

Review

Policy-Oriented Examination of Left-Behind Children's Health and Well-Being in China

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Abstract: Introduction: This paper will build on existing scholarly assets, addressing how the avoidance of rural-to-urban labour migration as a solution to mitigate the challenges faced by left-behind children is pragmatically infeasible. As an alternative, this paper will engage in the discussion about the relevant policy development and existing policy gaps the Chinese Government has implemented and has been subject to, respectively, in order to locate the problems of how left-behind children continue to be exposed to emotional and psychological vulnerabilities, despite the Chinese Government's interventions. Methods: Bibliographic databases, Google Scholar and PubMed were searched. A combination of words (“left-behind children” OR “LBC”) AND (“China” OR “Chinese”) AND (“human rights” OR “mental health” OR “well-being”) AND (“policy” OR “policies” or “policymaking”)) was input into the search engines. A total of 38 papers deemed eligible and relevant were chosen non-systematically, studied and summarised. Results: Local rural governments lack any concrete measures designated for left-behind rural children to specifically support their mental health needs. Additionally, medical care coordination within the Chinese Government and across counties, respectively on improving the emotional and psychological well-being of left-behind rural children is disorganised. Moreover, there is a very limited collection of up-to-date and available datasets examining left-behind children's development and well-being. Discussion: This paper suggests, in detail, how the Chinese Government can strategically apply policies and interventions for the redistribution of resources and opportunities to left-behind children in rural China. This paper recognises the existing interventions initiated and implemented by the Chinese Government for resource redistribution and, simultaneously, recommends that the Government follow two localised American models for further resource redistribution per se that are designed for benefitting left-behind rural Chinese children.

Keywords: policy; mental health; well-being; child health; left-behind children; China; sustainable development



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1. Introduction

Extensive Chinese literature argues that the influx of rural-to-urban labour migration in China has propelled the phenomenon of the prevalence of left-behind children in villages [1,2]. These children are left behind in the care of grandparents or extended family members while their migrated parents reside in cities to search for better-conditioned and more promising occupational opportunities [3]. Left-behind children experiencing the absence of one parent or both are at high risk of being psychologically and emotionally vulnerable [4]. Existing Chinese literature indicates that, for example, left-behind rural Chinese children, owing to the absence of parenting and emotional support or physical affection that is supposed to be delivered by parents, have the disposition to experience continual feelings of isolation and loneliness [5]. The Chinese Ministry of Education notes that left-behind children are prone to suffer from greater anxiety and depression relative to their peers dwelling with both parents [6]. The shortage of emotional support left-behind Chinese children receive from their parents discourages them from expressing

their emotions and feelings, rendering them prone to encounter communication issues and predicaments in building and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships [7].

Additional literature emphasises the academic underperformance among left-behind children. This is because rural households whose parents relocate to work as labour migrants are disproportionately representing the least financially secure families in villages [8]. Impoverished rural left-behind children fail to gain access to a fair share of quality education opportunities relative to their counterparts belonging to more-privileged rural and urban households [1]. These left-behind rural Chinese children are, therefore, vulnerable to experiencing low self-esteem and poor life satisfaction, compounding their mental health issues [9]. Existing scholarly discourse on addressing left-behind rural Chinese children's emotional and mental well-being focuses on prioritising the delivery of emotional support and mental health resources to such a vulnerable cohort [10]. Praag et al. contribute to the understanding of human well-being by, in part, explaining how subjective well-being can be interpreted. Subjective well-being can be transitory or chronic [11]. This concept refers to individuals' subjective domain of satisfaction regarding their occupation, finance, housing, leisure and environment. So long as individuals enjoy "achieved pleasure" maybe, but not necessarily, caused by "achieved fulfilment" and/or "achieved wealth", they are deemed to have positive subjective well-being. Unlike subjective well-being, objective well-being is not value-free but depends on aspects considered to be values under rational consideration. Those enjoying a domain of "successes" based on rational calculation and analysis concerning their occupation, finance, housing, leisure and environment are deemed to have positive objective well-being [12]. Existing literature argues that both subjective and objective well-being are relevant and crucial when addressing the levels of satisfaction enjoyed by left-behind Chinese children [13,14]. Therefore, in this paper, well-being refers to subjective well-being and/or objective well-being. This review paper builds on existing scholarly assets, addressing how the avoidance of rural-to-urban labour migration as a solution to mitigate the challenges faced by left-behind children is pragmatically infeasible. As an alternative, this paper delineates the relevant policy development and existing policy gaps the Chinese Government has implemented and has been subject to, respectively, in order to locate the problems of how left-behind children continue to be exposed to emotional and psychological vulnerabilities, despite the Chinese Government's interventions. Ultimately, this paper elaborates on how China cannot maximise its sustainable development without addressing the issues faced by left-behind children. Following this, I examine what the Chinese Government has to prioritise policymaking-wise for the purpose of building a more sustainable, equitable and habitable future.

