

Study on the Equalization of Public Service Provision through Urban-Rural Integration in Guangxi's Process of Chinese-Style Modernization

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Abstract: The equalization of public services in urban-rural integration represents a crucial focal point for China's modernization drive to overcome the urban-rural dual structure and advance toward common prosperity. Through long-term practice, Guangxi has gradually developed distinctive approaches- including county-level coordinated planning, adaptation to ethnic and border contexts, and digital penetration-driven empowerment- yet the overall level of urban-rural public service equalization still requires improvement. Significant supply gaps persist between urban and rural areas in core public service sectors such as education and healthcare; deep-rooted issues- such as fragmented resource allocation, misalignment between supply and demand structures, and inadequate safeguard mechanisms- have not yet been fundamentally resolved. Accordingly, this paper proposes leveraging a "Technology- Institution- Actor" tripartite policy matrix as a framework to advance equalization through measures such as tiered deployment of digital technologies, optimization of urban-rural institutional coordination, collaborative governance involving multiple stakeholders, and targeted, zoned policy interventions, aiming to provide a reference for similar frontier ethnic regions.

Keywords: Chinese-Style Modernization; Urban-Rural Integration; Equalization of Public Services; Guangxi; Ethnic Minority Regions

1. Introduction

Since the First Plenary Session of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Gathering of China, Chinese modernization has elevated urban-rural integration and the equalization of basic public services to an institutional foundation crucial for the realization of common prosperity. Characteristics of this

modernization—such as its "enormous population size" and the goal of "common prosperity for all people" - require breaking down barriers to the flow of production factors between urban and rural areas and promoting the balanced allocation of resources-including education, healthcare, and elderly care-thereby transforming the pursuit of equalization from a mere fiscal issue into a comprehensive matter involving profound reforms of the governance system.

Guangxi uniquely combines underdeveloped western regions, areas inhabited by ethnic minority groups, frontier border zones, and ecologically fragile rocky desertification areas. Its efforts toward public service equity hold landmark significance across multiple dimensions—ranging from common prosperity and ethnic unity to border stability, ecological conservation, and international engagement. However, various challenges—such as structural misallocation of resources stemming from the inertia of the urban-rural dual-track system, a limited range of supply entities, the coexistence of a "focus on construction but neglect of operation and maintenance" approach in digitalization initiatives for rural areas, and inadequate age-friendly design—interact and reinforce one another, severely hindering the achievement of equity goals. By leveraging Guangxi's regionally distinct endowments, a systematic examination of the current status, challenges, and mitigation strategies for achieving equitable public services through urban-rural integration can help transcend the theoretical limitations of the "technology-institutional" dual-analytical paradigm and provide a tiered, context-specific practical framework for Guangxi and other similar ethnic minority border regions in western China.

There has been considerable existing research both domestically and internationally focusing on the equalization of urban and rural public services. McGee proposed the Desakota Urban-

Rural Integration Theory, advocating for breaking down the urban-rural dualistic divide at the county level and coordinating the allocation of public resources [1]; Bushashe and Bayiley, using Ethiopia as a case study, argued that fiscal transfers must be accompanied by the development of local governance capacity to be effectively translated into public service outcomes [2]. In terms of domestic research, Chang Xiuzhe constructed a three-tier analytical framework encompassing equal opportunities, processes, and outcomes to provide a systematic exposition of public service equalization [3]; Jiu Maocuo et al. measured the level of equalization in ethnic minority regions and identified transfer payments and marketization as key influencing factors affecting public service equalization [4]; Li Yixian, drawing on the perspective of Chinese modernization, conducted a study on border towns in Guangxi and proposed strengthening industrial support and promoting the coordinated development of county-level towns to facilitate the equalization of urban and rural public services. However, most existing studies adhere to the "technology-institutional" dualistic approach, giving insufficient attention to the roles of diverse actors, while there remains a lack of in-depth exploration into the underlying mechanisms driving the intertwined characteristics of ethnic minority groups and ecological vulnerability in Guangxi's frontier regions. This paper adopts Chinese modernization as a macro-level reference and employs a "technology-institutional-actor" tripartite driving framework to analyze the current status, challenges, and coping strategies regarding the equalization of public services in urban-rural integration, aiming to provide valuable insights for policy-making practices in Guangxi and similar frontier ethnic minority regions.

