

# Empowerment-Oriented Growth: Practical Pathways for Social Work Agencies in Community-Level Governance

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## Abstract

In the process of advancing Chinese modernization and improving the social governance system, grassroots governance is gradually shifting from a “management-oriented” to an “empowerment-oriented” approach. How to stimulate the endogenous motivation of grassroots actors through empowerment mechanisms has become a key issue in promoting the modernization of social governance. Taking Community H in Yinchuan, Ningxia as a typical case, this study adopts a “resources–capabilities–institutions” analytical framework to systematically examine the evolutionary logic and staged characteristics of community empowerment. The findings indicate that empowerment-oriented growth is not a linear process, but rather follows a curvilinear trajectory of “initial empowerment—capacity cultivation—recurring dilemmas—organic growth.” In the initial stage, the concentrated infusion of external resources effectively activated community vitality but also generated dependency risks. During the capacity cultivation stage, resident leaders gradually emerged, and public participation shifted from “passive” to “active.” In the recurring dilemmas stage, administrative absorption and institutional formalization undermined the effectiveness of empowerment, leading to fluctuations. Ultimately, in the stage of organic growth, the integration of resources, maturity of capacities, and institutional embedding interacted to foster sustainable community governance. The study further reveals that resource empowerment provides the conditions, capacity empowerment shapes the driving force, and institutional empowerment ensures the consolidation of outcomes. The dynamic tension and interaction among these three dimensions across different stages constitute the internal logic of empowerment-oriented growth. Therefore, advancing the sustainable development of community governance requires the organic integration of diversified resource coordination, progressive capacity cultivation, and endogenous institutional embedding.

**Keywords:** social work agencies, community-level governance, empowerment theory, practical pathways

## 1. Problem Statement

In the process of Chinese-style modernization and the continuous improvement of the social governance system, grassroots governance has been gradually shifting from a “management-oriented” to an “empowerment-oriented” approach. The Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee explicitly proposed to “build a social governance structure characterized by co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits.” The 14th Five-Year Plan and subsequent policy documents have also repeatedly emphasized the need to enhance the capacity of grassroots social organizations and community residents through empowerment, enabling them to play a more significant role in community governance and public service provision. This policy orientation indicates that, in the context of the new era, the core of community governance lies not merely in the functional division among government, market, and society, but rather in how empowerment mechanisms can stimulate the endogenous motivation of grassroots actors, thereby promoting the sustainable development of social governance.

Nevertheless, empowerment practices in reality have not always fully aligned with policy expectations. In some localities, when advancing community construction, governments tend to rely excessively on financial allocations, project contracting, or the provision of venues, reducing “empowerment” to a mere supply of resources. Although such approaches may activate community vitality in the short term, they often lack capacity cultivation and institutional safeguards. As a result, once external support diminishes, organizations and residents often fall into stagnation or even disintegration. This phenomenon of “input-driven growth” and “dependency-based operation” has repeatedly appeared in many cases, not only weakening policy effectiveness but also giving rise, to some extent, to problems such as “pseudo-empowerment” and “performative participation” (Xu and Xu, 2016; Luo, 2018).

Based on this recognition, this paper introduces the analytical perspective of “empowerment-oriented growth.” Compared with existing research, this perspective emphasizes that empowerment is not a static outcome but a dynamic process; its value does not lie simply in whether empowerment occurs, but in whether it can guide community organizations and residents into a trajectory of continuous accumulation and adaptive adjustment (Xia, 2019). Specifically, the development of empowerment often goes through the stages of “initial empowerment, capacity cultivation, recurring dilemmas, and organic growth,” with each stage reflecting the tension and interaction among resources, capacities, and institutions. Such phasic and fluctuating characteristics constitute the basic logic of empowerment-oriented growth.

Accordingly, this paper selects Community H in Yinchuan as a typical case. This community, situated in a multi-ethnic context, faces the dual challenges of limited resources and insufficient capacities, while also possessing unique conditions for institutional innovation and cultural integration. Through a case study, this paper constructs a “resources–capacities–institutions” analytical framework to examine in depth the logic and evolutionary trajectory of empowerment at different stages, thereby revealing how grassroots communities can realize a dynamic process of transition from external injection to endogenous development, and eventually to institutional consolidation. This approach not only contributes to deepening academic understanding of empowerment mechanisms (Li, 2022; Min and Yang, 2025), but also provides theoretical interpretation and practical experience to support the exploration of sustainable empowerment models in grassroots governance, particularly in ethnically diverse regions.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations and Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Empowerment Theory and Research on Community Governance in China

