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Subdistrict Office Reform in Chongqing: A Case Study Based on the Organization–Authority–Resources Framework

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Abstract: As the nerve ending of urban governance, the institutional reform and efficiency improvement of subdistrict offices are very important. On the basis of constructing a three-dimensional framework of Organization–Authority–Resources(OAR), this paper takes the institutional reform of Chongqing subdistrict offices as an example to deeply analyze the practical path and basic experience of the reform of urban grass-roots administrative institutions. The study found that the institutional reform of Chongqing subdistrict offices takes party building as the core, reconstructs the organizational structure through the super-ministry system, clarifies the boundary of authority and responsibilities with list management, and enhances efficiency with sinking resources allocation. In this way, organization, authority and resources are brought into a more coherent fit. The practical experience of Chongqing shows that in the process of promoting the modernization of urban grassroots governance, It requires the government to think in systemic terms—keeping organization, authority and resources in a dynamic adjusted balance. Only then can grassroots vitality be stimulated and governance efficiency improved.

Keywords: Subdistrict Office; Institutional Reform; Organization–Authority–Resources.

1. Introduction

Few institutions in Chinese cities touch residents' daily lives more directly than the subdistrict office. Once the socialist market economy took shape and the danwei (work-unit) system gradually dissolved, the political, social, educational, and welfare functions attached to work units were peeled away, and resulted in new patterns of urban governance in China[1]. Most of these functions were reverted to government or society, while a substantial volume of administrative and social tasks precipitated downward to the subdistrict level. Departments higher up continued shifting responsibilities to the grassroots in the same period. Subdistrict offices thus inherited a steadily widening portfolio of local affairs, yet the incentives and resources accompanying those tasks did not expand at the same pace[2]. In many cases they were left with responsibility but little authority, accountable for problems they had neither the power nor the capacity to resolve. Residents, meanwhile, expected more: faster service, higher standards, and better outcomes. These converging pressures made the mismatch between assigned responsibility and actual capacity increasingly hard to ignore. when the mismatch persists, the quality of grassroots governance deteriorates. Reforming the subdistrict office system has accordingly moved from the margins of administrative debate to the center of governance reform.

Chongqing, a megacity, provides a particularly instructive vantage point. The article traces the concrete measures adopted in Chongqing, examines how the Organization–Authority–Resources (OAR) framework was coordinated in practice, and reflects on what this experience may offer subdistrict reform in other cities.

2. Analytical Framework: Organization-Authority- Resources

Administrative reform rarely touches a single lever. For subdistrict offices, three dimensions matter most: organizational structure, the allocation of authority and responsibility, and the resources needed to do the work. Each dimension is felt directly at the grassroots, and none operates in isolation. A change in one may pull the others out of alignment, which is why subdistrict reform cannot be reduced to merging or abolishing agencies. It must also rearrange organizational relationships, redefine who answers for what, and secure the resources those tasks require. Only when the three elements move together can subdistrict offices carry out their functions effectively. The following sections examine each dimension in turn and establish the analytical basis for the case study.

(1)Organization Dimension

This dimension concerns the internal structure of subdistrict offices, their administrative levels, and how departments coordinate with one another. A well-designed structure, in principle, avoids unnecessary layers, lets each department concentrate on its own functions, and makes cross-departmental cooperation routine rather than exceptional.

Structural functionalism argues that the different parts of a social system are connected through a certain order and that their interaction helps sustain overall functioning [3]. The insight applies naturally to subdistrict reform. Rather than starting with mergers, reform should begin with a clear definition of what these institutions are meant to do, and only then adjust structure to fit. Merging or removing departments may be part of the process, but it is not the point in itself. Reorganizing responsibilities, streamlining work processes, and strengthening coordination all matter as much as the formal boxes on an organization chart. Seen this way, organizational reform becomes a way of aligning structure

with function and building the capacity of subdistrict offices to govern.

(2)Authority Dimension

The authority dimension is about the distribution of administrative power and the responsibilities attached to subdistrict offices. Whether the two sides are matched is the central question. Considerable authority with weak accountability invites misuse of power; extensive responsibility without the authority to act makes implementation falter.

Fayol (1918) counted the pairing of authority and responsibility among the fourteen principles of administration. Responsibility follows authority: once authority is given, corresponding responsibility also arises [5]. The same logic bears on subdistrict reform. Clarifying who holds what power, and ensuring that subdistrict offices can actually exercise the authority their duties imply, should therefore be a core aim. Reform done this way strengthens policy implementation and the delivery of public services.

(3)Resource Dimension

The resource dimension refers to what subdistrict offices need in daily operations: finances, staff, physical conditions, and information. It is not enough that resources exist somewhere; they have to be sufficient in quantity and available where they are most needed.

