one hand, the growth of community self-organization drives the transformation of community governance structure. On the other hand, community self-organization is an effective tool to improve community governance performance because of

its inherent characteristics of cooperation and participation. Using methods of spatial awareness and spatial analysis and combining the concept of inclusive governance, Huang (2020) explored the governance paths of grassroots community problems such as habitat conflicts, interpersonal relationships, and public conflicts in new rural communities, taking a particular county in northern Anhui, China as an example.

In summary, the current research focuses on the governance of new rural communities starting from the micro-perspective and then assessing the current reality. Some inspiring results emerged from the analysis, but there remain two shortcomings. Firstly, there is a lack of highlights and breakthroughs at the theoretical level, no relevant analytical concepts and frameworks are proposed, and there is a certain degree of separation from governance practice. Secondly, there is a lack of scientific and systematic research. The relevant research lacks a description of how to combine new rural community construction and governance with the local economy, culture, and environment to guide the practice of community construction and governance. This paper probes the current models of new rural community governance, the characteristics and governance logic of different governance models, and the limits and future development trends of new rural community governance through in-depth systematic research on the connotation, characteristics, and types of new rural community governance. The results should provide theoretical support for new rural community governance.

## **Definition and analytical framework**

### **Characteristics of new rural communities**

The new rural community is different in connotation from the new countryside in the general sense and is a fundamental change from the past. To realize effective governance of new rural communities, we need to understand the connotation of new rural communities. We must note that a new rural community is neither a simple renovation of the original village nor a regrouping of many villages. Instead, the concept refers to new residential housing and service facilities that are relocated and merged within a certain period of time in accordance with unified requirements and unified construction; the unified planning and adjustment of the industrial layout, the formation of a new community of farmers' production and life, the formation of a new rural residential model, service management model and industrial pattern (CNR, 2017). Therefore, we cannot simply interpret new rural communities as "small villages merging into large villages," nor can we simply equate new rural communities with farmers moving into buildings. The new rural community is to realize the construction of beautiful countryside through new urban planning and construction to

improve farmers' income and living standards so that farmers can live the same life as urbanites. In general, the basic characteristics of new rural communities are as follows:

The size and population of the community are different. New rural communities are generally planned by integrating several villages, so they are generally larger in population area than the original rural communities. The population of a larger new rural community is equivalent to a central town, and the population of a smaller new rural community is equivalent to a large village.

It has a complete infrastructure. Although the new rural community is not quite a city, it has the same infrastructure as the city in all aspects, such as water and electricity supply, communication network, shopping, and entertainment. These infrastructures provide community residents with convenient and quick living needs. Nevertheless, the new rural communities do not have the perfect infrastructure as the cities due to various reasons such as transportation, geography, and history.

It has a good public service facility system. Compared with traditional rural communities, new rural communities have been significantly improved in terms of culture and education, medical and health care, employment security, and welfare benefits, essentially becoming urbanized. In recent years, the slogan put forward in building new rural communities across the country is to achieve the equalization of public services between urban and rural areas. Although there are some differences from place to place, it will ultimately be the basic direction for the development of new rural communities.

The community governance is diversified. Traditional rural communities are mainly governed by villagers' committees, while new rural communities not only have community grassroots organizations and community management committees but also have established various economic cooperatives, community welfare organizations, and community associations. They can all play the role of the main governing body in new rural communities, reflecting the management mode of multi-governance, ensuring the effective governance of new rural communities, and maintaining the harmony and stability of new rural communities. The harmony and stability of the new rural communities are maintained.

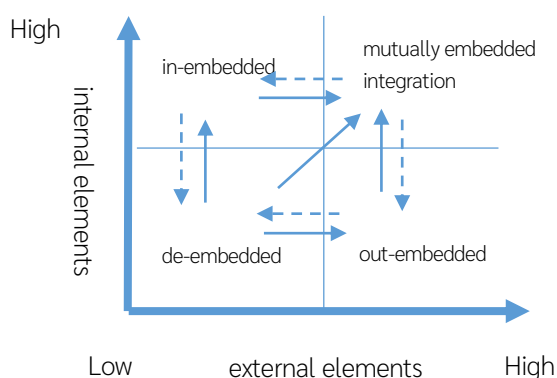
The community has a comfortable living environment. While traditional rural areas enjoy the beauty of the countryside, they also suffer from the plight of garbage and sewage, which have been successfully solved in the new rural communities. Generally speaking, new rural communities pay more attention to the improvement of village appearance and the beautification and greening of the environment, especially for the treatment of garbage and sewage, which are generally designed with special treatment sites and treatment facilities. In addition, the new rural communities have hardened roads, a beautified environment, cleaner living conditions, and brightened street lights, which can be said to have a beautiful environment and pleasant living and working conditions.