The concept of “empowerment” originated in Western social work and development studies during the 1970s. At its core, it aims to enhance the capacity of individuals and groups for self-development and autonomous action through external resource support and institutional guarantees (Rappaport, 1984). From the perspective of theoretical evolution, empowerment has generally experienced three stages. First, early development theories emphasized the injection of external resources, advocating that governments or professional institutions compensate for the structural deficiencies of grassroots organizations and vulnerable groups through the provision of funds, technologies, and policies. Second, with the rise of social capital theory and capacity-building theory, scholarly attention shifted toward “capacity cultivation,” stressing the importance of education, training, social networks, and participatory mechanisms in strengthening the agency and autonomy of individuals and groups. Third, more recent perspectives focusing on “institutional embedding” argue that empowerment outcomes can only be consolidated and sustained when they are institutionalized and embedded within grassroots governance mechanisms (Zhang and Hou, 2024). Thus, empowerment theory has gradually completed a logical transition from external support to internal growth, and finally to institutionalized guarantees.

In the Chinese academic context, research on empowerment has primarily concentrated on two areas: grassroots social governance and the development of social organizations. On the one hand, some scholars regard empowerment as an important instrument for the transformation of the national governance system, arguing that government support through service procurement, financial subsidies, and preferential policies creates developmental space for community organizations and social work agencies (Wang, 2015; Dai et al., 2020). On the other hand, some scholars emphasize the concrete processes of empowerment at the community level, proposing a threefold logic of “input-oriented empowerment—cultivation-oriented empowerment—institutionalized empowerment” (Li, 2018). They further highlight that social work plays a significant role in advancing governance modernization, refinement, and professionalization, and that micro-level responses can in turn contribute to the improvement of macro-level governance systems (Wei, 2018). Meanwhile, other studies have exposed phenomena such as “pseudo-empowerment” and “dependency-driven growth” (Xu and Xu, 2016). Overall, domestic research has shed light on the importance of empowerment in community governance, but several limitations remain: first, most studies conceptualize empowerment in a static manner, overlooking its staged and dynamic characteristics (Zhang and Liu, 2021); second, there is a lack of comprehensive analytical frameworks integrating resources, capacities, and institutions, which makes it difficult to fully uncover the growth logic of empowerment.

At the practical level, empowerment is also an unavoidable issue in the localization of grassroots governance in China. On the one hand, government-led community development requires empowerment to enhance the subjectivity of residents and organizations, equipping them with the capacity for independent operation and collaborative governance (Chen, 2021). On the other hand, the development of social organizations and professional social work must rely on empowerment mechanisms to overcome the dilemmas of “resource

dependence” and “administrative attachment” (Hou, 2022; Zhang and Guo, 2019). Particularly in communities located in ethnic minority regions, empowerment is not only about resource allocation and capacity building but also about the integration of cultural diversity and social identity (Fu, 2023). Therefore, empowerment should not be reduced to a unidimensional “external support,” but should be defined as a dynamic mechanism that runs through the entire process of resource provision, capacity cultivation, and institutional embedding (Yan, 2016). In this article, empowerment is defined as a process in grassroots community governance whereby governments, social organizations, and other actors jointly promote the self-growth, institutional consolidation, and sustainable development of community residents and organizations through resource support, capacity building, and institutional arrangements. This definition not only underscores the processual and dynamic nature of empowerment but also highlights its institutional embeddedness within the context of Chinese-style modernization (Zheng, 2017; Zhang and Xu, 2024).

## 2.2 The Growth Logic of Community Empowerment

Community empowerment is not a one-off act but a dynamic process characterized by fluctuation and recurrence. Existing research largely describes empowerment from a top-down policy perspective, framing it either as governmental support for grassroots communities or as service interventions by social organizations. However, such perspectives often reduce empowerment to a policy instrument, overlooking its actual operations at the community level. This study instead adopts a bottom-up “community perspective,” conceptualizing empowerment as the continuous accumulation of community capacities within the interplay of resources and institutions, and emphasizing its processual, staged, and curvilinear trajectory.

Specifically, this paper proposes a four-stage analytical framework of “initial empowerment—capacity cultivation—recurring dilemmas—organic growth.” The first stage, initial empowerment, entails the rapid activation of community vitality and service capacity through substantial external resource infusion, though this effect is often short-lived and risks generating dependency. The second stage, capacity cultivation, involves the gradual enhancement of organizational capacity and resident subjectivity, fostering endogenous development momentum while remaining constrained by resource limitations. The third stage, recurring dilemmas, arises under conditions of institutional inadequacy, cultural diversity, or administrative absorption, where empowerment effects fluctuate or regress, manifesting in performative growth or virtual prosperity. The fourth stage, organic growth, is reached when resources, capabilities, and institutions form synergies, enabling empowerment outcomes to consolidate into everyday community practices and rules, thereby achieving self-reinforcement and sustainable development.