1.1. Human Rights Concerns in Relation to Rural Children Being Left Behind

In this sub-section, this review paper briefly outlines the human rights concerns that spark national and international attention in association with the notable vulnerability experienced by left-behind rural Chinese children. The discussion of human rights concerns underpins the scholarly importance of the development of this review paper, as China and other countries are responsible for minimising any form of human rights violations that victimise any particularly vulnerable cohorts.

First and foremost, left-behind children are deprived of access to education opportunities, especially those of quality. Such a circumstance significantly hinders the acquisition of life chances, propelling dilemmas to secure upward social mobility opportunities to raise their impoverished rural households' quality of life [15]. Disadvantaged, impoverished and deprived cohorts are discouraged from academic advancement, leading to the result of having relatively poor educational credentials compared to their more privileged urban counterparts. Sun et al. surveyed 1708 rural adolescents (54.8 percent female; mean age = 15.03 + 1.93 years old) in Central China in addition to interviewing 32 LBC and 32 head teachers. Their findings suggest that LBC suffered from poor school engagement and academic performance, especially when they were subject to the absence of both biological parents, lack of parental contact and longer length of parent-child separation [16].

These poorly educated cohorts are unfavourable in the labour market, prompting their experience of more hurdles to career development and acquisition of financial resources. Hong et al. examined in-depth ethnographic case studies of a rural school in Southwest China. They collected data from 17 LBC. LBC believed that they could only enjoy better job prospects if they performed well in senior secondary school and were able to attend better-ranked higher-education institutions. However, some LBC doubted whether they could advance educationally and were uncertain about what university education was. Those who were more educationally ambitious and determined emphasised more the importance of seeking success in the labour market [17]. Song et al. argue that LBC, relative to their non-left-behind counterparts, scored lower in academic examinations and were less career ambitious and might have shared the same narrow vision as their parents to work as migrant labourers in the future [18]. As a result, those born in rural, impoverished and deprived households have the disposition to remain in an underprivileged social position with limited life chances in their lifetime. This means the deprivation of life chances is intergenerationally reproduced [19]. In response to educational deprivation, the Chinese Government has implemented interventions, such as the Two Supplementary School Programmes and the Free Compulsory Education Programme [20,21]. These initiatives have helped rural left-behind children secure financial support and necessary resources to attend rural schools. A small proportion of rural schools (i.e., 16 percent) also provide living subsidies to LBC. These rural schools usually deliver comprehensive support to LBC. Apart from living subsidies, LBC can also receive psychological counselling services and even phone cards—allowing LBC to maintain regular contact with their migrated parents [16]. However, rural China's governance has been dissatisfactory to some degree when the applications of these educational interventions have been inconsistent. As a result, ample left-behind children continue to suffer from an absence or a lack of opportunities for school attendance.