## **An embedding theory-based analysis framework**

Since the rural revitalization strategy was put forward, rural community governance has been moving further, and rural community governance has been diversified. The focus is on the government vis-a-vis community constituents outside the government. The argument is that the government needs to change its traditional function, and the center of social governance needs to move down to the grassroots, emphasizing the community-based governance model. Li (2011) has explored the mechanism of mutual empowerment between the government and the community, as well as the mechanism of mutual guidance between the government and the community in the construction of ecological civilization. Li (2015) proposed that rural community governance needs to integrate governance and promote the modernization of rural community governance. Fu (2016) proposed that the local government presents the phenomenon of multiple co-governance in grassroots governance. Each region should carry out the corresponding reform model and means according to its own situation. Li (2019) pointed out that rural community modernization involves building a collaborative system of community governance, as well as effective use of information for intelligent governance. This shows that rural community governance continues to embed deeper and deeper, and various elements (such as government and society) begin to merge with rural community life, continuously influencing and impacting on rural community governance. All these studies indicate that government and society should assume their respective responsibilities in China's rural community governance system, and enhance governance performance through mutual cooperation and interaction.

The theory of embeddedness reflects the relationship between one or more related events and aims to explain the logic of their mutual influence and action. Under the guidance of the social governance concept of "co-construction, co-governance, and sharing," the current rural community governance has evolved from the past unitary management to multi-subject co-governance. The forces (e.g., government, enterprises, and social organizations) have been gradually incorporated into the unified social governance system. At the same time, elements (such as villagers and cultural traditions endogenous to rural communities) are also playing a role and participating in the governance of rural communities. Each embedded element can be classified into two types of internal and external elements according to the way they are generated. The internal elements are endogenous elements of the village, including the village sages, distinctive culture, self-run community enterprises, etc. These elements are embedded in the process of rural governance through certain forms and have an impact on rural governance, but not every village can endogenously generate such internal elements, and the generation of internal elements is related to the history of the village itself and the external governance thrust, so it is contingent and inherited. With the continuous promotion of rural revitalization strategy,

external forces (such as government, society, social organizations, and universities) are constantly embedded in the process of rural community governance, which has a profound impact on rural community governance. At present, these external elements are bound to intervene in rural community governance, and the depth of embedding in each village is different, making it inevitable and uneven. This paper divides the current innovative practices of new rural community governance into four main types based on the different degrees of embedding of internal and external elements in rural community governance practices (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Embedding Structure of Community Governance

Source: Author

(1) The in-embedded pattern of rural community governance means that the internal elements are embedded to a greater extent than the external elements, while the external elements are embedded to a lesser depth and breadth and can only provide as much help and support as they can. The internal self-generated forces of rural communities dominate, guide, and control the direction of rural community governance. Although this type of embedding is less than the external embedding type and does not occupy the mainstream, it is worth encouraging and guiding. This type of rural community governance embedding pattern can mobilize the village forces so that the forces (originally in the emotional state) can be awakened and transformed into a rational and active state, thereby maximizing the exploitation and utilization of the resources. This type of embedding has stronger independence and less dependence on external forces, which is conducive to giving full play to the wisdom of the villagers, increasing villagers' participation in rural community governance affairs, and maximizing villagers' self-governance. However, this type also has defects. Rural communities are relatively lacking in governance resources such as human, financial, and material resources, coupled with the fact that the internal elements of villages

have their own limitations, making it difficult to break through the state prescribed by the unique cultural background of villages. If we only rely on the self-generated power of villages without guidance and regulation, rural community governance will fall into disorder and chaos, and it is difficult to develop to a more advanced stage, thus failing to further promote rural community governance.

(2) The out-embedded type of rural community governance embedding pattern means that the external elements are embedded to a higher degree than the internal elements, and the internal elements lack corresponding governance resources and capabilities. They are in the position of being influenced and dominated and can only cater to the embedding rhythm of the external elements to work together and promote the process of rural community governance. In the current policy context of continuous emphasis on rural revitalization, this type of embedding is the most common type. The external forces of rural community governance have strong governance traction and are embedded in rural communities through certain forms and methods, so those rural communities can govern with the resources of external forces and continuously improve and develop themselves. However, the “out-embedded type” also has disadvantages. Too much involvement of external elements can lead to too much dependence of internal elements on external elements, which restricts the generation and development of internal elements and affects the sustainability of rural community governance.