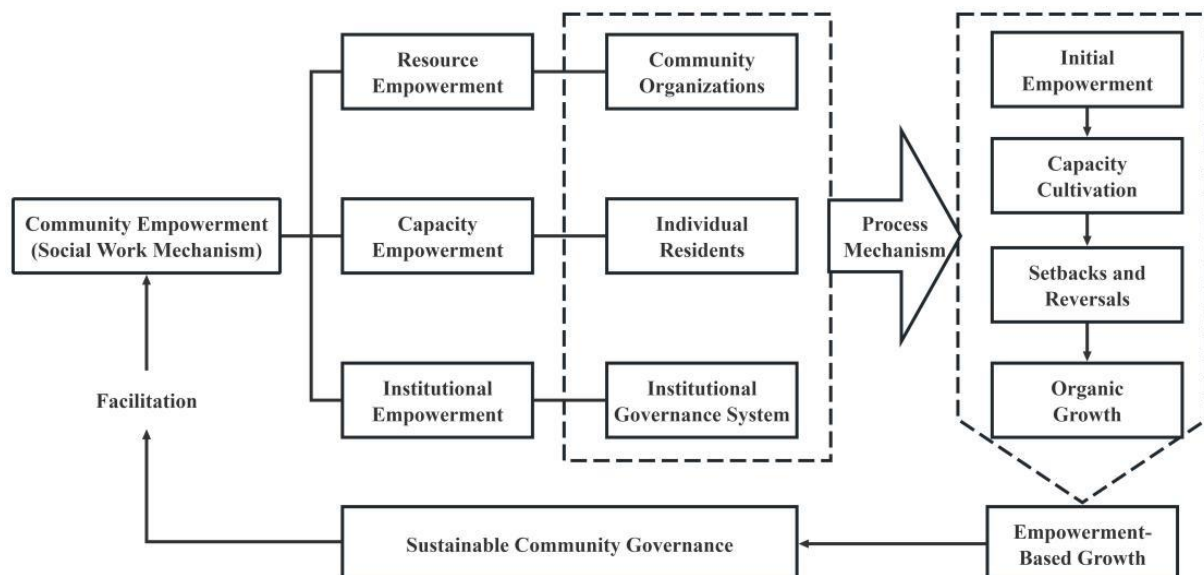


Figure 1. The Process Logic Framework of Empowerment-Oriented Growth

Within this framework, resource empowerment provides external conditions, capacity empowerment generates core driving forces, and institutional empowerment ensures the transformation and consolidation of outcomes. The three dimensions do not progress linearly but instead interact dynamically: the effectiveness of resource utilization depends on capability levels; the continuous enhancement of capacity requires institutional support; and the

effective functioning of institutions, in turn, relies on resource guarantees. The logic of empowerment-oriented growth thus unfolds within this cycle of interaction. Consequently, community empowerment does not follow a linear upward trajectory but instead exhibits a curvilinear pattern of fluctuation and recurrence. This non-linearity and reversibility reflect the authentic logic of empowerment-driven growth.

On this basis, this study selects Community H in Yinchuan as a typical case, applying the “resources–capabilities–institutions” analytical framework to systematically explore the growth logic of community empowerment. By tracing its trajectory across the four stages of “initial empowerment, capacity cultivation, recurring dilemmas, and organic growth,” this analysis illustrates how empowerment dynamically evolves from external activation to endogenous development and ultimately to institutional consolidation. Such an inquiry not only deepens understanding of the complexities inherent in empowerment practices but also provides new theoretical tools for exploring sustainable empowerment pathways in grassroots community governance, particularly in ethnically diverse regions.

### 3. Case Introduction

Yinchuan, the capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, is a typical multi-ethnic city. It serves not only as a major political, economic, and cultural center in Northwest China but also as a focal area for initiatives promoting ethnic unity and social progress. Under the national policy directives of “advancing ethnic unity and progress” and “strengthening grassroots social governance systems,” community governance in Yinchuan faces dual challenges: on the one hand, addressing common urbanization-related issues such as inadequate provision of grassroots public services and low levels of resident participation; on the other, tackling problems of social integration and identity construction within a multi-ethnic structure. These dual challenges render Yinchuan’s community governance both highly complex and broadly representative, providing fertile ground for examining the logic of empowerment-oriented growth.

