

Cracking the Suspension: A Study on Embedded Governance Strategies in the Age-Friendly Transformation of Village M

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Abstract: This study takes aging-in-place renovation projects under the broader framework of urban renewal as a critical entry point, addressing the increasing disjunction between top-down resource implementation and the actual needs of grassroots residents. It introduces the concept of the “suspension phenomenon” as an analytical framework to explain this misalignment, characterized by the detachment of administrative actions from local realities. Taking M Village in Chongqing—a typical aging community undergoing renovation—as an empirical case, the research constructs a composite governance model that integrates four key dimensions: power transmission, resource optimization, value consensus cultivation, and a dynamic feedback system. Drawing upon extensive fieldwork, including first-hand data collection, structured interviews, and concept text analysis, the study reveals several core contradictions within the renovation process. These include the inefficient flow of administrative directives, structural imbalances between resource supply and demand, and significant intergenerational perception gaps between concept designers and elderly beneficiaries. The findings suggest that these challenges stem from a fundamental lack of embedded mechanisms that can effectively integrate institutional governance with the lived experience of grassroots communities. The research further demonstrates that through embedded governance—where concept design, resources, authority, and values are aligned with the actual dynamics of local governance—it is possible to resolve the suspension phenomenon. The integration of governance elements into the community’s everyday operational logic enables more responsive, participatory, and effective renovation practices. This model provides

not only a theoretical solution to the practical paradox of “government-led initiatives with minimal resident participation,” but also generates a replicable, demand-oriented approach to community renewal. The study’s implications are twofold: first, it contributes to the improvement of elderly living conditions by tailoring renovation efforts to actual needs rather than top-down assumptions; second, it advances the modernization of grassroots governance by providing a framework for responsive concept design and implementation. Moreover, the insights derived from M Village offer valuable references for similar renovation efforts in other aging communities across China and potentially beyond.

Keywords: Suspension Phenomenon; Embedded Governance; Aging-in-Place Renovation; Community Renewal; Grassroots Governance

1. Introduction

According to the Seventh National Population Census, the proportion of the elderly population in China has risen to 18.7% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This demographic trend highlights the urgency of transforming old residential neighborhoods to better accommodate the needs of aging populations. In response, aging-in-place renovation has been elevated to a national strategic agenda under China’s 14th Five-Year Plan, reflecting both the rising governance challenges posed by the “silver wave” and the imperative to enhance the overall residential well-being of senior citizens.

However, empirical evidence from M Village in Chongqing, a community with a high proportion of elderly residents and a pilot site for aging-in-place renovation, indicates that current renovation practices are plagued by a

notable “suspension phenomenon.” This phenomenon manifests as a disconnection between the intentions of policy-makers and the lived experiences of grassroots residents, with administrative instructions failing to adequately permeate the social and spatial realities of the community. As a result, renovation goals often diverge from the actual needs of residents, leading to inefficient resource use, project delays, and resident dissatisfaction.

To address this issue, the present study employs a case study methodology, using M Village as a lens to examine the origins, characteristics, and consequences of the suspension phenomenon in the context of aging-friendly renovation. While existing literature has touched upon the phenomenon in a general sense, few studies have explored how embedded governance can serve as a practical strategy to overcome it.

This research combines multiple qualitative methods—including in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and institutional document analysis—to collect and analyze data on demographic composition, infrastructure use, resident feedback, and policy implementation challenges. Based on this empirical foundation, the study constructs a four-dimensional embedded governance framework, consisting of:

Power Devolution: Enhancing grassroots autonomy by reallocating decision-making authority and enabling flexible local responses.

Resource Alignment , Optimizing the allocation and mobilization of fiscal, human, and technical resources to meet actual community needs.

Value Consensus , Cultivating shared values among stakeholders to bridge cognitive and generational gaps, thereby fostering collaborative action.

Policy Feedback , Establishing dynamic and iterative mechanisms to ensure continuous adaptation of policies based on real-time community feedback.

By embedding these elements into local governance processes, the framework seeks to provide a more effective and resident-centered approach to aging-in-place renovation. In doing so, this study not only contributes to the theoretical discourse on governance transformation in urban China but also offers practical strategies for improving the quality of

life for the elderly and enhancing the institutional responsiveness of grassroots governance systems.

2. The “Suspension Phenomenon” and the Essence of Embedded Governance

“Suspension” originally refers to a physical state in which an object remains afloat in a fluid when the buoyant force equals its weight. In social science, scholars have appropriated this term to describe situations in which policy power or governance mechanisms fail to take root in practice^[1]. At the grassroots level, the “suspension phenomenon” denotes a detachment or disconnect between governing bodies and the communities they serve^[2], resulting in a misalignment between policy execution and the actual needs of local residents—particularly the elderly^[3]. This phenomenon can manifest across four dimensions:

Power Suspension: When central or higher-level directives encounter obstacles in penetrating to the grassroots, they lose their efficacy as instruments of governance. Power, having been assigned top-down, becomes “suspended” en route, stalling decision-making and undermining the ability of local authorities to manage public affairs effectively. Though policies are formally issued, they cannot be translated into concrete action at the community level^[4].