2. Current Status of Equal Access to Public Services in the Integration of Urban and Rural Areas in Guangxi

2.1 The Status of Integrated Urban-Rural Development in Guangxi

Guangxi is located in the western part of South China, karst landforms can be seen everywhere in this area. Multiple ethnic groups, including Zhuang, Han, Yao, Miao, Dong and so on, have lived together here for a long time. It has a long border line, and the economic foundation of most counties is not very strong, these factors together

make its development context very special. Both natural conditions and cultural features are different from those of inland plain provinces, so a very obvious pattern of regional differences has been formed in the process of Guangxi's urban and rural integrated development [5].

Take the Beibu Gulf Economic Zone as an example, it relies on urban agglomeration and port industrial clusters to develop. Its urbanization rate has reached more than 55%, it has a relatively strong ability to radiate industries from urban areas to rural areas and absorb rural population. The coordination between urban and rural areas in infrastructure connection and job market matching is also relatively good, so its overall level of urban-rural integration is among the highest in Guangxi. On the other hand, the karst mountainous areas and large rocky mountainous areas in northwest Guangxi are limited by natural geographical conditions, the arable land there is very scattered, and the industrial development capacity is also insufficient. The rural population there keeps flowing out, either to the central cities in the region or to developed areas outside the region like the Pearl River Delta. The problem of rural hollowing out is especially serious there, and the flow of resources between urban and rural areas shows a one-way outflow situation, which makes the gap between urban and rural development bigger and bigger. As for the border areas, they have made good use of policies such as the "Border Development and Prosperity Initiative" and the establishment of key border development and opening up pilot zones. The port economy has driven the development of surrounding townships, and a development model of "cities driving townships, townships connecting villages" has been formed there. The connection between urban and rural areas in border regions has also improved very fast in recent years.

At the policy level, Guangxi has been consistently advancing efforts to promote urban-rural integration in recent years. The "Guangxi 13th Five-Year Plan for the Equalization of Basic Public Services" issued by the Guangxi Autonomous Region in 2017 standardized subsidy rates for urban and rural elderly care, medical insurance, compulsory education, and cultural services, thereby establishing an initial integrated institutional framework [6]. The Guangdong-Guangxi East-West Collaboration Mechanism also launched a dedicated public service support program; under this initiative,

Guangdong's paired cities have provided substantial support for the construction of facilities—including rural schools, township health centers, and elderly care centers—in Guangxi's rural areas. In the realm of digital governance, provincial-level platforms such as "Guangxi Government Services" and "Guitongban" have streamlined high-frequency administrative tasks—such as social security contribution payments, medical insurance reimbursement, and applications for agricultural subsidies—into village-level processing systems, which has helped alleviate, to some extent, the challenges faced by residents in mountainous areas due to the long distances and logistical difficulties associated with accessing government services.

2.2 Status of Equalization of Public Services in Guangxi's Urban–Rural Integration

In recent years, when promoting development in Guangxi, the main work direction has been to combine the construction of new urbanization with various tasks of rural revitalization. They take solving the problem of the urban-rural dual structure as the key entry point for the entire work, and gradually adjust relevant policies and resource allocation. Three main methods have been adopted in the whole process: first, delegating the authority of resource allocation to lower levels to give grass-roots units more autonomy; second, unifying the institutional systems between urban and rural areas as much as possible to reduce inconsistent regulations; third, strengthening the connection of infrastructure between urban and rural areas to make roads, networks and other facilities more smoothly accessible to rural areas. With these practices, the local public service supply model has gradually changed from the previous separate supply model for urban and rural areas to a shared model that everyone can enjoy fairly. This change is not only visible, with the distribution of urban and rural service facilities becoming more balanced and no longer mostly concentrated in cities as before, but also some institutional channels have been gradually established to make population flow between urban and rural areas freer and less restricted than before. Now, whether rural residents or urban residents, they can gradually enjoy the same treatment in many aspects, such as when children register for school, when they are hospitalized and reimburse medical expenses, and in terms of social security related benefits. The

standards for everyone are gradually unified, and the rights they can enjoy are becoming more and more equal.