H Community, located in the transitional zone between Yinchuan’s urban center and peri-urban areas, represents a hybrid community that combines both older neighborhoods and newly developed residential districts. It is home to long-term Han residents as well as a significant proportion of Hui and other ethnic minority groups, forming a pluralistic and coexisting social landscape. The community has a complex demographic composition, including retired elderly residents, rural migrant workers, as well as a considerable number of middle-aged, younger residents, and emerging social strata. Within such a social structure, community governance must not only respond to the diverse demands for public service provision but also establish effective mechanisms of communication and negotiation among different groups in order to achieve collaborative governance across multiple actors. In its earlier stages of grassroots governance, H Community relied heavily on administrative directives and government-led project-based operations. While such approaches ensured the functioning of public affairs to some extent, they also resulted in weak resident participation and lagging development of social organizations. In recent years, with Yinchuan’s comprehensive efforts to modernize community governance, H Community has gradually introduced multiple empowerment mechanisms, including financial and policy support from government, professional interventions by social work agencies, and the establishment of resident deliberation platforms. These external resources and institutional arrangements initially invigorated community organizations and encouraged greater public participation. However, once project cycles ended, the community revealed structural problems such as resource dependency, weak capacities, and institutional gaps—manifestations of the recurrent fluctuations characteristic of the empowerment process.

H Community was selected as the typical case for this study based on three primary considerations. First, its multi-ethnic composition reflects the particularities and complexities of grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions. Second, in recent years, the community has engaged in rich empowerment practices involving government, social organizations, and residents, which included both rapid growth spurred by external support and recurrent dilemmas caused by insufficient capacities—features that align well with the analytical needs of the empowerment-oriented growth framework. Third, the community has gradually experimented with pathways of interaction among resources, capacities, and institutions in its governance model, providing a real-world setting for examining whether empowerment outcomes can be consolidated into sustainable developmental momentum.

In summary, the governance practices of H Community not only mirror the broader challenges of community governance in ethnic minority regions of China but also illustrate the complex processes of empowerment in action. A systematic study of this community helps uncover the internal logic and staged characteristics of empowerment-oriented growth, thereby offering both empirical insights and theoretical support for advancing the modernization of grassroots community governance in ethnically diverse regions.

#### 4. Process Analysis: The Staged Evolution of Empowerment-Oriented Growth in H Community

Field investigations and documentary analysis of H Community in Yinchuan reveal that its empowerment practices did not follow a linear developmental trajectory. Instead, they evolved along a curvilinear path characterized by external infusion, internal growth, recurring dilemmas, and institutional consolidation. Corresponding to the theoretical framework of “empowerment-oriented growth” proposed earlier, the development of H Community can be broadly divided into four stages: initial empowerment, capacity cultivation, recurring dilemmas, and organic growth. Each stage reflects the interaction and tensions among resource empowerment, capacity empowerment, and institutional empowerment, thereby illustrating the volatility and dynamism of grassroots community development in ethnic minority areas under the logic of empowerment.

##### 4.1 Initial Empowerment: Resource Infusion and External Activation

Against the backdrop of national policies promoting community governance modernization and initiatives for ethnic unity, H Community was among the first to introduce models of government-purchased services and professional interventions by social work agencies. The defining feature of this initial stage was the concentrated infusion of external resources, including not only financial support and public venues but also professional knowledge and methods provided by social work institutions. At the resource level, government allocations funded resident activities and community space renovation, providing solid material guarantees for public life. Party-mass service centers offered fixed office and activity spaces for social work agencies, thereby creating relatively stable public venues for residents. For instance, at the outset of the project, agencies used funding to establish a “Neighborhood Mutual Aid Team” to provide companionship and daily assistance to elderly residents living alone or in “empty-nest” households. Such direct resource provision substantially lowered the barriers to participation, quickly revitalizing community life. At the capacity level, improvements were primarily reflected in “experiential learning.” Under the guidance of social work agencies, some residents were introduced to basic skills in organizing activities and collaborative practices. However, this learning remained largely passive. For example, during the first ethnic unity-themed event, residents mostly acted as performers and participants, while planning and coordination were dominated by the agency. This reliance on external actors indicated that capacities had not yet been internalized into residents’ own action logics. At the institutional level, early arrangements were mostly reliant on external rules. Agreements between government and social work agencies specified service lists and performance indicators, while residents’ participation was largely “objectified,” lacking initiative in rule-making. Institutional empowerment remained weak, and governance continued to depend on external drivers. Thus, the initial empowerment stage was characterized by resource-driven activation: external resources effectively energized the community atmosphere, but residents and organizations had not yet developed endogenous capacities or autonomous institutional arrangements.

