Lecture Notes in Education, Arts, Management and Social Science,
2026, Volume 4, Issue 7
https://bbwpublisher.com/journal/LNE
Online ISSN: 2705-053X
Print ISSN: 3083-1091

The Operational Dilemmas and Optimization Pathways of Villager Self-Governance under the Rural Revitalization Strategy

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Abstract: As the core part of China's grassroots mass autonomy system, villager autonomy constitutes the foundation of the rural governance system that integrates self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue. It plays an important role in activating rural endogenous momentum, protecting farmers' dominant position, and consolidating the foundation of grassroots democracy during rural revitalization. Using the AGIL systemic functional model as the analytical tool and combining official statistical data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Bureau of Statistics, this paper examines the practical operational dilemmas of the villager autonomy system from four functional dimensions: Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latent Pattern Maintenance. It also explores the causes of these dilemmas. The study finds that the current villager autonomy system faces systematic problems. These include insufficient resource acquisition capacity, deviated autonomy goals, failed integration of multiple governance subjects, and weakened support from local rural social culture. Based on the logic of AGIL function restoration, this paper proposes optimization paths from four dimensions: resource supply, goal calibration, mechanism integration, and cultural cultivation. The aim is to improve the quality and efficiency of the villager autonomy system and support the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas.

Keywords: Rural revitalization; Villager autonomy; AGIL model; Grassroots governance; Grassroots democracy

Online publication: July 26, 2026

1. Introduction

Article 41 of the Rural Revitalization Promotion Law clearly requires the construction of a modern rural social governance system. This system features Party committee leadership, government responsibility, democratic consultation, social coordination, public participation, legal guarantee, and scientific and technological support. It also requires improving a sound rural governance system that integrates self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue. Villager autonomy is the fundamental institutional carrier of this governance system. It centers on democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management,

and democratic supervision. Through these processes, villagers obtain the rights of self-management, self-education, self-service, and self-supervision. Villager autonomy is therefore a practical form of whole-process people's democracy in rural areas.

Since the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, the standardized construction of village-level autonomous organizations has been steadily promoted across the country. According to the development achievements of the 14th Five-Year Plan, by the end of 2024, the share of village Party branch secretaries with college or higher education nationwide had risen to 52.4%. The coverage rate of village (community) service stations reached 97.9%, and 84.1% of administrative villages had built public legal service offices. These figures indicate significant progress in the physical infrastructure of village-level autonomy and in the structure of village officials [1]. However, urban-rural factor mobility continues, and the rural population structure is changing. Against this background, many systematic contradictions have appeared in the practical operation of villager autonomy. These include the absence of participating villagers caused by the massive outflow of young and middle-aged laborers [2], the compression of autonomous space due to administrative tasks [3], formalized village affairs consultation and supervision mechanisms, and weak collective economies with insufficient autonomous resources in villages. Therefore, addressing the problems in the implementation of villager autonomy and promoting the high-quality development of grassroots autonomy is necessary for effective democratic governance.

Most existing studies discuss the problems of villager autonomy from a single dimension. They lack holistic analysis based on systematic management frameworks. Therefore, this paper adopts the AGIL systemic functional model. It regards villager autonomy as an organically operating social system. It systematically diagnoses the operational bottlenecks of villager autonomy from four dimensions: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance. It then analyzes their causes and proposes improvement measures.

2. Theoretical foundation and concept definition

2.1. AGIL systemic functional model and adaptive analysis

Proposed by Talcott Parsons, the AGIL model is an analytical tool for organizational and social system management. The theory holds that any sustainably operating social system must fulfill four basic functions at the same time. If any function is absent, system failure may follow [4].

First, the Adaptation function (A). The system must acquire resources from the external environment and convert them into usable elements for system operation. In villager autonomy, this function measures a village's ability to obtain talents, funds, policies, land, and other resources to support autonomous affairs.

Second, the Goal Attainment function (G). The system needs to clarify its core goals and mobilize organizational resources to achieve them. The legal goal of villager autonomy is to safeguard villagers' collective interests and handle village public affairs. Goal deviation will lead to the alienation of autonomous governance outcomes.