(3) The mutually embedded integration type has a stronger degree of both internal and external embedding. Both internal and external elements are embedded to a higher degree, and no part is in a weaker position, which is close to the equilibrium state. This embedding pattern of rural community governance is extremely conducive to promoting rural community governance, and both endogenous and external governance forces of villages are stronger, achieving balanced interaction in the process of jointly promoting rural community governance without imbalance so that the strength of both sides can be maximized.

(4) The de-embedded type is the weak embedding of both internal and external elements. Under this de-embedded pattern of rural community governance, there is a lack of relevant governance forces embedded in rural communities internally and a lack of forces to guide and help rural community governance externally, so the de-embedded type of rural community governance pattern is most unfavorable to the further improvement of rural community governance. Nowadays, the state pays more and more attention to rural community governance and always insists on promoting it at a high level, striving to continuously improve the lives of people in rural areas. As a result, the de-embedded type is becoming less common in the current practice of rural community governance. Various

elements are constantly embedded in various aspects of rural community governance, promoting the realization of good governance in rural communities.

It is worth noting that the above discussion of new rural community governance types is only a static description of a certain governance model for a specific period of time. As the governance process evolves, the original governance type may be transformed to other types (the transformation path is shown by the arrow in Figure 1). For example, the mutually embedded integration, which is the ideal model of new rural community governance, may be transformed into a negative direction due to the influence of certain factors that lead to the reduction of the embeddedness of its internal or external elements and become in-embedded or out-embedded, or even degenerate into a de-embedded type as time progresses. For the in- and out-embedded types, there are two possible transformation paths at the same time: they may become in-embedded by optimizing the existing governance model in a positive direction, or they may encounter resistance to transform in a negative direction and become de-embedded. Both paths are possible. Thus, the question is: Can the de-embedded type be transformed into the in- embedded or the out-embedded, or even leap to the mutually embedded integration? In our opinion, under the national vigorous rural revitalization system optimization and the promotion of successful cases in pilot communities, it is also theoretically feasible for internal and external elements to be embedded at the same time to form a pluralistic and balanced governance.

## **New Rural Community Governance Practice: Multiple Case Analysis**

Nowadays, the Government of China pays more and more attention to rural community governance, always insisting on a high level of promotion and striving to continuously improve the lives of people in rural areas. At the same time, the de-embedded type is becoming less and less common in the current practice of new rural community governance, and it is difficult to find supporting cases in reality. Therefore, in order to further explain and verify the rationality of the analytical framework of new rural community governance constructed above, we selected three cases of new rural community governance innovation in Zhejiang Province as typical representatives of each new rural community governance model for comparative analysis. The three cases have obvious characteristics of new rural community governance and have been implemented for more than 12 months since official implementation. The information mainly comes from the author's empirical investigation of the communities concerned, which includes three aspects: First, internal documents of the grassroots government and communities; second, the author's interviews with village committee cadres, property staff, and residents, as well as the author's participatory observations; and third, public reports of authoritative media recommended by community cadres. In order to improve the external validity of the cases, we adopted the method of

ensuring the adequacy, authenticity, and accuracy of the case materials by drawing on the triangular inter-evidence method in which the interview recordings were compiled by different researchers and verified by each other, the interview transcripts were confirmed by the interviewees, and the first draft of the paper was submitted to the main person in charge of the relevant communities for review.

### **In-embedded**

In December 2017, Case A was identified by the Ministry of Civil Affairs as the first batch of national rural community governance experimental areas. In the past four years, the county government has taken the demonstration creation as a carrier to improve the governance mechanism, promote the mentorship system, focus on improving the level of rural community governance and service capacity, build a governance pattern of co-construction and shared governance, and build a vibrant, harmonious and orderly new countryside.

The "double peak council"<sup>1</sup> is a successful exploration of the village to encourage villagers to actively participate in consultation and deliberation. The "double peak council" is chaired by a village leader; representatives speak to abide by the principles of not interrupting, not attacking, not questioning motives, etc., mainly to assess the feasibility of the issue and the scientific nature of the program and put forward their views. After a full consultation, a secret ballot is held to form the final opinion. In 2020, the village needed to relocate 42 graves for the construction of the greenway, and some villagers were not in favor of relocating the graves. The village "two committees" through the "two mountains council" widely engaged the villagers to discuss the matter and finally found the "best solution" for the successful relocation of graves. At the same time, Case A also made efforts to promote the construction of "happy neighborhood centers," 35 of which have been built and are operated by social organizations. These centers have guided residents to resolve more than 3,100 issues of concern to them through consultation, such as chaotic parking in the neighborhood, and have created local consultation brands such as the "Mother-in-law and Mother-in-law Cooperation Hall," "Red Housekeeper," and "Wednesday Council."<sup>2</sup> In May 2020, the development of rural tourism in Case A required the widening of the road surface, involving nearly five acres of farmland belonging to four different farmers. The village "two committees" used the "four-step work method" to successfully obtain the villagers' consent.