Resource dependence theory points out that organizations cannot operate entirely on their own. They are dependent on external resources for survival [5]. That dependence is easy to overlook in reform debates. Adjusting structure or clarifying authority accomplishes little if the necessary resources are absent. Money, personnel, material conditions, and information access all have to be provided continuously, and they have to be matched to the functions a subdistrict office is actually expected to perform.

Organization, authority, and resources therefore form one system in subdistrict reform. A shift in any one dimension affects the others, and reform that fastens onto a single aspect is unlikely to hold. The three must be weighed together, so that structure, authority, and resource support end up aligned with the real needs of grassroots governance.

3. Subdistrict Office Reform in Chongqing

Chongqing's subdistrict reform was a response to problems that had accumulated at the grassroots for years. Organizational structures had grown tangled, authority and responsibility were poorly defined, and resources rarely matched the tasks at hand. The city took on all three problems at once, and the sections below trace what it did in each dimension.

(1)Systemic Restructuring: Optimizing Organizational Structure

Tangled structure was the first target. Subdistrict offices handled too many tasks, yet departments tended to work in silos, so coordination was expensive. Chongqing's answer was the "141" Grassroots Intelligent Governance System.

The first "1" stands for an integrated command center at the subdistrict level. In ordinary times it coordinates routine work; in an emergency it becomes the command hub. The "4" names four functional platforms: Party building, economic development, livelihood services, and public security and the rule of law. Staff from different departments and administrative lines are folded into these platforms, which blurs the old boundaries between areas of work and makes coordination easier. On top of this, Chongqing reorganized the internal structure of subdistrict offices into a "one office, four sections" arrangement, designed to keep the administrative machinery in line with the four platforms. The final "1" refers to a comprehensive governance grid. Village and community grid networks now reach across subdistricts, so problems can be spotted and handled at a much finer level.

Taken together, the "141" system tied organizational restructuring to platform-based coordination and grid-based governance. It broke down departmental walls, pooled personnel and governance resources, and gave digital tools a firmer organizational base to work from.

(2)List Management: Clarifying Authority and Responsibility

Authority was a separate sore point. No one could say with confidence which level of government was supposed to do what. In 2023, Chongqing launched a city-wide reform of comprehensive administrative law enforcement in townships and subdistricts. The reform created a single-port enforcement system, clearer lists of administrative powers, merged enforcement teams, and heavier reliance on digital procedures.

A central piece of the reform was sorting enforcement powers into three categories: statutory, delegated, and commissioned. Chongqing identified 27 statutory enforcement items and 99 high-frequency items for townships and subdistricts. Fifteen of the 99 were delegated uniformly to all townships and subdistricts, mostly involving emergency response, fire safety, urban management, and water resources. The remaining 84 items were optional, spanning civil affairs, environmental regulation, housing and urban-rural development, and transportation. Each subdistrict could choose the items that fit its own location, population size, and industrial structure, subject to one floor: at least 15% of the optional items had to be adopted.

By this stage, all 1,031 townships and subdistricts in Chongqing had published and implemented their mandate lists. The lists say plainly which powers are exercised at the grassroots and who answers for them. Chongqing has also wired enforcement matters into its integrated smart governance platform, which tracks a case from report and intake through transfer, handling, and feedback, making the process easier to follow and supervise. The overall effect has been to push a substantial number of enforcement powers down toward the grassroots and, more importantly, to tie the authority granted to subdistrict offices to the responsibilities they are actually expected to carry.

(3) Integrated Resource Allocation: Strengthening Grassroots Capacity

The third problem was resource starvation: responsibilities kept moving down while the money, staff, and technology needed to carry them did not. Chongqing adjusted resource allocation along several fronts.

Financially, the municipality adopted the principle that "funds follow functions, and authority follows responsibility." It built a funding mechanism around the expenditure responsibilities of subdistrict offices, improved special transfer payments, and piloted direct funding arrangements in some areas, giving offices more freedom to spend according to local needs.

On the staffing side, the reform made it easier to move personnel between departments and posts. Under the "141" system, staff can be shifted across platforms as tasks change,

following the idea that "personnel follow tasks, and posts follow functions." The law enforcement reform added a "county-assigned, township-managed" arrangement under which more than 4,200 district- and county-level enforcement personnel were assigned to townships and subdistricts to work alongside local staff.

Technology received similar attention. Building on Digital Chongqing, the municipality rolled out a unified smart governance platform for grassroots areas. The platform pools demographic, geographic, facility, and incident data into a single grassroots governance database and allows sharing across municipal, district, and subdistrict levels. Subdistrict offices can now get hold of information when local issues arise, and repeated data collection plus redundant systems are gradually being squeezed out.