Third, the Integration function (I). This function coordinates multiple subjects within the system. It clarifies the power and responsibility boundaries between subjects, resolves conflicts, and ensures orderly internal collaboration. The villager autonomy system covers multiple subjects. These include township governments, village Party organizations, village committees, villager representatives, village collective economic organizations, and social organizations. They require unified integration and coordination.

Fourth, the Latent Pattern Maintenance function (L). This function sustains the system's values, cultural norms, and collective identity. It fosters a culture of participation and guarantees the long-term stable operation of the system. It corresponds to rural democratic awareness, village regulations and folk conventions, and rural social capital.

2.2. Connotation of villager autonomy

Centering on the "four democracies" (democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic supervision), villager autonomy is a grassroots governance arrangement in which villagers exercise self-management, self-education, self-service, and self-supervision in accordance with the law. It combines democratic practice with routine village governance.

3. Operational dilemmas of villager autonomy in rural revitalization based on the AGIL model

In recent years, with the continuous implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, China's grassroots mass autonomy has been steadily advanced. The standardization level of villager autonomy has been improved. This has helped maintain rural order and protect villagers' legitimate rights and interests. However, rural social structure has changed. Governance affairs have continued to grow. Villagers' demands have become more diverse. As a result, the original autonomous operation model has gradually failed to adapt to the requirements of governance modernization. Based on Parsons' AGIL model, this paper analyzes multiple structural problems in current villager autonomy practice. These problems are examined from four dimensions: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance. They have become key bottlenecks restricting the upgrading of grassroots governance and the effective implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

3.1. Adaptation function dilemma: Insufficient resource acquisition capacity and unbalanced supply of autonomous resources

The adaptation function requires the autonomous system to continuously absorb external resources such as talent and funds. Current rural population mobility and deficiencies in the collective economy have directly weakened the resource acquisition capacity of the autonomous system.

First, the loss of talent resources leads to the hollowing out of autonomous participants. Urbanization has driven young and middle-aged rural laborers to work in cities. In most villages, permanent residents are mainly the elderly, women, and children. Data from the Seventh National Population Census show that the proportion of people aged 60 and above among rural permanent residents is much higher than that in urban areas. This highlights the severe aging problem in rural China. Young and middle-aged villagers with education and governance capabilities work outside for long periods. They cannot return to their hometowns to attend villager meetings and villager representative assemblies. As a result, the participant group for democratic election and decision-making is limited. In some regions, the candidate pool for village committee re-election is narrow. This leads to problems such as aging village officials and insufficient reserve talent. Although the proportion of village Party branch secretaries with college education or above has risen to 52.4% in recent years [1], the overall educational level and governance capacity of ordinary villager representatives and village affairs supervision committee members remain uneven.

Second, a weak collective economy causes a shortage of funds for autonomous operation. Most ordinary villages in central and western China have meager collective economic income. They lack stable operating revenue. As a result, the maintenance of public facilities and the development of public affairs depend heavily on superior fiscal transfer payments. Once superior project funds are suspended, improvements in rural human settlements, public service provision, and villager autonomy activities cannot be sustained. Village autonomous organizations lack independently disposable funds. This restricts their autonomy in handling village public affairs. They can only passively wait for superior resource allocation. The resource acquisition capacity of the autonomous system is therefore weak.

Third, resource allocation is unbalanced. Resources are disproportionately directed to demonstration villages and key villages. Ordinary and remote villages receive fewer policy and project resources. This widens the gap in autonomous development foundations across regions.

3.2. Goal attainment function dilemma: Deviated autonomy goals and compressed autonomous space by administrative tasks

The goal attainment function requires the system to operate around the core goal of safeguarding villagers' public interests. In practical governance scenarios, village committees show a certain tendency toward "administrativization." This leads to deviated autonomy goals.

According to legal provisions, township governments maintain a relationship of guidance, support, and assistance with village committees. This is not a superior-subordinate relationship. However, in grassroots practice, a large number of administrative tasks are delegated to village-level organizations. Various statistical reports, inspections, assessments, and record-keeping tasks occupy most of the village officials' energy [5]. The work focus of village officials has shifted from responding to villagers' demands to completing superior assessment indicators. This weakens the original goal of villager autonomy, namely "serving local villagers."