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<sup>1</sup> Case A explored a set of "independent proposal, according to the needs of the deliberations, the appointment of councilors, democratic evaluation, follow-up supervision" of the deliberative mechanism.

<sup>2</sup> Several methods of villagers' consultation and self-governance

The first step is "seeing," that is, to lead the villagers to visit the field to learn about the beautiful village construction and rural business experience. The second step is "talking," that is, holding a forum, inviting villagers to talk about what they saw, heard, and thought. The third step is "hanging." The effect of hanging on the main roadside so the villagers can see a good prospect. The fourth step is "fixing." The village has "two committees" to make a commitment and keep a record, so the villagers are assured of the commitment being kept.

In recent years, Case A has formulated the "mentorship convention," established a mentor pool, and implemented mentor star management to further enhance the effectiveness of the mentoring system. The mentors set up the mentoring classroom on the front line of projects and work sites, effectively enhancing the ability of young cadres to do mass work and solve practical problems.

Case A is a highly in-embedded representative of community governance, which is based on the embedding of village cadres, actively plays the main role of residents in community governance and solves many problems in basic management through a number of measures.

### **b. Out-embedded**

Case B is one of the birthplaces of ancient Wu-Yue culture. The core area of the ancient town has 250,000 square meters of Ming and Qing buildings and is one of the first batches of historical and cultural towns in China. Thanks to the town planning and conservation work started in the mid-1980s, Case B has preserved intact the ancient style of the water town in the south of the Yangtze River and gradually developed into a 5A-level scenic spot, attracting tourists. However, with the influx of more foreigners, such as businesses and tourists, problems grew and community governance demands had to be upgraded. Zhang, the owner of the Hanfu store in the ancient town for many years, recalled that there was a time when there was a lack of effective management. The merchants in the ancient town's scenic area exploited tourists, there were itinerant vendors crowding the streets, sanitation management was not up to standard, and there were many disputes between tourists and residents.

In 2018, the government introduced an external property group, a new public management model led by the government, with property enterprises as the main body and active participation of service users. After the property enterprises moved in, the corresponding service ideas and directions were adjusted for the main issues (Table1).

**Table1.** Specific Methods and Measures

Methods	Measures
Communication	Regular visits by project staff of property companies. Weekly meeting, monthly meeting. Understand the work plan and difficulties of the client
Total	Set up special teams for special management of difficult management
Management	problems Identify problems and deal with them in time through daily inspections
Multi-	Assist the industry and commerce department to unify the registration of all
Government	merchants in the scenic area, and update the merchant information in a timely
Cooperation	manner. Assist the health department and differentiate food safety inspections Assist the community to solve the management problems of indigenous people in the scenic area

### Mutually-embedded integration

Case C is the earliest typical case of using Singapore's community planning concept to promote the implementation of relevant scenarios and is the only pilot project for creating a future community with seven scenarios in the province. Through the management side of the digital cockpit, the WeChat user side of the community residents, the WeChat public user side, and the physical side of the convenience hut, the future community is comprehensively built with 59 residential buildings and nearly 10,000 people. "Cloud future community" is used to achieve the community's basic information and management information. There is "a key to pass," community and residents management communication, "a key to reach," community help public welfare tasks, "a key to grab," and is committed to building a social management pattern of common construction, governance, and sharing.

The community points policy fully mobilizes local residents' participation and a sense of belonging. In the APP terminal, volunteer service projects and the corresponding points reward are released. At the same time, residents can also respond to the problems of security, environment, parking, and garbage disposal in the APP user terminal with on-site photos, which can be understood and solved by the property owners and the residents' committee in time. At the same time, the community points can also be used as the circulation currency in the community, and residents can issue mutual aid tasks to increase the residents' feelings.