##### 4.2 Capacity Cultivation: Emergence of Community Leaders and Formation of Endogenous Momentum

As projects advanced, H Community entered the capacity cultivation stage. At this point, the utilization of external resources shifted from “direct provision” to “guided use,” and resident learning progressed from “passive experience” to “active learning and practice.” At the resource level, social work agencies introduced “small grant projects,” encouraging residents to independently design activities and apply for funding support. For example, some residents proposed organizing cross-cultural food exchange events, with agencies providing limited funding and guidance on budgeting and execution. This resource allocation model shifted the dynamic from “agency-organized, resident-participated” to resident-initiated activities, teaching residents how to mobilize and manage resources through practice. At the capacity level, the growth of community leaders became a key highlight. The agency organized a three-month “Community Leadership Workshop,” offering systematic training in organizational management, deliberative consultation, and conflict mediation. Through repeated practice, a group of resident leaders gradually emerged. For instance, one Hui resident leader, together with Han neighbors, initiated a “Halal Neighborhood Table” activity that respected cultural differences while fostering inter-ethnic exchange. This not only demonstrated concrete capacity gains but also reflected the cultural sensitivity specific to governance in minority regions. Similar to findings in international social work education, where field practice and mentorship play a vital role in transforming passive learners into active practitioners (Aikawa et al., 2025), H Community residents also gradually internalized empowerment through experiential learning and practical engagement. At the institutional level, H Community experimented with mechanisms such as residents’ councils and a volunteer points system. The residents’ council sought to transfer the decision-making of public affairs to residents, marking a shift from “passive participation” to “institutional participation.” The volunteer points system incentivized sustained involvement by allowing points to be redeemed for rewards. Though still in exploratory stages, these mechanisms indicated a trend toward institutionalizing empowerment outcomes. Overall, this stage can be summarized as

capacity-driven empowerment. Residents transitioned from “being asked to participate” to “wanting to participate,” and the growth of community leaders provided new momentum for self-governance and cross-ethnic integration.

#### *4.3 Recurring Dilemmas: Administrative Absorption and Virtual Prosperity*

The empowerment process was not linear or cumulative. In the midterm of the project, H Community’s empowerment practices encountered dilemmas and reversals, as tensions among resources, capacities, and institutions became pronounced. At the resource level, administrative performance pressures led to the politicization of resource allocation. For instance, during Ethnic Unity Promotion Month, community officials demanded large-scale events within short timelines. As a result, residents’ councils became tokenistic, and resource distribution catered more to administrative assessments than to residents’ needs. This administrative absorption weakened the effectiveness of resource empowerment. At the capacity level, community leaders reached bottlenecks in practice. Despite earlier training, they lacked sufficient professional support in handling complex issues. For example, in mediating neighborhood disputes, leaders often struggled to resolve conflicts effectively, undermining trust and discouraging their own enthusiasm. Some residents experienced “capacity fatigue,” believing their efforts could not meaningfully influence outcomes. At the institutional level, mechanisms such as the residents’ council and the points system became increasingly formalized and hollow under administrative pressures. Many residents perceived the council as a “symbolic procedure,” while the points system lost appeal due to limited redemption options. Institutional empowerment risked being hollowed out, and resident participation declined. This stage was marked by virtual prosperity and administrative encroachment. Although community activities appeared frequent, genuine resident participation declined, capacity development stalled, and institutional innovation stagnated. The empowerment process exhibited a “curvilinear downturn,” highlighting the tension between external support and internal growth.

#### *4.4 Organic Growth: Institutional Embedding and Sustainable Development*

Following cycles of difficulty and adjustment, H Community gradually transitioned into the organic growth stage, in which resources, capacities, and institutions became more stable and interlinked, and empowerment outcomes were consolidated into institutional practice. At the resource level, emphasis shifted toward diversified resource integration. For example, H Community collaborated with nearby halal restaurants to establish a “Neighborhood Mutual Aid Kitchen,” which simultaneously met minority cultural needs and created employment opportunities for residents. Resource provision thus evolved from reliance on government supply to a model of co-construction involving government, enterprises, and residents, enhancing resilience in community development. At the capacity level, the development of community leaders stabilized. Some residents were not only able to chair residents’ councils but also to lead teams in agenda-setting, discussion, and solution design. For instance, in addressing issues such as waste sorting and parking management, residents proposed pragmatic solutions and demonstrated coordination skills during implementation. This indicated a shift from “passive imitation” to “active creation” in capacity development. Similar to empowerment-based interventions in the health field, where structured programs effectively enhanced self-management and sustained capacity among marginalized groups (Cao et al., 2025), H Community’s practices demonstrated that empowerment outcomes could be consolidated through continuous institutional embedding. At the institutional level, empowerment outcomes were gradually embedded into community governance mechanisms. H Community adopted a Residents’ Self-Governance Charter that specified agenda-setting, decision-making procedures, and supervisory mechanisms for the residents’ council. The volunteer points system was normalized, with points not only redeemable for services and goods but also granting residents priority in participating in community affairs. These institutional arrangements effectively consolidated empowerment outcomes and fostered a virtuous cycle of self-reinforcement. The organic growth stage was characterized by institution-driven empowerment. Through the synergy of resource integration, capacity maturation, and institutionalization, the community achieved a transformation from external support to endogenous development, and ultimately to sustainable governance.