An additional key human rights concern is left-behind children's limited healthcare access. These vulnerable cohorts often experience restrictions to gaining full access to routine medical care when needed [22]. In the least developed villages, basic healthcare services and establishments, to date, remain in shortage. The existing healthcare establishments are usually underfunded and understaffed, and healthcare professionals' turnover rates are saliently high as these specialists prefer relocating to cities to seek better-conditioned job opportunities. The least developed rural healthcare establishments enjoy little to no leverage to attract or retain better-quality and specialised healthcare professionals [23]. Additionally, Guan et al. (2018) found that rural students were not willing to seek the healthcare services they needed unless they were well aware of any existing subsidies that could cover their healthcare expenses [24]. Due to parental absence, parents are unable to advocate for their children's medical needs. Many left-behind children are therefore at high risk of developing health and nutrition issues, further jeopardising their long-term well-being.

Safety issues are another human rights concern left-behind Chinese children are facing, as they often stay at home alone. These children are, thus, vulnerable to dangers and accidents domestically owing to the absence of any caregivers [25]. In a study carried out by Shen et al., a sum of 3019 rural students were interviewed (note: 1182 of them were LBC). Findings show that LBC were twice as likely as children residing with both biological parents to suffer from any kind of non-fatal unintentional injuries. Per 1000 LBC injury cases, 252.9 children injured themselves compared to 119.8 children dwelling with both biological parents [26]. While the Chinese Government has responded by implementing community supervision measures, wherein villagers or rural neighbours are encouraged to assume more responsibility to take care of left-behind children, such measures are not effectively enforced [27]. As a result, left-behind children remain highly physically vulnerable.

In this sub-section, this paper summarises how left-behind children are subject to multi-faceted deprivation and vulnerability. They are discriminated against by the education system and the healthcare system and are physically at risk and unprotected. While the Chinese Government has acknowledged their vulnerability and responded by introducing

corresponding interventions, such interventions per se are either poorly or voluntarily enforced. Therefore, the challenges faced by left-behind children in rural China persist to a large extent.

1.2. Why Encouraging Rural-to-Urban Labour Migrants to Return to Villages Is Pragmatically Infeasible

Under rapid and continual rural development, the Chinese Government has invested substantially in raising living conditions and accelerating infrastructure development in rural China. Given such a circumstance, in this sub-section, this paper discusses the possibility of encouraging rural-to-urban labour migrants to return to villages and, therefore, minimise the rates of rural children being left behind. Furthermore, this paper emphasises why such a suggested policy is pragmatically infeasible, since a significant proportion of rural labourers will continue to relocate to cities for work and leave their children behind.

Encouraging rural-to-urban labour migrants to return to villages theoretically seems like the ideal circumstance that enhances the long-term subjective (due to more parental care and warmth, in most circumstances) and objective (due to improved parent-child relationships, in most circumstances) well-being of those being left behind. This is because returned labour migrants can stay closer to their immediate families and have more opportunities to fulfil parenting responsibilities in person. Such scenarios should be conducive to the positive development of left-behind children.

Nevertheless, encouraging many rural-to-urban labour migrants to relocate back to villages is unlikely to be possible for a few major reasons. First, despite China's resource redistribution in recent decades, there has remained a profound rural–urban divide economically [28]. Rural-to-urban labour migrants are disincentivised to relocate back to villages as they are able to secure far better-conditioned job opportunities for personal development and career advancement in cities. To date, rural parents retain the disposition to relocate to cities as they perceive that urban areas offer more and better-paying job opportunities. Villagers from households with more children, smaller house sizes and more family members working as migrant labourers disproportionately prefer to relocate to cities for career advancement [29].

Second, the rural labour market is underdeveloped. For landless rural-to-urban labour migrants, they find no reasons to return to villages [30]. Even if they have land and can practise farming work in villages, they often deem the financial return of such an occupation insufficient to support their households' living costs. Li et al. found that rural-to-urban labour migration is the most prevalent off-farm activity in China today. In villages, those working in the agricultural sector are mostly old or female farmers. Younger villagers, especially those who are male, are reluctant to undertake the lower-skilled or unskilled agricultural wage jobs [31]. Therefore, they prefer to relocate to cities to engage in off-farm labour activities. Furthermore, they found that urban wage levels raise continually in a sustainable manner, drawing more rural citizens to move to better-tier cities for job opportunities in the long term.

