

# Social assistance in the Coronavirus pandemic: the current status of the system and the path to optimization

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**Abstract:** The social assistance system, as a basic social system arrangement related to the country's livelihood, has taken constructive temporary measures in the process of epidemic prevention and control of the COVID-19, safeguarding people's lives, maintaining social stability, and producing a wide range of social effects. However, it is also necessary to see that the social assistance system faces the dilemma of increasing the number of people to be assisted, the unsoundness of the emergency operation system, the lack of service level and the poor sustainability of assistance funds under the normalization of epidemic prevention and control. Therefore, we analyze the problems to find the possible optimization path of social assistance, make up the shortcomings of the social assistance system, estimate the participation of social organizations, and improve the response capacity of the social assistance system in the face of major public health events, so as to better play the role of underwriting protection for people's livelihood.

**Keywords:** Social assistance system; Epidemic prevention and control normalization; Dilemma; Optimization path.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 18th National Congress, China has built the largest social security system in the world, which provides favorable conditions for building a moderately prosperous society and achieving the first 100-year goal on schedule. [1] And social assistance is an important part of the social security system, mainly playing the role of the bottom. And the Coronavirus pandemic outbreak after 2020 is a major public health emergency with the fastest spread, the widest infected population, the difficulty of prevention and control, and the longest duration that has occurred in China since the founding of the country. The Party and the State dispatched all human and material resources to ensure the health of the people by adhering to the principle of a national strategy.[2] The social assistance system also played a huge role in the epidemic prevention and control battle, such as expanding the system's coverage and increasing temporary assistance, while also exposing the problems of China's public health emergency response system, government investment in public health, and joint prevention and control of the epidemic in the process of epidemic response before the big test of epidemic prevention and control. From the perspective of practical necessity, this paper analyzes the problems and possible improvement space of social assistance under the normal situation of epidemic prevention and control, and further proposes the optimization path with practicality.

## 2. Difficulties faced by the social assistance system under the normalization of epidemic prevention and control

The normalization of epidemic prevention and control is relative to the emergency state of epidemic prevention and control, and is based on the long-term impact of epidemic or the normalization of epidemic risk. In this paper, we focus on two dimensions of epidemic prevention and control

normalization from underwriting protection and epidemic prevention and escalation. [3] The main purpose of the underwriting guarantee is to stabilize the basic livelihood of people, and the purpose of the epidemic prevention system upgrade is to improve the country's ability to prevent and control sudden risks. Normalized epidemic prevention and control in this paper refers to a system that makes epidemic prevention and control the norm with a long impact time and a long span of prevention and control time. The social assistance system needs to adapt to the long-term epidemic prevention and control policy, and improve the mechanism of social assistance to improve the system's resilience and ability to resist risks and guarantee the basic quality of life of the needy. [4]

In the community-wide fight against the Coronavirus pandemic, the social assistance mechanism plays a role: firstly, it provides basic livelihood protection for people in distress; secondly, it improves social harmony and stability, and embodies the purpose of people first and life first in China's social policy. The economic and social livelihoods have been viciously affected, which has brought challenges to the social assistance mechanism. The current regular epidemic prevention and control has also put new demands on the social assistance system.

### 2.1. Inadequate legislation affects the performance of the social assistance system

The necessary prerequisite for social assistance-related work to be carried out in a rapid, orderly and standardized manner is sound laws and regulations. Since the outbreak of the new epidemic in 2020, it is difficult to effectively release the maximum effectiveness of social assistance by merely relying on the Interim Measures for Social Assistance issued by the State Council in 2014, and the State Council and other relevant government departments must issue policy documents to check the existing policies to fill in the gaps.[5] Up to now, China has not yet promulgated a special "Social

Assistance Law" to unify the national social assistance-related regulations.