### **5. Three-Dimensional Pathways: Analyzing the Internal Logic of Empowerment-Based Growth**

A systematic study of H Community in Yinchuan reveals that empowerment-based growth is not a single-dimensional process but rather a multi-dimensional evolution driven by the interplay of resource provision, capacity cultivation, and institutional embedding. Resource empowerment provides external conditions, capacity empowerment shapes endogenous momentum, and institutional empowerment ensures long-term consolidation. Each dimension assumes a distinct emphasis at different stages, functioning both independently and interdependently, thereby constructing the complete logical chain of empowerment-based growth.

### *5.1 The Resource Pathway: From “External Injection” to “Autonomous Integration”*

Resource empowerment constitutes the starting point of empowerment-based growth, directly determining whether grassroots communities can embark on a trajectory of public participation and collaborative governance. In the initial phase of H Community, external resource injection played a decisive role in activating collective action. Government-designated funds, professional services provided by social work agencies, and the allocation of facilities significantly lowered the threshold for residents’ involvement in public affairs. For example, the establishment of a “Neighborhood Mutual Aid Team” relied almost entirely on project funding and institutional support; this “blood-transfusion-style” resource provision revitalized community life in the short term.

However, while resource pathways stimulate vitality, they also carry the risk of “input dependency.” Field investigations reveal that when external funds diminished or administrative evaluations intensified, some resident organizations became nominal entities, and the enthusiasm of community leaders markedly declined. Without follow-up institutional mechanisms, resource provision risks devolving into “virtual prosperity,” undermining sustainability. Thus, the logical progression of the resource pathway should move from singular external injection toward diversification and endogenization. During the stage of organic growth, H Community explored resource integration models: for instance, through collaboration with halal catering enterprises to establish a “Neighborhood Mutual Aid Kitchen,” which not only diversified funding and venue sources but also generated employment and intercultural exchange opportunities. This demonstrates that the effective logic of resource empowerment lies in the transformation from “externally driven inputs” to “autonomously integrated systems,” thereby forming a resilient and endogenous resource base.

### *5.2 The Capacity Pathway: From “Passive Participation” to “Active Governance”*

Capacity empowerment forms the core of empowerment-based growth. The utility of external resources can only be sustained when translated into long-term developmental momentum through capacity building. In H Community, capacity cultivation advanced primarily via a “training–practice–reflection” model. In the mid-project phase, social work institutions established a “Community Leadership Workshop” to systematically train resident leaders in organizational management, participatory deliberation, and conflict mediation. Some leaders gradually mastered intercultural communication skills, enabling dialogue between Han and Hui residents. Such capacity-building extended beyond technical proficiency, fostering identity recognition and confidence accumulation.

Nevertheless, capacity development was accompanied by setbacks and reversals. During the phase of recurring challenges, resident leaders frequently encountered bottlenecks in mediating disputes and coordinating resources, leading to frustration and even “capacity fatigue.” This indicates that empowerment-based growth does not follow a linear upward trajectory but unfolds as a curve characterized by reversals and recalibrations. The ultimate goal of the capacity pathway is to transform residents from “passive participants” into “active governors.” By the stage of organic growth, community leaders in H Community were able to independently preside over deliberation meetings, propose concrete governance solutions, and mobilize volunteers for implementation. For instance, the resident-initiated “Waste Sorting Self-Governance Group” not only addressed environmental concerns but also reinforced a sense of responsibility in public affairs. Thus, the logical progression of capacity empowerment can be summarized as: beginning with external guidance, internalizing through iterative setbacks and practice, and culminating in the substantive subjectivity of community residents.

### *5.3 The Institutional Pathway: From “External Discipline” to “Endogenous Embedding”*

Institutional empowerment serves as the safeguard of empowerment-based growth, determining whether earlier gains in resources and capacity can be consolidated into long-term, stable governance outcomes. H Community vividly illustrates the evolution of this pathway. In its initial phase, institutional empowerment relied on external discipline imposed by government and social work organizations, such as project agreements, service lists, and performance indicators. While these mechanisms ensured programmatic operation, residents often lacked a sense of ownership, and the institutional arrangements functioned more as administrative constraints than as collectively constructed norms.