In some villages, the "four deliberations and two disclosures" system has become formalistic. A deliberation system has been established. However, major decisions are made by village officials in advance. Villager representative meetings and general villager meetings only conduct procedural voting. Democratic decision-making has become a mere formality. It is difficult for villagers' collective demands to enter the decision-making process. As a result, villager autonomy fails to effectively safeguard villagers' common interests. The goal attainment function therefore fails. In the implementation of rural revitalization projects, some construction projects are arranged top-down by superior departments. Villagers are not fully consulted in project planning. The completed projects fail to meet villagers' actual needs. This causes resource waste and reflects the deviation of autonomous goals from villagers' demands.

3.3. Integration function dilemma: Vague power-responsibility boundaries of multiple subjects and failed collaborative integration mechanism

The core of the integration function is to clarify the powers and responsibilities of multiple subjects within the system and realize collaborative governance. In the current villager autonomy system, powers and responsibilities among township governments, village Party organizations, village committees, village collective economic organizations, and villagers are ambiguous. This leads to role confusion among governance subjects.

First, the power and responsibility boundaries of Party organizations, administrative bodies, autonomous organizations, and collective economic organizations are unclear. In some villages, personnel concurrently

hold positions in village committees and village collective economic organizations. Assets and affairs are mixed. The blurred boundaries among village affairs management, collective asset management, and Party work easily create supervision blind spots [6]. Overlapping tenure of personnel in village Party organizations, village committees, and village collective economic organizations is common in rural areas. Some villages integrate the account management of Party affairs, village affairs, and financial affairs. Most members of village affairs supervision committees are elderly Party members who concurrently hold other posts. As a result, supervision independence is insufficient.

Second, villagers are marginalized in governance. As the core subjects of autonomy, villagers have limited participation channels in the entire governance system [7]. Migrant villagers lack regular online deliberation channels. Resident villagers face insufficient participation incentives and generally have a "free-riding" mentality. They view village affairs as the sole responsibility of village officials and show low willingness to participate.

Third, grassroots multiple governance subjects lack regular consultation platforms. Social organizations, village elites, returning entrepreneurs, and other subjects lack institutionalized channels to participate in rural affairs. It is therefore difficult to integrate diverse forces into the villager autonomy system and form governance synergy.

3.4. Latent pattern maintenance function dilemma: Declining rural social capital and weak democratic autonomy culture

The latent pattern maintenance function relies on value consensus, rural culture, and rule awareness to sustain the long-term stable operation of the system. Impacted by urbanization, the traditional rural social structure has changed. Village communities have gradually weakened.

On the one hand, the traditional acquaintance society has disintegrated. Rural public spirit has faded. Long-term population outflow has reduced interactions among villagers. It has also weakened neighborhood trust and rural collective consciousness. Villagers pay more attention to individual family interests. They lack collective identity with village public affairs. They also have low recognition of village regulations and autonomous rules.

On the other hand, grassroots democratic cognition is insufficient. Many villagers are unaware of their legal rights in villager autonomy and the functions of villager meetings and village affairs supervision. Some villagers simply equate autonomy with "village officials managing the village." Their awareness of democratic supervision is weak. The formalization of village affairs disclosure persists. Disclosure content is vague and not updated in a timely manner. It is also difficult for villagers to understand and supervise. This further undermines villagers' trust in the autonomy system [8]. The formulation of village regulations and folk conventions simply copies universal templates without combining local village conditions. As a result, these conventions have weak binding force. They fail to give play to the supplementary role of the rule of virtue and cannot support the long-term stable operation of the autonomous system. Some villages revise their regulations by directly modifying online templates. They do not organize villagers to discuss and vote on each clause. The empty and impractical content leads to weak binding force in resolving neighborhood disputes and restraining bad rural customs.