A complete legal system is a necessary prerequisite for the orderly, standardized and rapid promotion of social assistance work. After the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, it is difficult for social assistance to effectively perform the function of social assistance simply by relying on the Interim Measures for Social Assistance, and relevant departments must issue policy documents to supplement the existing policies. To date, the government has not yet issued a special Social Assistance Law to oversee the national social assistance legal system. Now that China has entered the stage of normalized epidemic prevention and control, promoting the social assistance law passed by the National People's Congress is the key to releasing the maximum effectiveness of the social assistance system. [6]

## **2.2. Poor integration and unclear division of social assistance programs**

The social assistance system covers a wide range and many items, including urban and rural minimum living security, special hardship support, temporary assistance, special assistance and many other aspects. It seems that each project has clear division of labor and responsibility, but the integration of the whole system of social assistance is not high, and there is no clear boundary of responsibility for each project, so it is very easy to have fuzzy areas, overlapping policies and blank policies. And when the social assistance system is faced with some emergencies, the process of resource allocation to play a full range of relief measures is disorganized and the relief objects overlap, which not only increases the workload of the staff, but also is not conducive to follow-up related service management; the overall effect of social assistance cannot be maximized, and the functions need to be transferred in order to implement relief. In short, it is inefficient, ineffective, and costly in the face of public health emergencies such as the Coronavirus pandemic. [7]

## **2.3. Legal level, the operability of social assistance measures is weak**

A total of 70 articles in the Provisional Measures for Social Assistance appear to make clear provisions for social assistance-related work, but in fact the average number of articles in each chapter is even less than 6, which leads to poor practical operability at the legal level. [8] The design of the social assistance system is complicated and the management operations are tedious, all of which limit the usefulness of the social assistance system.

## **2.4. Inadequate social assistance emergency management system**

China's social assistance system has been developed for more than 70 years since its establishment and has gradually been perfected. Compared with the social welfare system and social insurance system, social assistance mainly plays a bottom-up protection function and ensures social stability and maintains economic development. However, in the face of the sudden emergence of the new epidemic, the emergency mechanism of social assistance seems to be overstretched.

The outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic exposed the imperfection of the social assistance emergency management system, the lack of capacity of the social assistance system to deal with major emergencies, the normalized and professional social assistance emergency mechanism is still in its infancy,

and a comprehensive, accurate and efficient social assistance emergency mechanism has not yet been established, and there is also a lack of corresponding early warning mechanisms and mechanisms to deal with emergencies. In the face of the Coronavirus pandemic, government departments have introduced social assistance policies, but there are still some problems: first, the policy synergy of government departments is insufficient; second, the coordination and cooperation ability among government departments is insufficient, which leads to the introduction of policies that are not systematic and scattered, which is not conducive to eligible audiences to apply for assistance, the phenomenon of delayed assistance, the policy does not achieve the expected effect, which is important for promoting the social This is not as effective as it should be in promoting the national coordination of the emergency relief mechanism and soothing the negative impact of the epidemic on people.

## **2.5. Uneven levels of social assistance services**

After the prevention and control of the Coronavirus pandemic became normalized, the social assistance mechanism also gradually moved closer to the normalized mechanism. In the process of epidemic prevention and control, the content of various services of social assistance is single and too simple, and the largest form of assistance is the minimum living security system.[9] The minimum subsistence security system can largely alleviate the pressure of living of the poor in society, but the form of assistance has rigid characteristics, is a one-way "relief process", the relief side and the recipient is simply the form of giving, but not to achieve the full range of social assistance-related services.

So far, a more complete social assistance service mechanism has not been formed, failing to pay attention to the actual needs of the poor, the service assistance is not accurate. This problem is more obvious during the Coronavirus pandemic. First, the cash assistance did not address the problems encountered by some people who purchased essential items in time due to the epidemic prevention and control policy. [10] Second, it was also clear that cash assistance did not address the lack of endogenous motivation of the socially poor. Thirdly, due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, sick members of the socially disadvantaged groups and their families have been adversely affected psychologically to a certain extent, while social assistance lacks psychological relief services for socially disadvantaged groups.