During the capacity cultivation phase, institutional innovation began to emerge. The introduction of a Residents’ Deliberation Council and a Volunteer Credit System reflected the community’s efforts to embed resident participation within an institutional framework. Although fluctuations in participation and inadequate incentives constrained implementation, these mechanisms nevertheless provided preliminary channels for consolidating empowerment achievements. By the stage of organic growth, institutional empowerment transitioned from external discipline to endogenous embedding. H Community formally issued a “Community Autonomy Charter,” stipulating rules for deliberation, decision-making, and oversight, while normalizing the operation of the Volunteer Credit System. These measures not only established stable behavioral routines among residents but also fostered

interethnic trust and cooperation, thereby achieving genuine institutional “endogenization.” Thus, the logical evolution of institutional empowerment follows a trajectory from externally imposed rules to participatory institutional construction, and ultimately to the solidification of an endogenous community governance framework.

#### 5.4 The Processual Logic of the Three-Dimensional Pathways

The resource, capacity, and institutional pathways in empowerment-based growth do not exist in isolation but are mutually dependent, interactively constrained, and collectively form the dynamic architecture of community empowerment. At different stages, each pathway assumes distinctive primacy, yet their interplay remains in constant flux and tension. In the initial phase, resource empowerment occupies the core position: external funding, venues, and projects inject direct momentum, while capacity and institutional arrangements remain underdeveloped, largely reflecting passive reliance on resources. During the capacity cultivation phase, the growth of resident leaders and deepened public participation shifted the focus toward capacity empowerment, with resources and institutions serving primarily as supportive conditions. In the stage of recurring challenges, contradictions among the three dimensions became pronounced: administrative absorption distorted resource allocation, capacity stagnation dampened residents’ enthusiasm, and institutional mechanisms deteriorated into formalistic routines, reflecting a complex entanglement of tensions. Finally, in the organic growth phase, the three dimensions achieved positive synergy: resource provision evolved toward diversified integration, residents’ capacities advanced toward sustained maturity, and institutional arrangements became endogenously embedded. Together, these dynamics pushed empowerment outcomes onto a trajectory of institutionalization and sustainable development.

In sum, the curvilinear progression of empowerment-based growth does not result from a unilinear path but rather from the composite effect of three-dimensional pathways dynamically coordinated through tension and adjustment. When imbalances arise among the three, empowerment processes often stagnate, encounter setbacks, or regress; conversely, when resources, capacities, and institutions achieve coordinated interaction, empowerment outcomes are transformed from external stimulus to endogenous development and ultimately to institutional consolidation, thereby steering grassroots community governance into a sustainable virtuous cycle.

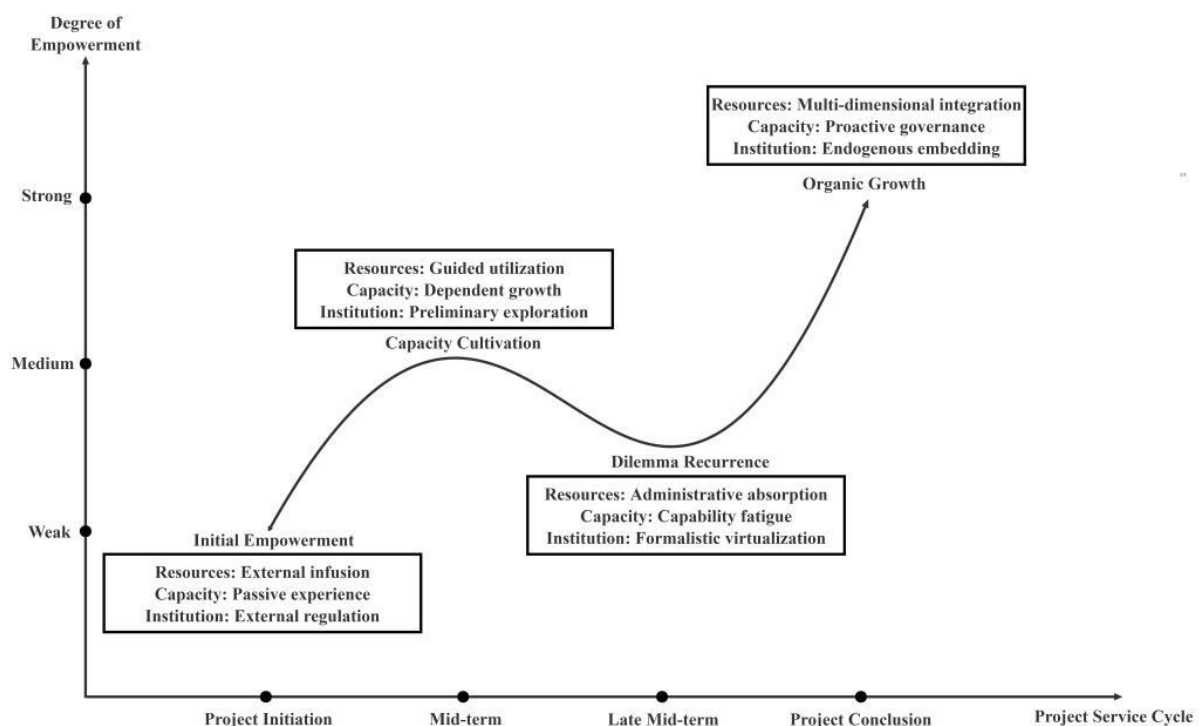


Figure 2. The Curvilinear Developmental Trend of Empowerment: “Initial Empowerment – Capacity Cultivation – Dilemma Recurrence – Organic Growth”