4. Cause analysis of operational dilemmas of villager autonomy based on the AGIL model

4.1. Causes of adaptation function deficiencies: One-way urban-rural factor flow and imperfect resource guarantee system

Under the urban-rural dual structure, the continuous flow of labor and capital from rural to urban areas is a long-term structural problem. Rural industries are underdeveloped. The cultivation of the collective economy features a long cycle and high risks. Most villages lack sustainable operating industries and cannot generate endogenous funds. Meanwhile, the incentive mechanism for talent return is inadequate. Guarantees, benefits, and development paths for returning talents participating in village-level governance are insufficient. It is therefore difficult to retain young and middle-aged talents for rural autonomy. The funding guarantee system for village-level organizations mainly relies on superior fiscal subsidies. It lacks regular and institutionalized collective economy support mechanisms. The autonomous system can only passively obtain resources from external input. Its endogenous capacity for resource generation is insufficient.

4.2. Causes of goal deviation: Grassroots assessment pressure transmission and inadequate implementation of power-responsibility list system

The grassroots assessment system is dominated by top-down task assessment. Indicators focus on quantitative account records and project completion. Villagers' satisfaction carries a low weight. Under the pressure-based governance system, township governments tend to decompose and delegate administrative tasks to villages. This forces village committees to undertake a large amount of administrative work. The village-level power and responsibility list system is not fully implemented. The division between government administrative affairs and villagers' autonomous affairs is ambiguous. This leads to confusion between the two types of affairs. Meanwhile, rigid constraints and accountability mechanisms for villagers' democratic decision-making are insufficient [9]. This leads to simplified deliberation procedures for major village affairs and the substitution of autonomous goals by administrative goals.

4.3. Causes of integration failure: Insufficient institutional supply for multi-subject collaboration and lack of villager participation incentives

Current laws and regulations on grassroots governance clarify the framework of power and responsibility division for village Party organizations, village committees, and collective economic organizations. However, they lack detailed operational rules. The separation mechanism of decision-making, implementation, and supervision has not been fully implemented under the overlapping tenure of governance subjects. The villager participation incentive mechanism is deficient. Villagers who attend meetings and participate in deliberations rarely receive reasonable compensation for lost work time. They bear individual costs for public affairs participation while sharing collective benefits. This highlights the dilemma of collective action. Social forces such as village elites and social organizations lack stable institutional access to autonomous governance. There is also no regular consultation platform for the integration of multiple subjects.

4.4. Causes of pattern maintenance weakening: Dissolution of rural communities and long-term absence of grassroots democratic culture cultivation

The in-depth penetration of the market economy has transformed the logic of rural society. It has formed an individual-interest-first mindset and gradually weakened rural public spirit. Grassroots legal education

and democratic publicity are mostly one-off campaigns without sustained education. As a result, villagers' cognition of laws related to grassroots autonomy is limited. Some village regulations and folk conventions are formulated through simplistic procedures without full villager discussion. They feature unrealistic content and weak moral binding force. Publicity for village affairs supervision is insufficient [10]. Supervision channels for villagers are inconvenient. Over the long run, this reduces villagers' recognition of the autonomy system and weakens the latent pattern maintenance function.

5. Countermeasures for improving villager autonomy from the perspective of AGIL function restoration

5.1. Compensating adaptation function: Expanding resource acquisition channels and enhancing endogenous hematopoietic capacity of autonomy

First, implement the village-level collective economy cultivation project. Relying on rural revitalization industrial support policies, villages should develop characteristic industries based on their resource endowments. They should revitalize collective assets such as idle homesteads, collective barren mountains, and idle factories. They should expand sources of collective operating income and enhance the independent fund supply capacity of village autonomy. For villages with weak collective economies, special fiscal support funds should be implemented. A "one village, one policy" assistance mechanism should also be established.

Second, improve the village-level talent introduction and cultivation system. Optimize the salary guarantee and promotion incentive mechanism for village officials. This can attract college student village officials, returning youth, veterans, and village elites to join village "two committees" and villager representative teams. Establish a village-level reserve talent pool. Carry out regular governance capacity training for village officials. Improve the professional level of autonomous governance teams. Build online deliberation platforms so that migrant villagers can remotely participate in village affairs voting and consultation. This can address insufficient participation caused by talent outflow.