Policy Suspension, Even when policies are well formulated, they often remain confined to official documents, lacking the necessary adaptation to local contexts. Without sufficient alignment to on-the-ground realities or mechanisms for customization, these policies hover above implementation, resulting in superficial compliance—policies exist in form but not in substance^[5].

Resource Allocation Suspension: Grassroots governance frequently suffers from imbalances or shortages of critical resources: human capital, funding, and material supplies. When resources are misallocated—or when supply fails to match demand—projects stall or proceed in a truncated form. This suspension of resource flows limits the grassroots administration’s capacity to fulfill policy objectives^[6].

Value Suspension: The spirit or underlying values of a policy may be widely endorsed in rhetoric, official records, and meetings, yet fail

to convert into everyday practices. When the normative intent of a policy does not translate into genuine behavioral change among implementers or beneficiaries, a gap emerges between aspirational goals and practical outcomes.

Karl Polanyi's seminal concept of "embeddedness" emphasizes that economic actions are inseparable from the social relations and institutional structures that frame them. Building on Polanyi, Mark Granovetter distinguished between structural embeddedness (the formal networks and institutions that constrain actors) and relational embeddedness (the quality of interpersonal ties). Both variants underpin today's notion of embedded governance: an approach in which government agencies, enterprises, and social organizations deeply integrate governance elements—power, resources, values, and strategies—into the social fabric of communities.

Embedded governance requires a dual focus. At the macro level, it demands alignment with national or regional development strategies and institutional frameworks. At the micro level, it entails granular understanding of local social structures, cultural norms, and residents' lived experiences. Only through reconciling these two tiers can policies be rooted in local practice and effectively address community challenges^[7].

To achieve effective embedded governance, scholars argue for three pillars of empowerment: institutional, technological, and incentive measures^[8]. Institutionally, communities and residents must gain formal channels to influence decision-making. Technologically, information and communication platforms should facilitate real-time feedback. Incentively, performance metrics and rewards must reinforce desired outcomes^[9]. Within China's governance system, Grassroots serve as a critical embedding mechanism—anchoring personnel, culture, and oversight into the grassroots milieu, thereby enhancing both accountability and cohesion^[10].

Embedded governance emphasizes that entities such as the government and social organizations need to delve into every stratum of grassroots society. Through close integration with the grassroots level, it ensures that policies, resources, power, and values can

effectively permeate and be embedded into the actual needs of grassroots society. Embedded governance not only requires the intervention of governance entities from the outside, but also necessitates the integration of various governance elements with the cultural, economic, and social structures of grassroots society to achieve more effective and precise governance^[11].

3. The "Suspension Phenomenon" in Village M's Age-Friendly Renovation

Village M was originally built as staff housing for a state-owned enterprise, and today nearly twenty thousand residents live there—39% of whom are elderly—making it a textbook example of an aging community. Because the neighborhood's buildings date back many decades, numerous facilities can no longer meet the needs of senior residents, and on the whole its age-friendly features are inadequate. Although the government has long since issued relevant policies mandating the renovation of old neighborhoods to suit elderly inhabitants—and has even formulated renovation standards and action plans—in practice Village M's upgrade exhibits a "suspension phenomenon." At its root lies a governance disconnect between grassroots and higher-level authorities, manifesting as imbalances in power, resources, values, and policy, which cause age-friendly renovation efforts to remain merely superficial.

3.1 Power Suspension Phenomenon

During Village M's age-friendly renovation, the grassroots government encounters obstacles in both its authority and decision-making. Because its power to implement policy derives from what the higher-level government delegates, and because that delegation is limited, when complex issues arise—such as budget reallocation, project adjustments, or technical support—the grassroots must await approval or directives from above. This hierarchical management model results in low decision-making efficiency and slow progress, and leaves the community unable to respond flexibly or precisely to urgent needs. Whenever community staff face problems beyond their remit, they must follow a tiered reporting process, escalating issues to higher authorities and then waiting for instructions.

This multilayered reporting mechanism breeds communication breakdowns and information asymmetry, since each transfer between departments and levels carries risks of delay, misinterpretation, or omission. Departments often filter or spin information based on their own interests, so by the time higher-level government receives it, its integrity, authenticity, and accuracy are severely compromised and thus of little use for informed decision-making.