## **3. The optimization path of social assistance system under the normalization of the prevention and control of the Coronavirus pandemic**

### **3.1. Further improve the laws related to social assistance**

As we all know, the standardized operation of social assistance should be based on a complete law. According to the guiding idea of "strengthening the construction of universal, basic and bottomless people's livelihood and guaranteeing the basic life of the masses" in the Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee, the Social Assistance Law needs to clarify the boundaries of the government's responsibility and guarantee the basic living needs of the nationals. It should be extended from the

recipients of the minimum living security to all kinds of low-income members of society and social groups in temporary hardship.[11] As mentioned above, the current law on social assistance in China is the administrative law of the State Council's Interim Measures on Social Assistance introduced in 2014, therefore, the National People's Congress needs to introduce the Law on Social Assistance as soon as possible to provide specific regulations for various service measures of social assistance.

### **3.2. Clarify the boundaries of responsibility for social assistance programs**

Under the current structure of the Provisional Measures for Social Assistance, it is necessary to solve the problem of crossover or gaps in the social assistance mechanism by integrating various sub-programs of social assistance. By reorganizing the relationship between social assistance sub-projects, we can avoid the phenomenon that social assistance sub-projects need the support of other sub-projects or transfer their functions when they need to perform their functions.

It should be noted that, in integrating social assistance programs, we should further promote higher-level legislation on social assistance based on the clarification of program boundaries, build a comprehensive and multi-level social assistance pattern, and promulgate as soon as possible a comprehensive social assistance law with the main contents of minimum living security, disaster relief, special hardship support, temporary assistance and employment assistance. The Social Assistance Law, which has higher legal effect and stronger practicality, makes the work related to social assistance lawful and followable. [11]

### **3.3. Improve the operability of social assistance laws**

Improve the operability of the legal aspects of social assistance, and strengthen the clarity and portability of the legal provisions in their use by checking the gaps in the legal provisions on social assistance. To build an effective, complete and healthy legal network of social assistance, to strengthen the social security function of social assistance work, and to emphasize the role that social assistance can release in the fight against major public health emergencies.

### **3.4. Improve social assistance emergency management mechanism and enhance flexibility**

In the face of major public health emergencies, China's emergency management system distinguishes between normal management and non-normal management. The Party and the State have established the principle of "unified leadership, comprehensive coordination, categorized management, hierarchical responsibility, and local management as the mainstay" for emergency measures. The existing social assistance system in China has not yet established an independent emergency response system. Building up an emergency management system for social assistance can provide a timely response to major public health emergencies and help the people in distress, preventing the inefficient operation of social assistance due to the slow response and ineffectiveness of the mechanism. And improve the social assistance emergency management mechanism can start from the following aspects.

First of all, an independent epidemic relief management

department needs to be established in the social assistance system. Social assistance is a comprehensive social work, and the undercover protection of the needy requires the cooperation of various departments. Therefore, we should strengthen the systematic cooperation among the civil affairs system, financial operation system and emergency management system departments.

Second, it is necessary to improve the emergency management mechanism of social assistance. After the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, it has shown the importance of building and improving the national medical supplies reserve system, and constantly improving the emergency mechanism of aid from the capacity protection, dispatching system and reserve system, so as to achieve the goals of unified management, centralized allocation, daily service and emergency response in times of disaster, saving and high efficiency, and to ensure the efficient operation of the social aid system. Once again, it is necessary to build an information sharing system for social assistance to facilitate the timely grasp of information by various departments, so as to facilitate the exchange between horizontal departments and ensure the unified deployment of resources. At the same time, we should improve the supervision system of social assistance, and establish a scientific and reasonable evaluation system with the cooperation of higher authorities, internal departments and social third-party evaluation agencies.