Third, addressing left-behind Chinese children's health and well-being requires comprehensive and holistic interventions. While parental presence is beneficial to children's development, other factors such as access to education, healthcare and social welfare opportunities are equally pivotal. If parents return to villages to live with their children but the latter continues to be systematically deprived by rural Chinese society, these children are still subject to significant emotional and psychological vulnerability. Tong et al. argue that LBC have been subject to multifaceted systematic stigmatisation and discrimination. They often live in substandard accommodations with poor facilities and hygiene and experience limited social and academic functioning compared to their rural counterparts who are not left behind by their parents [32]. Therefore, even if rural parents return from cities to villages to assume their parental responsibilities to take care of and supervise their children, ample root causes restricting these children's overall development and well-being will remain unresolved.

In this sub-section, this paper points out three main reasons why parental urban-to-rural relocation is not necessarily an efficient solution to tackle left-behind children's encounters with emotional and psychological challenges. To build a more sustainable, equitable future that is habitable to all children, the Chinese Government has to strengthen its interventions and policy development to bridge the gaps of development between villages and cities. Such a policy goal is expected to enhance the economic prospects of rural-to-urban labour migrants, regardless of whether they reside in cities or villages. Moreover, by entitling more resources and opportunities to rural citizens, left-behind children can enjoy a higher degree of inclusion and, therefore, improved health and well-being.

2. Methods

To develop this paper, the bibliographic databases Google Scholar and PubMed were searched. A combination of words (“left-behind children” OR “LBC”) AND (“China” OR “Chinese”) AND (“human rights” OR “mental health” OR “well-being”) AND (“policy” OR “policies” or “policymaking”) was input into the search engines. Papers that partially or primarily focused on policy-oriented research or policy-oriented scholarly discourse were selected and read. Papers addressing left-behind children and containing the word “China” or “Chinese” but predominantly or exclusively referring to non-Chinese contexts were excluded. Papers where the abstracts were written in English but the main bodies of the texts were not written in English were excluded too. As this paper was not developed based on the output of carrying out a systematic review, not all eligible and relevant policy-oriented papers were selected and studied. In total, 38 policy-oriented papers deemed eligible and relevant were studied and summarised in order to facilitate the development of this paper. Viewpoints, supported by existing policy-oriented scholarly arguments, were provided.

3. Results

3.1. Chinese Government's Policy Development to Maintain Left-Behind Children's Emotional and Psychological Development and Well-Being

Regarding the discussion of why the Chinese Government should place a higher level of emphasis on the construction of a more sustainable, equitable and liveable future for left-behind children, in this sub-section, this paper addresses the major policy development implemented by the Government to help ameliorate the emotional and psychological well-being of those left behind in villages. Such an understanding paths the way to the exposure of existing policy gaps (which will be examined in the following sub-section) that the Chinese Government should be aware of in order to ensure that left-behind children are protected and included.

The highlighted policy development endeavour is the Chinese Government's implementation of the “two-layer” guardianship programme, which involves assigning guardians to left-behind children [33]. Local government officials are responsible to choose responsible figures within local communities to become the guardians of those being left behind by parents. The guardians assume the responsibility to provide supervision, guidance and emotional support to those children. In doing so, left-behind children in rural China receive constant and consistent warmth and embracement from respectful and trustable figures. However, existing literature argues guardians are inclined to place a lower emphasis on LBC's educational attainment and care needs [34]. Therefore, tightened surveillance and evaluation of the implementation of the “two-layer” guardianship programme have to be carried out continuously. Here, policymakers have to ensure that the implementation of such a programme is not simply rhetoric but contains pragmatic values that are beneficial to LBC's development and well-being. Unless local rural governments monitor the operation of the programme, they cannot notice whether the assigned guardians are fulfilling their responsibilities of taking good care of the LBC. Yu and Lu support this argument and unveil the major problem of forming guardianship in rural China today. They point out that guardians tend to assume superficial responsibilities as caregivers