Third, optimize balanced resource allocation. Prioritize resource and project allocation to remote and underdeveloped villages. This can narrow the gap in autonomous development foundations among villages.

5.2. Calibrating goal attainment function: Clarifying power-responsibility boundaries and returning to the fundamental goal of villager autonomy

First, implement the village-level power and responsibility list system. Strictly distinguish government administrative affairs from villager autonomous affairs. Prohibit the arbitrary transfer of non-autonomous administrative matters to village committees. Establish a village affairs access mechanism. Empower village-level organizations to refuse unapproved affairs. This can effectively reduce grassroots burdens and redirect village officials' energy to villagers' public services.

Second, strictly standardize the democratic decision-making process of "four deliberations and two disclosures." Take the resolutions of villager meetings and villager representative meetings as the legally required prior procedure for major village projects and collective asset disposal. Prohibit the implementation of affairs without complete democratic procedures.

Third, improve the village affairs disclosure system and refine the disclosure catalog. Fully, detailedly, and timely disclose information on collective assets, engineering projects, and subsidy funds through multiple channels. These include village bulletin boards and WeChat groups. This safeguards villagers' right

to know. Incorporate villagers' satisfaction into the core assessment indicators for village officials. Reverse the tendency of "prioritizing superior accountability over villager service." Return villager autonomy to its original goal of serving villagers' collective interests.

5.3. Strengthening integration function: Straightening multi-subject relationships and building a collaborative autonomy pattern

First, adhere to the overall leadership of village Party organizations. Clarify the relationship among village Party organizations, village committees, and village collective economic organizations. Promote separate accounts and clearly assigned responsibilities for Party affairs, village affairs, and financial affairs. Clarify their respective power and responsibilities.

Second, improve consultation platforms such as villager representative meetings and village-level deliberation committees. Implement the innovative pilot mechanism for village-level deliberation. Attract villager representatives, village elites, social organizations, and returning entrepreneurs to participate in consultation on village public affairs.

Third, improve the operation mechanism of village affairs supervision committees. Guarantee their independent supervision power. Realize whole-process supervision over village-level decision-making, finance, and engineering projects. Establish a villager participation incentive mechanism. Provide reasonable compensation for lost work time to villager representatives and participating villagers. Reduce villagers' participation costs. Break the dilemma of collective action and realize collaborative governance of multiple subjects.

5.4. Consolidating latent pattern maintenance function: Reshaping rural public culture and cultivating grassroots democratic consensus

First, sustain public outreach on grassroots democracy and the rule of law. The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees and the Rural Revitalization Promotion Law should be regularly publicized. This informs villagers of their statutory rights to democratic election, decision-making, management, and supervision.

Second, guide villages to democratically revise village regulations and folk conventions in accordance with the law. Based on local customs and conditions, villagers should conduct full deliberation and voting. In this way, such conventions fit village realities and exert the soft restraints and educational functions of the rule of virtue. Village communities should be revitalized. Relying on rural cultural auditoriums and New-Era Civilization Practice Stations, collective cultural activities should be organized. These activities can foster a rural public spirit featuring mutual assistance, co-construction, and shared benefits.

Third, open accessible channels for villagers' supervision and complaints. Establish a closed-loop feedback mechanism. These measures enhance villagers' trust in the autonomy system and consolidate the cultural and social foundations for the operation of villager autonomy.

6. Conclusion

As the cornerstone of rural governance, the operational quality of villager autonomy directly determines the implementation outcomes of the rural revitalization strategy. Drawing on Parsons' AGIL systemic-functional model in management studies, this paper treats villager autonomy as an integrated operating system. From its four functions—Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latent Pattern Maintenance—it systematically

identifies multiple predicaments. These include resource shortages, goal deviation, collaborative failure, and cultural attenuation. Rather than isolated defects, these dilemmas constitute holistic problems arising from mutual interactions among the four systemic functions. Under the premise of upholding the Party's overall leadership, we should continuously improve the rural governance system that integrates self-governance, the rule of law, and the rule of virtue. We should effectively guarantee farmers' principal status in rural revitalization, revitalize the villager autonomy institution, and consolidate the grassroots-democratic foundation for comprehensive rural revitalization.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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