The model is an in-embedded and out-embedded balanced governance model under exploration. On the one hand, the future community is a high government embeddedness with a strong leadership. At the same time, the community APP is not from the grassroots government's creativity and requirements, and the grassroots government does not interfere too much with the operation and management of the APP, which is highly embedded in the enterprise. In the process of operation, the community property, property

committee, volunteers, community residents and other community self-governing bodies actively respond and cooperate, which solves the long-standing problem of "no will, no motivation, no rules, no sustainability, no method" of community participation, which is highly embedded. It is a highly mutually-embedded integration community that combines internal and external embedding led by community autonomy, and numerical technology support.

### Case Characteristics Summary and Comparison

Through the description of the three cases, the analytical framework of new rural community governance constructed above was initially explained and verified. Table 2 further summarizes and compares the basic characteristics of different types of new rural community governance in terms of governance goals, external elements, internal elements, resource input, and resident satisfaction.

**Table 2.** Basic Characteristics of Three Types of New Rural Community Governance

Type	Example	Governance Goals	External Elements	Internal Elements	Resource input	Resident satisfaction
In-embedded	Case A	Promoting villagers' participation	low	high	small	high
Out-embedded	Case B	Enhancing management capabilities	high	low	large	medium
Mutually embedded integration	Case C	Enhancing management capabilities and promoting villagers' participation	high	high	large	high

### Discussion and Suggestions

According to the analytical framework constructed in this paper, there is some uncertainty about the effectiveness and sustainability of innovation over time due to the characteristics of different community governance types and the influence of the external environment. Different governance types may be transformed into each other. This paper presents a preliminary forecast and analysis of the current challenges and possible future transformation paths of the three cases from a dynamic perspective.

## **In-embedded**

The greatest dilemma faced by Case A was the lack of resources for community governance and the over-reliance on the capacity and commitment of the individual director of that community. The research found that the director of the community governance case has, to some extent, assumed the role of a policy innovation entrepreneur in designing, implementing, and sustaining the innovation. Therefore, the future development goal and path of community governance is to transform into a mutually embedded integration type by mobilizing multiple embedded resources. A feasible idea is to seek solutions to problems that go beyond the functions of village committees. The help and support of social forces (such as government and enterprises) should be actively sought to help rural communities solve their governance problems. It is possible to explore the establishment of a synergistic linkage mechanism between the community WeChat group and the grassroots government among only those departments related to community work. On the other hand, to prevent the transformation of in-embedded to de-embedded type, rural community governance cannot and should not rely solely on individual responsibility, commitment, and efforts but needs to establish a long-term mechanism, enterprise, and institutionalized operation.

## **Out-embedded**

The most prominent problem faced by Community B is that villagers do not participate enough in community governance and do not feel deeply about the endeavor. The villagers' sense of access and satisfaction has a limited role in improving the situation. In our opinion, the future development goal and transformation path for rural communities with mainly out-embeddedness is to further optimize and improve the operational mechanism of government and enterprises and promote the transformation of innovation to mutual embeddedness by referring to villagers' autonomy and participation. On the one hand, rural communities should actively promote the importance of introducing professional enterprise management and the positive effects on the daily lives of villages. On the other hand, there could be an increase in interactive communication channels and the activation of villagers' participation. There should be consideration of an online interactive platform to regularly invite village committees, property owners, relevant government departments, community volunteers, and villagers to conduct extensive online and offline consultations and discussions and collect opinions on community public affairs and the direction of further optimization of the operation of rural collective affairs. At the same time, to prevent an externally embedded type of negative slippage to a de-embedded type, the key is to balance the relationship between experimental management services through the enterprise to improve the effectiveness and the government's limited financial resources input.

## Mutually-embedded integration

Case C has achieved better governance results. It can be considered the best model among the four new types of rural community governance proposed in this paper. For this type to thrive in the future, we should continue to innovate the working mechanism, and optimize the platform function on the basis of the existing achievements, strengthen the in-depth analysis and utilization of community big data, further improve the management service capacity and villagers' participation enthusiasm, and gradually realize the symbiotic rural community governance model that is both endogenous and exogenous. We should recognize and improve the shortcomings of our current work. We should also eliminate the negative effects of over-management, leading to the transformation to in-embedded or out-embedded or even de-embedded. It should effectively strengthen the positive role of the innovation of community governance, fully concentrate on "five community linkage", explore the establishment of the community as a platform, place social organizations as a service carrier, use social work professionals as a force, co-construct units as support, employ volunteers as the backbone of the leading service governance model, and maximize the absorption of autonomous multi-functional forces. There should be the introduction of intelligent community governance units, deep integration of intelligent applications and community governance, avoidance of formalism in community governance, and gradual formation of a new model of innovation and experience in rural community governance that can be replicated and promoted.

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