Again, social assistance services need to be diversified. The diversity and complexity of the needs of the distressed people themselves illustrate the need for diversification of social assistance services. After the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, the forms of social assistance are gradually diversifying for the recipient masses by providing mainly in-kind and cash assistance and daily care for special poor groups. [12] The future development path of social assistance still requires cash assistance, but it becomes increasingly necessary to expand the service functions of assistance. The expansion of the service function of social assistance can be started from the following two aspects. (1) Pay attention to the reasonable needs of the recipients and provide corresponding services on the basis of giving cash and material assistance. (2) Social assistance services can provide psychological counseling, spiritual comfort, and daily life care services. Spiritual comfort and psychological counseling refer to the provision of psychological counseling-type services to the distressed members of society, which can alleviate their psychological pressure, especially the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, some people in need of anxiety, panic, anxiety and other phenomena, the provision of psychological counseling can provide the anxiety of the distressed people. Daily life care is mainly aimed at groups of people such as the disabled elderly, children, and people with disabilities, and solving their basic living needs cannot be solved by relying closely on cash and in-kind assistance. With the normalization of epidemic prevention and control, service relief for distressed members of society should be emphasized, and special psychological assistance should be provided to families and individuals who have lost their loved ones due to the epidemic. By building an all-round protection system in the form of "material + spiritual + service", the material aid-based assistance will be expanded to a full range of social assistance such as life support, spiritual comfort and social integration.

### 3.5. Expanding the coverage of social assistance, especially temporary assistance

Faced with the heavy blow of the Coronavirus pandemic, China's economy is facing enormous challenges that require us to adopt more targeted and inclusive measures to increase the protection of basic livelihoods. Relief for the poor can be implemented in the following ways:

First, the establishment of a mechanism for the increase of funds for social assistance standards and the emergency adjustment mechanism in unexpected situations. The former should gradually expand the recipients from the management of household registration to the management of the resident population, the latter refers to the sudden situation of temporary distress people into the scope of relief; second is to ensure the timely distribution of relief supplies. The process of application for approval of various types of assistance for the online platform for processing, regular review during the epidemic relief time limit extension and other policies, these for ensuring the basic livelihood of people in distress during the epidemic and people in temporary distress has a huge role; third, simplify the procedures for determining relief, expand the coverage of temporary relief. During the prevention and control period of the new epidemic, low-income households, poor people, infected low-income marginal households, and people who are infected with the virus in foreign places or affected by the prevention and control of the epidemic due to visiting relatives or going out to work, etc. can refer to the low-income standard to issue temporary assistance to ensure the basic quality of life of these groups; fourth, the low-income marginal households are included in the scope of the low-income insurance, which are low-income people with poor risk resistance and whose daily life is affected by the epidemic. These low-income people have poor risk resistance and their daily lives are greatly affected by the epidemic.

### 3.6. Expanding the financing set of social assistance

The funding and operation of social assistance is supported by government finances. The impact of the new epidemic has increased the number of people in need of assistance but reduced tax revenue due to the economic downturn, which has put great pressure on the government's finances. The first possible solution is to adjust the current social assistance fund mechanism in China, and local governments at all levels should increase the financial investment and also guide social organizations to participate in social assistance work, using the unique flexibility of social organizations and the characteristics of resource allocation flexibility, encourage social organizations to participate in social assistance and can establish social organizations' assistance institutions, which can form a multi-faceted financial investment mechanism. Secondly, in order to solve the problem of uneven level of social assistance in western and rural poor areas due to the unbalanced regional economic development. Finally, social financing is needed to make up for the lack of government funds and to improve the quality of social assistance.

## 4. Summary

In the face of the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, China's social assistance mechanism has played the role of underwriting protection, but some of these problems have also emerged in the process. How to further optimize the social assistance system is the next step to be considered. China's social assistance cause should realize the change of social assistance standard from single to diversified; the change of social assistance target from helping the poor to helping the needy; the change of social assistance level from survival to development; the change of social assistance service mode from fragmentation to systemic. By exploring a social assistance system with minimum subsistence security and special hardship support as the main body, supplemented by temporary assistance system and other special social assistance, we will further improve the level of social assistance protection ability in China and effectively guarantee the bottom line of basic livelihood.

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