In the field of education, during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, RMB 46.059 billion was invested to build 516 new schools and create an additional 660,000 student placements; the enrollment rate of migrant children in public schools reached 95.1%. The approach to accessing education has shifted from "allocation based on household registration" to "based on the permanent resident population." In healthcare, 100% of county-level hospitals have met the required standards, and tightly integrated county-level medical consortiums have been established; the implementation of direct cross-regional medical insurance settlement has facilitated a shift in healthcare services from being "bound to specific designated providers and household registration" to being "available wherever the individual moves or across different administrative regions." Traditional Chinese medicine and Zhuang/Yao medicine now cover all counties and townships. In the areas of elderly care and social security, the coverage rate of township elderly care service centers has reached 60.9%; the "One-Card" social security system has removed the requirement to apply based on one's place of household registration; and the transition in urban and rural services—from merely providing access to ensuring high-quality service—is accelerating, with the level of equity in these services continuously improving.

3. The Requirements for Achieving Equitable Access to Public Services in the Context of China's Modernization Process for Urban-Rural Integration in Guangxi

3.1 The Connotation of Chinese Modernization

Understanding the essence of Chinese modernization requires comparing it with classical Western modernization theories. Western modernization typically follows an evolutionary trajectory of "capital expansion – urban bias – dualistic differentiation"; while driving economic growth, it has also exacerbated the spatial division between urban and rural areas as well as the solidification of social classes. In contrast, Chinese modernization is characterized by five core features: a vast population base, common prosperity for all people, the coordination between material and spiritual

civilization, the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, and the pursuit of a path of peaceful development. This is not merely an adjustment of development goals. It is a fundamental shift in the underlying development logic. In public services, this shift means that development outcomes should no longer be measured solely by GDP growth. Narrowing the urban-rural gap, balancing and equitably distributing public resources, and safeguarding livelihoods in frontier regions should be incorporated into core evaluation dimensions. The level of equity in public services. In other words, the level of equity in public services largely serves as a benchmark for assessing whether the "people-centered" value orientation inherent in Chinese modernization has been effectively implemented.

3.2 Requirements for the Equalization of Public Services in the Integration of Urban and Rural Areas in Guangxi

When applying these conceptual frameworks to the specific context of Guangxi, the five core characteristics of Chinese modernization impose systematic requirements for the equalization of public services in urban-rural integration from various dimensions.

Guangxi's rural population is large in size and widely dispersed; therefore, the provision of public services must evolve from "point-based demonstration projects" to "comprehensive coverage" [7]. In the context of achieving common prosperity, efforts should be made to enhance the precision of financial aid for rural students, consolidate the three-tier medical insurance safeguard system, and direct more funds toward grassroots-level services, thereby narrowing the disparity in benefits between urban and rural areas and ensuring that rural residents enjoy the same level of public services as their urban counterparts. When we work toward the goal of common prosperity, we need to make financial support for rural students more targeted; we have to keep improving the three-level medical insurance system, and put more money into services at the grassroots level, so that the gap in benefits between urban and rural areas can be narrowed, and people living in rural areas can get the same level of public services as those in cities. To get balanced development of both material and spiritual civilization, we can add more content to rural spiritual and cultural supplies on the basis of existing public cultural

projects, like the central-branch library network and the "Traditional Chinese Opera in Rural Areas" program; in this way, people can get equal treatment both in material life and spiritual cultivation. To build a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, projects such as the wide use of sanitary toilets, waste collection and disposal systems, and sewage treatment should be included in the overall layout of public service facilities; we can try to create a green, low-carbon public service system that covers both urban and rural areas. Besides, since Guangxi is a border region with many different ethnic groups, making public services equal is a basic foundation for ethnic unity and regional stability; if people in both urban and rural areas can get equal access to education, healthcare, and social security, all ethnic groups in the region will feel more satisfied and have a stronger sense of belonging. This method uses better living conditions to promote unity and integration, maintain stability, and lay a solid foundation for long-term peace and stability in border regions.