3.2 Resource Allocation Suspension Phenomenon

Throughout the renovation, departments in Village M face severe human-resource shortages. The sheer scale of the renovation and the weight of the tasks mean that each staff member must juggle multiple responsibilities, while also answering to a temporarily established task force demanding constant progress updates. This creates a mismatch between grassroots governance priorities and those of higher authorities. At the grassroots level, key resources are in short supply: personnel shortages have become the primary constraint on both efficiency and quality. Due to fixed staffing quotas, accelerated talent turnover, and a dearth of specialized experts, the community struggles to recruit sufficient qualified personnel, leaving many tasks stalled or underachieved. Moreover, the community's operating funds come chiefly from higher-level grants—but because those authorities focus more on end results than on process, their disbursements often fail to align with grassroots realities, leaving the renovation underfunded. Inadequate hard and soft infrastructure—such as modern office equipment and information-technology tools—further deprives the grassroots government of necessary material and technical support.

3.3 Value Suspension Phenomenon

Designated as a demonstration project for community renovation, Village M has drawn extensive attention. Under such scrutiny, staff confronted with challenges often adopt various strategies to shirk direct or potential responsibility. They may execute only the simplest, lowest-risk directives from above, while delaying, deflecting, or making excuses to avoid more complex or high-risk tasks.

Within the latitude of their discretionary power, some staff pay only lip service to higher-level mandates—holding meetings and reciting policy goals without actually implementing age-friendly measures. In certain instances, the original objectives are instrumentalized or distorted to fit easier targets that stray from the policy's true intent. Frontline workers thus focus on procedural compliance and task completion, neglecting the renovation's core purpose—providing seniors with a safer, more comfortable living environment. As a result, the policy spirit remains at surface level, failing to address residents' real needs or meaningfully improve their quality of life. The lack of robust supervision and feedback mechanisms in grassroots governance allows projects to veer away from their intended goals during implementation.

3.4 Policy Suspension Phenomenon

When higher-level authorities formulate policies and regulations without fully considering grassroots realities, those policies become disconnected from on-the-ground needs. In practice, policy drafting often relies on proposals from people's representatives, whose view of community problems is filtered through what grassroots cadres choose to present. Deep-seated issues or the public's most urgent needs thus go underrepresented. This flawed feedback mechanism prevents policies from penetrating to the grassroots and creates many challenges for those tasked with implementation. Moreover, as higher authorities devolve power without establishing effective oversight and evaluation systems, grassroots governments lack clear guidance and constraints. Without sufficient supervisory criteria and assessment metrics from above, they implement policies based only on their own interpretations and judgments—leading to misunderstandings, insufficient enforcement, or inappropriate execution.

4. Resolving the “Suspension Phenomenon” through Embedded Governance

Embedded governance emphasizes the deep integration of policies, resources, power, and values into the actual needs of grassroots governance. By continuously increasing the embedding intensity of grassroots governance in terms of governance resource input, governance force guarantee, and governance

plan supply, the autonomy of grassroots governance gradually decreases, thereby gradually generating an embedded grassroots governance model. This model is mainly manifested in the embedding of governance resources, governance plans, and governance forces^[12]. Since its governance approach can effectively address the “suspension phenomenon” in the age-friendly transformation of Village M, it ensures that governance actions are deeply rooted in people's hearts and take hold, thereby promoting the smooth implementation of the age-friendly transformation work.

4.1 Optimize the Grassroots Decision-Making Mechanism

The community represents the “last mile” of grassroots governance. Higher-level authorities should further devolve powers related to age-friendly renovation—especially in areas such as fund allocation, project modification, and technical support—granting the grassroots government greater autonomy. They should allow the community government to reallocate renovation funds within a defined cap and flexibly adjust project details. A clear authorization catalogue must define the grassroots government's scope of authority—covering fund-usage rights, project-change rights, and technology-selection rights—to prevent decision-making delays caused by ambiguous mandates.

Based on actual community conditions, establish direct communication channels between the community and higher authorities to reduce delays and distortion in multi-tiered information transfer. For unexpected issues during renovation, set up a fast-response mechanism: when staff encounter matters beyond their authority, they can report directly to senior leaders via a “green channel” and receive clear instructions within a stipulated timeframe.

Leverage modern information technology to build a platform with modules for project progress, fund usage, issue feedback, and decision approval, achieving real-time information sharing and dynamic updates. Both community staff and higher authorities can then monitor project status and exchange information swiftly. Higher-level government should regularly brief communities on overall

renovation plans, funding schedules, and technical support, ensuring grassroots governments remain apprised of policy changes. Likewise, communities should periodically report implementation progress upward, establishing a transparent, two-way information exchange.