## 6. Conclusion and Discussion

Using Community H in Yinchuan as a representative case and applying a three-dimensional analytical framework of resources–capacity–institutions, this study examined the process logic of empowerment-based growth. The findings reveal that community empowerment does not follow a linear trajectory; rather, it evolves along a curvilinear path of “initial empowerment—capacity cultivation—setbacks and reversals—organic growth.” Its internal logic is embedded in the interaction and tensions among three dimensions: resource empowerment provides external conditions, capacity empowerment generates endogenous momentum, and institutional empowerment ensures consolidation and sustainability. Nevertheless, the empowerment process is also marked by challenges such as administrative absorption, superficial prosperity, capacity fatigue, and institutional formalism, which may cause fluctuations or even regressions in outcomes. To facilitate the transformation of community empowerment from stage-based growth to sustainable development, integrative pathways need to be sought across resources, capacities, and institutions.

### *6.1 Resource Integration: From “Single Injection” to “Pluralistic Integration”*

Resource empowerment constitutes the starting point of community empowerment, as its effectiveness determines whether a community can be activated and enter the track of public participation. In Community H, the initial inflow of external funding, project venues, and professional institutions indeed succeeded in stimulating community vitality. However, with the expiration of project cycles, the drawbacks of resource dependency became apparent, as some resident organizations stagnated after losing financial support. This highlights the limitations of input-driven growth. The key to resource integration lies in shifting from “external injections” toward “pluralistic integration.” On the one hand, government should continue to provide fiscal support and build platforms, but it should avoid over-reliance on administrative performance assessments, instead steering resources gradually toward co-production among resident groups, social organizations, and enterprises. On the other hand, communities themselves must strengthen their capacity to mobilize and integrate resources, transforming limited inputs into sustainable momentum. Community H’s “Neighborhood Mutual Aid Kitchen” illustrates this transition well: by bringing together government, enterprises, and residents, it not only expanded funding channels but also enhanced community resilience. Thus, the logic of resource empowerment in its integrated form emphasizes “plural supply—autonomous integration—sustained transformation.”

### *6.2 Capacity Integration: From “Passive Participation” to “Proactive Governance”*

Capacity cultivation represents the core of empowerment-based growth. Only through capacity transformation can external resources be internalized into enduring momentum. In Community H, resident leaders grew progressively through training and practice, moving from passive reception to proactive planning and organization, thereby demonstrating emergent subjectivity. Yet capacity building also faced challenges of “fatigue” and “bottlenecks”: without institutional support and resource guarantees, resident leaders often lost confidence, reducing participation. Advancing capacity integration requires overcoming the limitations of training-focused approaches by establishing mechanisms that align capacity with opportunities. On one hand, sustained opportunities for practice—such as deliberation councils and self-governance groups—are needed to translate training outcomes into real action and avoid “paper-based” capacities. On the other hand, the community should build a “leadership pipeline,” fostering a developmental pathway from ordinary residents to community leaders and, eventually, to self-governance champions, thereby amplifying capacity effects at a collective level. Only through such mechanisms can residents truly shift from “I am asked to participate” to “I want to participate”, and finally to proactive governance.

### *6.3 Institutional Integration: From “External Regulation” to “Endogenous Embedding”*

Institutional empowerment is the key to ensuring the sustainability of empowerment outcomes. In Community H, the early stages of institutional development relied heavily on external regulation by governments and agencies, taking the form of project agreements, service lists, and performance evaluations. While these arrangements ensured the operation of services, they lacked meaningful resident participation. In later stages, innovations such as residents’ deliberation councils and a volunteer points system marked the beginnings of institutional experimentation, though administrative pressures led to tendencies of formalism. Genuine institutional integration requires transitioning external rules into endogenous mechanisms. On one hand, institutional design must incorporate broad-based resident participation so that rules become shared consensus and everyday practice. On the other hand, institutional embedding must align with cultural identities, particularly in multiethnic contexts, where institutional design should accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds and differentiated needs. Ultimately, Community H consolidated empowerment outcomes through a Residents’ Self-Governance Charter and the normalization of the points system, thereby transforming temporary measures into long-term governance mechanisms. This exemplifies the logic of transitioning from “external regulation” to “endogenous embedding.”

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