4. Challenges of Achieving Equal Access to Public Services through Urban-Rural Integration in Guangxi's Chinese-Style Modernization

In recent years, Guangxi has made a lot of progress in making public services more equal between urban and rural areas; but if we look at the requirements of Chinese-style modernization, the current development path still has four interrelated structural challenges that need to be solved.

4.1 The Inertia of the Urban-Rural Dual System Still Causes Problems with Improper Resource Allocation

Public resources like education and healthcare have been focused on central urban areas and county towns for a very long time; remote rural and border villages not only don't have enough resources, but also have a big gap in the quality of services. Take the rocky desertification mountainous areas in northwestern Guangxi as an example; the villages there are scattered, so the cost of building public service facilities per unit is unusually high. Even if basic service outlets are set up through fiscal transfer payments [8], it is still hard to keep qualified healthcare workers and teachers there; this leads to a situation where people often say "we can afford to build them, but we can't keep them running and use them well".

So any equalization method that uses the same standard for all areas will face the problem of not being suitable enough [9].

4.2 There are too Few Entities Providing Public Services, and a Diversified, Collaborative Framework has not been Formed Yet

In Guangxi, the government is still the main provider of public services, almost the only supplier; enterprises and social organizations don't have much space to participate. Enterprises find it hard to get incentive policies like tax reductions and land use support, while social organizations face high entry barriers when taking on government-purchased services. Urban and rural residents also don't have effective channels to express their needs or carry out supervision. Multi-centric governance theory says that effective provision of public goods needs cooperation among multiple stakeholders: government, market, and communities [10]; but we cannot ignore the problems of resource misallocation and service fragmentation caused by the absence or mismatch of these stakeholders.

4.3 There is a Contradiction between "Valuing Infrastructure Construction more than Operation and Maintenance" and "Insufficient age-Friendly Design" in Rural Digitalization

Some village-level digital service terminals have been left unused for a long time because there is no funding for operation and maintenance; the initial investment has not turned into actual service benefits. At the same time, elderly residents and members of ethnic minority communities in western border regions generally lack digital literacy; it is very common for them to find smart terminals "unusable or too hard to operate". As a result, digital services have not only failed to narrow the urban-rural digital divide, but also may make a new digital divide worse. If we only invest in technology, without supporting operation and maintenance and age-friendly adaptations at the same time, it is hard to really achieve inclusive and equal access to digital services.

4.4 County-Level hub Functions are Weak, and the Efficiency of Policy Transmission and Resource Integration is Relatively Low

County-level administration should act as an important intermediary for implementing higher-

level policies, integrating local resources, and matching urban and rural supply and demand; but in practice, its functions have not been fully used. Some counties have a "disconnection between upper and lower levels" when carrying out urban-rural integration policies; the original intention of policies is weakened during multi-level transmission, and there are no mechanisms to correct such deviations. It is common for departments like education, healthcare, and civil affairs to work separately; so it is hard to coordinate and allocate public service resources at the county level, which reduces the overall effectiveness of integrated development.

5. Strategies for Achieving Equal Access to Public Services through Urban-Rural Integration in the Process of Chinese Modernization—Guangxi Case Study

The aforementioned fourfold dilemma is interrelated and mutually reinforcing; the five core characteristics of Chinese modernization provide a systematic framework for resolving these structural contradictions. Within the tripartite driving framework of "Technology-Institutions-Actors," efforts should be coordinated across the following five dimensions. (1) Establish a differentiated public resource allocation mechanism to achieve comprehensive coverage of public services across all sectors.

To address regional disparities—such as those found in the mountainous areas of northwestern Guangxi and remote border villages—the "one-size-fits-all" evaluation criteria [11] have been adjusted; fiscal transfer payments have been increased with greater emphasis on targeted support; and the requirements for local matching contributions have been lowered [12]. Through policies such as preferential funding allocations, targeted professional title evaluation systems, and grassroots job subsidies, efforts are being made to encourage educational and medical professionals to serve rural communities. The reform of the county-level administrative management system is being deepened by granting county governments the authority to coordinate and allocate resources, fostering cross-departmental collaboration in agriculture-related public services [13], and establishing a corrective mechanism to overcome the "last mile" challenge in policy implementation.