In sum, Chongqing worked on organization, authority, and resources in one movement rather than piecemeal. Organizational changes made coordination easier; mandate lists clarified who may act and who answers for the result; financial, human, and technological resources gave the new arrangements something to stand on. Together, these measures narrowed the gap between what subdistrict offices are expected to do and what they can actually deliver, and the experience carries lessons for similar reforms elsewhere.

4. Implications

The Chongqing experience carries lessons for urban grassroots administrative reform more broadly. Three stand out, and they track the organization, authority, and resources dimensions examined above.

(1)Building a Demand-Oriented and More Flexible Organizational Structure

Grassroots administrative reform has to be built around what local governance actually needs, not what an organization chart finds convenient. In many cities, vertical line departments and territorial governments remain fairly separate, which makes coordination slow and responses sluggish. Unified leadership and basic policy standards should stay in place; what has to change is the fit between agency design and residents' needs.

An integrated command center at the subdistrict level is one workable option. It needs clear leadership and clear accountability. It can also pull Party leadership, cross-departmental coordination, and emergency response under one roof. When different kinds of problems enter through the same platform, assignment and follow-up follow the same rules, which gives subdistrict offices a chance to act before a problem hardens into a crisis rather than tidying up afterwards.

Internal structure matters just as much. Adding another coordinating layer would not fix fragmented responsibility; it might simply thicken the bureaucracy. Subdistrict offices exist to serve residents directly, so their internal design should say so. Grouping related functions into integrated offices around the main areas of grassroots governance is one route: fewer departmental divides, more room for coordination and adjustment, and a stronger position for Party organizations in steering the work.

(2)Improving Mandate Lists and Follow-Up Supervision

Division of functions and powers between levels of government is the second set of lessons. Chongqing's mandate lists show how this division can be made explicit and how authority can be attached to responsibility in a concrete way, and other cities undertaking similar reforms may find the approach useful.

One lesson concerns the categories of powers themselves. Cities need to tell apart statutory, delegated, and commissioned enforcement powers, and to identify the matters that arise frequently or demand quick responses at the grassroots. Some powers will be basic, required by law; others can be delegated according to local needs. The first group gives subdistrict offices a stable core of responsibilities; the second gives them room to take on additional powers. Handled this way, the lists make it less likely that a subdistrict receives powers it cannot actually use.

Another lesson concerns supervision. It should run through the whole exercise of administrative power, from the initial report and assignment to handling and feedback. Digital platforms make this visible: each case can be followed, each stage has a responsible actor, and the resulting record becomes evidence for evaluating how delegated powers perform.

A third lesson is that mandate lists are not one-time documents. The results of delegated powers, and the capacity of subdistrict offices to absorb new responsibilities, need regular review; the lists should be adjusted when review shows they should. The division of authority and responsibility is then able to track changes in local governance needs.

(3)Forging Pathways for Integrated Resource Allocation and Targeted Downward Delivery

Resources make the other two dimensions sustainable. Chongqing's experience suggests that authority cannot be pushed downward indefinitely if funding, staff, and technology fail to follow. Financial support, for a start, should be tied to functions. New responsibilities should come with a stable funding source, and subdistrict offices need room to spend according to their own circumstances. Clearer rules and greater transparency help direct resources to the places where they matter most.

Personnel is another front. Staffing pools and position pools allow people to move between areas of work instead of being locked into one department; personnel can then follow tasks and positions can shift with functions. Training, incentives, and similar supports are also part of the package, since subdistrict offices need to attract and retain capable staff over the long run.

Technology and information belong in the same picture. Data sharing and system integration deserve more attention than they usually get. Better connections reduce duplicate data collection and wasteful investment in separate platforms, and they put the information grassroots officials need closer at hand.

Overall, none of this works alone. Institutional reform at the grassroots cannot rely on organizational adjustment by itself; structure has to be matched by clearer authority and responsibility and by adequate resources. When the three move together, transferring responsibilities to subdistrict offices has a real chance of improving grassroots governance.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the reform of subdistrict offices in Chongqing using the Organization–Authority–Resources framework. The case shows that many of the difficulties faced by subdistrict offices are connected to three basic issues: organizational arrangements that do not fully match their tasks, unclear divisions of authority and responsibility, and insufficient resources for carrying out assigned duties. These problems cannot be addressed by changing the organizational

structure alone. Changes in authority and responsibility need to be accompanied by corresponding changes in resource allocation.

Reform is an ongoing process. Future subdistrict governance must continue to address such challenges as deepening the participation of social forces and balancing administrative imperatives with community autonomy, so as to sustain the optimization of OAR fit and ultimately move toward a new urban governance configuration characterized by collaborative participation, shared responsibility, and shared benefits for all.

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