when they, for example, rarely motivate LBC to achieve academic pursuits and they exercise limited supervision and caregiving to ensure that LBC's safety and development are protected [35]. Such a scholarly argument underpins the need for rural China to set up a surveillance system and an evaluation mechanism whereby guardians' performance is assessed regularly. Should the quality of the guardianship be significantly below par, local policymakers and community leaders should seek alternative candidates to undertake the responsibilities as caregivers. Undoubtedly, the programme is conducive to ensuring that children who are regularly being neglected and excluded can maintain better emotional, social and psychological development. Yet, having trustable figures who can teach and socialise children in rural schools is important for positive children's development too. Given the circumstance where many impoverished left-behind rural Chinese children are deprived of access to quality education opportunities, these victims often lack the presence of teachers or headmasters to provide academic and disciplinary advice/support [35]. As a result, their capacities for personal development remains restricted.

Another policy development the Chinese Government prioritises is the provision of psychological counselling and support services. Local rural government officials have established an increasing number of counselling centres in villages. These establishments are staffed by trained and qualified counsellors and psychologists who are responsible for providing psychological and counselling services to those being left behind [36]. While such services are beneficial to help left-behind children cope with their emotional and psychological challenges, those who are constantly neglected may not be self-aware of their need to seek psychological and counselling support. Therefore, rural community leaders and local rural government officials should ensure that the guardians or whoever is taking care of left-behind children are fully aware of the availability of psychological and counselling services. This helps maximise the value of setting up psychological counselling and support centres and improves the health and subjective (e.g., the satisfaction of being included in the healthcare sector) and objective (e.g., improved health status) well-being of those being left behind. Existing literature argues that, in addition to psychological counselling services, the presence of after-school counselling services led by registered social workers is equally important to benefit LBC's mental health. Therefore, rural China has to endeavour to expand the psychosocial and emotional support delivered to LBC by allocating more psychological counsellors and social workers to each village or even each rural school in the long term [37].

The paper also has to highlight the Chinese Government's development of the "Returning Home for Reunion" initiative wherein migrant parents are subsidised and financially incentivised to return to their hometowns regularly to visit their left-behind children [38]. The Chinese Government has to ensure that such an initiative covers the majority of rural Chinese territories, including provinces and areas that are least developed or regulated in the mid- and long-term. Such an initiative contains significant social values as, despite the separation, parent-child social bonding can be maintained to some degree, allowing left-behind children to spend family time with their parents through the facilitation of family reunion and cohesion. Today, the majority of migrant parents are only given the opportunity to reunite with their LBC during the Chinese New Year and school holidays over the summer. Zhao et al. argue that parent-child separation is a negative and painful life event for LBC and many children who are left behind cherish every moment that their migrated parents are able to share with them during festivals or holidays. Despite parent-child separation, many LBC maintain strong affective and emotional bonds with their biological parents [38]. Therefore, the Chinese Government should experiment with the Initiative in wider geographical contexts, allowing more migrated parents to return to villages occasionally to spend quality time with their LBC.

The Chinese Government has, furthermore, delivered education and cultural initiatives to support the development and growth of left-behind children. For example, under the "Left-behind Children Education Development Plan", the Chinese Government offers funding for rural schools to improve the quality of education and create more favourable,