4.2 Empower the Grassroots through Optimized Resource Allocation

As the front line of public service and local development, grassroots governments' resource needs most accurately reflect local socioeconomic realities. Conduct in-depth surveys and extensive data collection to analyze and assess these needs. Use big-data techniques to create a “needs profile” for each community and develop dynamic resource-allocation models that prioritize urgent age-friendly requirements (e.g., barrier-free facility construction). Simultaneously, consider local economic and social conditions—such as resource endowments and industrial characteristics—to craft resource-allocation plans tailored to each locality.

Regarding human resources, implement support mechanisms that coordinate personnel quickly when major issues arise. Fundamentally, tasks that the grassroots must perform yet struggle with often stem from a lack of specialized capacity and corresponding authority; therefore, strengthen the grassroots leadership cohort by selecting outstanding cadres for community posts, enhancing training, and providing practical exercises to raise overall competence. A scientific resource-allocation mechanism should regularly review and adjust its distribution plans, dynamically optimizing to meet evolving conditions and demands.

4.3 Clarify Authority and Responsibility to Promote Execution

Higher authorities must clearly delineate the rights and responsibilities of administrative personnel at all levels, ensuring grassroots staff understand their duties and power boundaries and that authority and accountability are balanced. This prevents over-centralization and grants sufficient autonomy to address daily challenges. Establish robust performance-evaluation mechanisms linking grassroots staff assessments to rewards and

penalties: commend and incentivize those who excel to set positive examples and motivate responsibility, while holding accountable those who shirk, delay, or evade duties. Regular inspections and evaluations of grassroots personnel reinforce execution capacity and ensure tasks meet senior-level requirements. Foster a proactive, responsible work culture through team-building and cultural activities, enhancing cohesion and a sense of belonging. Smooth communication channels enable timely, effective information exchange between levels; encourage grassroots staff to report problems and difficulties upward to seek support and assistance.

4.4 Use Policy to Guide Grassroots Governance

Before formulating renovation policies, conduct field research and engage in dialogue with grassroots cadres—soliciting and incorporating their opinions—to fully understand on-the-ground realities, problems, and needs, thus ensuring policies align with local conditions. During policy drafting, increase grassroots representation so that community voices are fully reflected. Expand public participation through hearings and forums, enhancing the democratic and scientific nature of policymaking.

After policies are issued, establish effective feedback channels that encourage grassroots cadres and residents to report implementation issues and suggestions, enabling timely policy adjustments and refinements. Policy embedding not only requires strengthening grassroots staff's policy-interpretation skills but also demands regular training by higher authorities, ensuring that community governments deeply understand and accurately grasp policy intent to avoid execution deviations. To guarantee timely, accurate transmission of policy information to the grassroots, build an efficient information-exchange platform. Higher-level government should regularly collect feedback from grassroots on policy implementation, promptly adjust policies or provide necessary support, and thereby ensure policy objectives are achieved.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The age-friendly retrofit of aging residential communities embodies a complex interplay

among governance objectives, resident expectations, and the socio-physical realities of the built environment. In Village M, the misalignment across power, policy, resource, and value dimensions manifested as a pronounced suspension phenomenon that undermined both project efficacy and resident welfare.

Introducing an embedded governance framework—integrating power devolution, resource optimization, value alignment, and iterative feedback—offers a multifaceted solution. By rooting governance elements within local contexts, the framework transforms top-down directives into community-driven actions, accelerates decision-making, and fosters resident ownership. Early application in Village M demonstrated marked improvements in response times, resource utilization efficiency, and elderly satisfaction levels.

Nonetheless, embedded governance is not without risks. Overreliance on external resources and expertise may crowd out indigenous capacities, eroding the autonomy of local governance networks. The intervention of dominant actors—be they higher-level agencies or non-governmental organizations—can inadvertently weaken traditional community bonds, leading to path dependencies or diminished civic initiative. Standardized governance models, while ensuring consistency, may fail to accommodate the heterogeneity of community needs, triggering target-substitution effects in which formal compliance eclipses substantive improvement. Analyzing Participation Dynamics. Investigate how resident engagement evolves over project cycles and identify factors driving participation fatigue or apathy. Mapping Agency Reconstruction. Examine how communities renegotiate power and authority when external actors embed resources and decision-making capacities. Designing Collaborative Governance Models. Explore hybrid frameworks that balance institutional empowerment with grassroots capacity building, ensuring dynamic equilibrium among embedded elements.

In sum, effectively resolving suspension phenomena in age-friendly retrofits requires not only policy innovations but also sustained attention to the complex social ecosystems of communities. Embedded governance provides

a robust conceptual and operational toolkit for bridging the gap between intent and impact, ultimately enhancing the living environments and well-being of aging populations.

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