(2) Foster diverse actors and establish a collaborative supply framework to narrow the urban-rural treatment gap.

Lower market entry barriers for businesses and implement incentive policies such as tax reductions and exemptions; streamline the approval process for social organizations to undertake government-purchased services; and strengthen mechanisms for urban and rural residents to express their needs and exercise oversight. Promote the alignment of urban and rural standards in education, healthcare, and social security—enhance the precision of financial aid for rural students, ensure the quality of school meal programs, consolidate the "Three-Level Guarantee System," and direct medical insurance funds toward grassroots-level services. Leveraging platforms such as "Guangxi Government Services" and "Guitongban," accurately identify low-income populations and vulnerable groups to ensure that support resources are delivered in a targeted and precise manner.

(3) Optimize the digital public service system to achieve dual equity in both material and spiritual-cultural aspects.

Establish dedicated funding for the regular operation and maintenance of village-level digital terminals, and create a localized O&M mechanism; promote the age-friendly adaptation of digital platforms and the localization of digital services for minority languages. Conduct practical digital skills training programs to enhance the digital literacy of elderly residents in rural areas and members of ethnic minority communities. Building upon initiatives such as the central-branch library network and the "Traditional Opera in Rural Areas" program, further enrich the rural spiritual and cultural offerings and facilitate the sharing of high-quality cultural resources between urban and rural areas.

(4) Uphold the principle of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and advance the integrated spatial planning of public service facilities.

Integrate the widespread deployment of sanitary toilets, waste collection and disposal systems, and wastewater treatment facilities into the overall layout of public service infrastructure to eliminate departmental silos. Leverage digital technologies—such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and remote sensing monitoring—to conduct real-time monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of human settlement environment management initiatives. Encourage enterprises and social organizations to participate in the operation of rural environmental protection

facilities and in ecological public welfare projects, thereby seamlessly integrating ecological conservation with the improvement of people's livelihoods.

(5) Adhere to the peace-oriented development strategy and strengthen the foundation for ethnic unity and border stability.

To strengthen the sense of belonging shared by people from all ethnic groups, equal access to essential public services including education, healthcare, and social security will be extended consistently across both urban and rural areas. Additionally, social organizations and market entities will be encouraged to actively participate in public service delivery programs tailored for border regions. Digital government service platforms will be further leveraged to make high-quality public services more accessible for residents living in frontier areas, effectively supporting these regions to transform from "the last mile of national development" into "the new forefront of cross-border openness and cooperation" [14].

6. Conclusion

Against the broader backdrop of Chinese modernization, this study draws on the "Technology–Institutions–Actors" tripartite driving framework to systematically examine how public service equalization unfolds in the process of Guangxi's urban-rural integration. Our analysis shows that narrowing the urban-rural public service gap in Guangxi is a multifaceted endeavor that requires coordinated progress in three interconnected areas: technological enabling, institutional restructuring, and multi-stakeholder collaborative governance. Guangxi has already explored context-specific practices in this process, such as county-level integrated coordination mechanisms, tailored adaptation measures for ethnic and border regions, and efforts to expand and empower digital infrastructure at the grassroots level. That said, the province's pronounced regional heterogeneity means it cannot simply copy the one-size-fits-all development models used in more developed eastern regions. Instead, policy design must be rooted in the actual conditions of its border and ethnic minority areas, with differentiated resource allocation standards developed for different types of regions—including rocky desertification-prone mountainous areas, border villages, and suburban integration zones. Guided by the core values of Chinese modernization, advancing

public service equalization is fundamentally a key approach to putting the "people-centered" development philosophy into practice, and it also plays a critical role in consolidating the foundation for ethnic unity and border stability. To this end, this paper puts forward a "Technology–Institutions–Actors" tripartite policy matrix, which outlines four interconnected pathways to systematically advance this goal: layered deployment of digital technologies, optimization of urban-rural institutional linkages, multi-stakeholder collaborative governance, and targeted, zoned policy interventions. This differentiated governance model also offers useful reference for other western ethnic and border regions in China facing similar development challenges.

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