better-facilitated learning environments for children [17]. The Plan also contains the implementation of a number of localised cultural development initiatives wherein rural schools are given funding to provide music and art programmes, summer camps and sports activities for children in order to enhance their holistic development and long-term subjective (e.g., subjective satisfaction gained from being socially active and connected) and objective (e.g., an increase in actual social bonding) well-being. Sun et al. argue that LBC who are subject to the absence of both biological parents, limited parent-child contact and longer durations of parent-child separation tend to be less engaged in school. Therefore, in addition to the provision of more school activities for LBC to participate in, the parent-child reunion initiative mentioned in the preceding section should be deemed conducive to encouraging LBC to be more engaged in school [16]. Despite the social benefits generated by this Plan, left-behind children who fail to access schooling opportunities are barred from becoming beneficiaries. In the least developed rural Chinese provinces, many most financially insecure left-behind children remain deprived of schooling opportunities, in spite of the national guideline of the provision of nine-year compulsory education to all Chinese children. Therefore, while enhancing the benefits of those who are included in the education system is useful to children's development, the Chinese Government should endeavour to universalise the obtainment of education opportunities in the foreseeable future.

3.2. Chinese Government's Policy Gaps That Bar Left-Behind Children's Emotional and Psychological Development and Well-Being

In the preceding sub-section, this paper summarises the major public initiatives that address the vulnerability faced by left-behind rural Chinese children and ensure that their development and growth can be better protected. However, a significant existing policy gap in rural China is that local rural governments lack any concrete measures designated for left-behind rural children to specifically support their mental health needs. Existing findings indicate that merely 5.5% of villages in the provinces of Guizhou, Sichuan and Hunan possess operating centres providing mental health services for left-behind children. Within the centres offering mental health services for left-behind children in the surveyed villages, there was a complete absence of on-duty trained professionals to provide counselling services or support [39]. This highlights that the psychological counselling and support services delivered by the Chinese Government, as discussed in the preceding sub-section, are still prematurely operating. To date, many rural Chinese regions witness a shortage of psychological counselling and support centres and trained supporting staff or professionals. As a result, rural China has to urgently endeavour to accelerate the construction of these psychological-health-supporting establishments and socioeconomically incentivise psychology professionals or related staff to work in villages.

Furthermore, internal coordination within the Chinese Government on improving the emotional and psychological well-being of left-behind rural children is disorganised. To date, a number of government agencies, including the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Education, share the responsibility for delivering emotional and psychological services for children's welfare [40]. Nevertheless, interagency coordination has been substantially weak, rendering duplications of work and inefficiencies in the provision of needed services and support. Therefore, the Chinese Government should emphasise the integration of internal policies and services among different agencies and departments to minimise any confusion and duplications of work caused by miscommunication and disorganised coordination. In addition to institutional coordination barriers, the lack of medical care coordination also harms the well-being and development of LBC and their migrant parents. It is noteworthy that the medical care fund is only coordinated at the county level. This means that if migrant labourers move from one county to another, they have to cancel their existing medical care account and reinstate another account in the other county. Given the fact that many migrant labourers change jobs across counties, they are disincentivised from opening up a medical care fund [41]. Likewise, the loophole of the existing medical care fund bars rural-to-urban migrant parents from bringing their LBC

to live together in cities. This is because LBC's medical care account is not transportable across counties. Therefore, if migrant labourers move to another county to pursue careers there, their children who relocate with them have to sacrifice their existing medical care benefits and re-prepare all the paperwork to set up another medical care account [41]. This lack of medical care coordination significantly marginalises the health and well-being of LBC and their migrant parents.

Moreover, as there is a rich collection of existing research examining the long-term impact of parental migration on left-behind children's development and well-being, Chinese society harbours the misconception that there must be sufficient empirical research addressing the specific needs and challenges encountered by those who are being left behind. However, either existing research projects have been conducted with geographical restrictions or secondary data analysis projects published in academia mostly rely on the few identical nationally representative datasets available. There is an urgency for government departments or academic research institutions to carry out more nationally representative data collection projects focusing on specific areas of the challenge faced by left-behind children in rural China. Without diverse and reliable datasets available, Chinese policymakers can hardly design and deliver targeted policies or interventions to support the needs of today's left-behind children in a timely fashion.

4. Discussion

4.1. Can Rural China Achieve Sustainable Development If It Fails to Share a Fair Share of Life Chances to Left-Behind Children in Rural China?

Sustainable development has been prioritised by all emerging and established powers, including China. Given left-behind children's vulnerability, in this sub-section, this paper explores whether rural China can sustainably develop while neglecting the interests of those being left behind. Arguments made in this sub-section suggest that if rural China overlooks the need to protect the interests and rights of children who are left behind, its policy goal of reaching sustainable development is plausibly a distant dream.

Should rural China desire to build a sustainable future, it is necessary for its provision of equal opportunities to all rural citizens on a non-discriminatory basis. This means that all citizens, regardless of their social status, wealth or location, should be entitled to a fair share of life chances. However, per the status quo, left-behind children have been significantly systematically marginalised, discriminated and deprived, which compromises their opportunities for reaching success [42]. Such a circumstance renders rural China's achievement of sustainable development impossible, owing to the fact that children who represent the leading members and assets of tomorrow's China fail to receive a reasonable portion of the available opportunities to succeed.

The fair distribution of life chances is prominent in organised societies. In areas where there are significant disparities in the allocation of resources and opportunities, societal issues such as development stagnation are likely to exist. In rural Chinese contexts, left-behind children who are excluded from enjoying sufficient resources to pursue quality education are discouraged from developing knowledge and skills that propel their self-establishment as future productive members of society.

Leaving education aside, left-behind children are hampered from accessing healthcare services, resulting in exposure to higher risks of attaining poor health outcomes. These outcomes, in turn, affect the academic performance, physical and mental health, and subjective (e.g., feeling depressed from being excluded by the healthcare system) and objective (e.g., the inability to gain access to healthcare services when needed) well-being of those who are left behind. Existing literature argues that, in 2014, as few as 50.6 percent of caregivers of LBC received free health examination in local rural clinics or township hospitals, and 81.3 percent of caregivers never participated in health education workshops or lectures organised and delivered by local health institutions [43]. The utilisation rate of available health services in rural areas was extremely low, which adversely affected caregivers' delivery of caregiving and supervision to, and psychological and emotional

influences on, LBC's development and health status. Such statistics unveil that awareness of available health-related services and facilities was very weak among the rural Chinese population, barring them from accessing healthcare services. It is, therefore, imperative for rural China to guarantee domestic left-behind children access to basic healthcare, education and nutrition. The more inclusivity society contains, the more likely its cycle of poverty, if it exists, can be broken and the more sustainably developed it becomes.

In this sub-section, this paper explains why rural China, or China as a whole, cannot build sustainable futures by neglecting the interests of those who are systematically vulnerable. Such an argument underpins the importance of developing this paper where the paper, in parts, identifies the relevant policy development and gaps and discusses how China can create more sustainable futures by enhancing the well-being of left-behind children in rural China.

4.2. Barriers to Sustainable Development Concerning the Equal Distribution of Resources to Left-Behind Children

In the preceding chapter, this paper reiterates that sustainable development cannot be realised without a fairer redistribution of resources and opportunities to left-behind rural Chinese children. In this sub-section, this paper assesses, given the Chinese Government's endeavours for redistribution, the major barriers to the realisation of sustainable development.

In recent years, the Chinese Government has implemented a number of policies and interventions for the redistribution of resources and opportunities to left-behind children in rural China. The "two basics" policy is a highlighted example. Such a policy focuses on the delivery of compulsory education and basic healthcare services to all rural children, including those from the least developed regions. The policy has accomplished a certain degree of success; for example, 96.7% and 94.9% of left-behind children in rural China enrolled in primary and secondary education, respectively [44]. However, despite their enrolment in school, they remain likely to drop out of school prematurely. Moreover, unless local rural governments continue to raise the quality of education in villages, the outcomes of rural human investment remain dissatisfactory, and left-behind rural Chinese children's disadvantaged social positions, relative to their urban elite counterparts, are underpinned.

The Chinese Government is also known for its implementation of the "spring bud programme", an initiative that provides financial assistance to rural girls in order to increase their chances of completing compulsory education or even reaching higher education [45]. A series including mentoring and psychological support are delivered to female beneficiaries as parts of the initiative. While such a scheme intervenes in the ingrained societal problem of gender inequality and helps empower girls' and young women's educational and human development, the programme has yet to cover female beneficiaries from all rural areas. Rural Chinese policymakers still have a long journey ahead to ensure the coverage of the programme expands to more underdeveloped regions, allowing more rural Chinese girls, including those who are left behind, to gain access to education opportunities.

In this sub-section, this paper notes that the Chinese Government has made notable strides in ensuring that more equal opportunities are distributed to left-behind rural Chinese children. Despite its endeavours, this paper emphasises that there remain substantial policy gaps in rural China that the Chinese Government needs to address to mitigate the profound rural–urban divide or intra-rural divide. In so doing, more underprivileged financially insecure left-behind children in China can be included in any national or local schemes of rural development.

4.3. How to Ensure Left-Behind Children Are Valuable Assets but Not Liabilities to Rural Chinese Society?

This paper points out that the Chinese Government has been endeavouring to redistribute its resources and opportunities to left-behind children in rural China, despite policy outcomes still having significant room for improvement. This paper particularly highlights the importance of improving rural Chinese cohorts' access to quality education and healthcare services. Yet, fulfilling such policy focuses is inadequate to ensure that

left-behind children can become valuable assets to society rather than liabilities. In order to achieve this end, the Chinese Government has to apply a more comprehensive approach that prioritises long-term solutions and ensures the equal distribution of resources and opportunities from a holistic perspective persists in a sustainable fashion.

Regarding education, in order to improve the quality of rural education, the Chinese Government needs to incentivise and retain highly skilled and educated teachers to work in villages. Despite the Chinese Government implementing initiatives that financially incentivise promising teachers to work in villages for contracts lasting a few years, most of them return to cities for work upon the completion of their contracts. The Chinese Government can consider following the American model where underfunded schools in rural areas have been experimenting with a four-day school week. By extending the weekends from two days to three days, these rural schools are able to lower operational costs and better quality teachers' turnover rates decline due to the enjoyment of a better work-life balance and higher job satisfaction [46,47].

The Chinese Government needs to spend a larger share of financial resources on rural development, especially in the construction of public infrastructure. Working in better-facilitated and better-built communities heightens levels of convenience and comfort associated with residing in villages, and such communities per se will be less socially disdained by citizens. With the enhancement of public infrastructure development, more better-conditioned and better-facilitated rural schools should be built, and older, broken school establishments should be renovated. With better working environments, rural schools are able to retain more promising teachers to continue teaching in villages for the long term.

5. Conclusions

To build a more sustainable future, as mentioned, Chinese policymakers cannot overlook the rights and interests of left-behind children in rural China. To improve the development and well-being of left-behind children, more detailed social support schemes have to be developed and delivered. The aforementioned arguments point out that not only are left-behind children more emotionally and psychologically vulnerable, but their interpersonal skills are weak due to the lack of social interactions they experience. As a result, when enhancing rural public infrastructure, policymakers should focus on ensuring that each rural community has the presence of social support establishments, including centres that provide psychological counselling services; social, entertainment and sports activities and group learning opportunities. The development of these establishments is necessary to strengthen the levels of social bonding and social trust within communities, which, in turn, improves left-behind children's emotional and psychological well-being.

The Chinese Government can, furthermore, follow the practice of the model of foreign advanced societies that universalises the application of an affirmative action programme in educational settings. Under such a programme, more scholarships and education-related subsidies will be distributed to more disadvantaged and rural school-aged cohorts, including left-behind children. Better-ranked senior secondary schools and higher education institutions will also be legally bound to admit a portion of disadvantaged school-aged students. With the universalisation of an affirmative-action-like programme, the Chinese Government can reinforce the endeavours of redistributing opportunities and resources, allowing the construction of a future marked by sustainability, equity and liveability.

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