

Review

Reducing Rural Poverty: A Step Towards Sustainable Development

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Received: 3 September 2025; Accepted: 29 November 2025

Abstract: Poverty remains a persistent challenge worldwide, with rural areas disproportionately affected compared to urban regions. Effective rural development policies are therefore essential for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. China provides a notable example of successful poverty alleviation over the past four decades, implementing a comprehensive strategy that combines targeted poverty eradication, rural infrastructure development, industrial growth, and education and vocational training. These measures have contributed to a dramatic reduction in rural poverty, decreasing the number of individuals living in extreme poverty from 250 million in 1978 to zero by 2020. The Chinese experience underscores the importance of political commitment, coordinated sectorial policies, and targeted interventions in achieving both poverty reduction and long-term sustainable rural development. Lessons learned from China's strategies may serve as guidance for other countries seeking to reduce rural poverty while maintaining sustainable growth.

Keywords: *Poverty; rural areas; sustainable development; rural development policy; poverty reduction; economic development.*

1. Introduction

Poverty is a condition in which individuals or groups lack sufficient resources to meet basic living needs such as food, clothing, housing, education, and healthcare [1]. It represents both an economic and social problem that limits quality of life and constrains opportunities for sustainable development. Poverty may appear in several forms, including absolute poverty, relative poverty, social poverty, multidimensional poverty, and energy poverty [2]. Absolute poverty affects individuals who are unable to meet their basic needs, such as access to food, clean water, basic hygiene, and shelter. This form of poverty is considered the minimum standard for the physical survival of every individual. Relative poverty, by contrast, represents a milder form, defined as a significantly lower capacity to meet existential needs compared to the average standard of the society in which one lives. This does not necessarily imply the absence of basic necessities but rather a weaker access to goods and services that are considered normal in a given social context. Another manifestation of poverty is the so-called social poverty, which occurs when an individual or group is isolated from society and deprived of access to education, healthcare, and other services. People facing such limitations encounter significant obstacles in escaping poverty. Furthermore, poverty is most often multidimensional, meaning it is shaped by a combination of factors, including economic deprivation, lack of education, inadequate healthcare, poor housing conditions, and social exclusion.

Extreme poverty is predominantly a rural phenomenon. According to data from 2013, four out of five people living in extreme poverty – those subsisting on less than USD 1.90 per day – reside in rural areas [3]. However, there are significant regional differences in the prevalence and forms of

rural poverty across the world. Global studies on rural poverty confirm that poverty rates are consistently higher in rural than in urban areas, with the highest levels observed in Sub-Saharan Africa [2]. In addition to Sub-Saharan Africa, where rural poverty exists in its most severe form, it is also present in economically developed regions. Despite the long-standing tradition of state intervention, rural poverty remains a pressing issue in developed countries such as the European Union, Japan, the United States, and Australia. In these countries, poverty rates in rural areas are significantly higher than those in urban centers [4]. The situation is further complicated by so-called “vicious circle” that perpetuates poverty and hinders escape from it. Many studies [1,2,3] highlight that the deepening of rural poverty is linked to the interconnection between underdeveloped labor markets, unfavorable demographic structures, limited educational opportunities, and physical distance from urban centers.

Rural development, as both a development concept and a component of agricultural policy, aims to improve living and working conditions in rural areas [5]. The universal objectives of rural development include poverty reduction, balanced regional development, food security for both rural and urban populations, and sustainable management of natural resources [6]. Therefore, reducing rural poverty represent a priority goal of rural development policy, regardless of a countries level of economic development.

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Agenda for Sustainable Development, which established the eradication of poverty in all its forms everywhere in the world by 2030 as its first and foremost goal. The kea priorities of the UN agenda for poverty reduction include: the eradication of extreme poverty, reduction of relative poverty, equal access to basic services, strengthening the resilience of vulnerable groups, and promoting economic growth and employment [7].

At the global level, various strategies and mechanisms have been implemented to achieve this sustainable development goal within the designated timeframe. Certain progress has already been made in some countries. Over recent decades, rural poverty has declined partly due to successful populations. A study conducted in nineteen countries [8] found that poverty in rural areas has been decreasing at a faster rate than in urban areas. One of the most notable examples of effective poverty alleviation is the experience of the Peoples Republic of China. Therefore, this paper focuses on the methods implemented in China and outcomes achieved. The systematization of these experiences and results may serve as a valuable input for relevant sectoral policies in our country.

2. Reducing poverty and inequality in rural areas as complementary goals

Although closely interrelated phenomena, rural poverty and inequality are distinct concepts, and therefore require different approaches in addressing them. Income inequality, measured by the GINI coefficient, is generally lower in rural than in urban areas. This assertion is based on empirical research conducted in fifty-six countries [2]. Specifically, in 44 out of 56 countries (79% of the sample), the level of income inequality – one of the most significant indicators of quality of life – was found to be lower in rural than in urban environments.

The United Nations World Social Report 2020 indicates that wealthier rural households, in which the head of the agricultural holding possesses a higher level of education. The differences between these two groups are reflected primarily in access to healthcare and educational services. The same report also highlights gender disparities, emphasizing additional challenges faced by rural women. Empirical evidence confirms that women in rural areas encounter more barriers to accessing education compared to rural men. Moreover, rural women tend to have lower levels of land ownership and, consequently, reduced rights of control and decision – making over property. They also face limited access to paid employment and public services [9].

Efforts to reduce rural poverty have not always coincided efforts to reduce inequality. For instance, in China, Indonesia, and India, rural inequality either increased or remained unchanged despite significant reduction in poverty between 2000 and 2010. Experience suggests that measures aimed at reducing poverty can sometimes deepen disparities among different categories of the rural population, as well as between rural and urban inhabitants [2]. For example, agricultural development, while a key driver of rural poverty reduction, may exacerbate income differences

among farms of varying economic size. Similar effect can result from urbanization and diversification policies aimed at reducing rural poverty. Therefore, this issue must be addressed through a multisectoral approach – by combining economic, agricultural, rural, and other sectoral policies. Without reducing inequality, neither economic growth nor genuine development can be achieved.

Inclusive rural development, which entails the simultaneous reduction of both poverty and inequality, should be grounded in the concurrent implementation of economic and social measures [2]. These measures need to be applied at both the national and local levels. Implementing appropriate actions within local communities is essential for addressing rural challenges in accordance with their specific characteristics, constraints, resources, and development needs [10].

There are five key mechanisms that enable the simultaneous reduction of poverty and inequality in rural areas [2,11]:

- Investment in infrastructure and activities of general social significance;
- Promotion of agricultural development;
- Ensuring secure access to agricultural land;
- Improvement of social protection programs; and
- Elimination of all forms of discrimination.

Investment in infrastructure and socially significant activities includes measures such as the construction of transportation networks, electrification and water supply systems, the establishment and improvement of educational institutions, and the development of healthcare infrastructure. These measures contribute to improved access to public services, enhancement of the quality of life in rural areas, and integration of marginalized population groups into the development process. Promotion of agricultural development is implemented through measures such as farm modernization, introduction of new production technologies, farmer education, and the increase of direct subsidies. The outcomes of these measures include higher incomes for rural and agricultural populations, greater food security, and additional financial capacity to invest in health and education systems.

Another mechanism recommended by the United Nations within the strategy for reducing rural poverty is ensuring secure access to land. This mechanism involves land policy measures, equitable land distribution, and the establishment of appropriate legal frameworks. Such policies eliminate discrimination against certain categories of rural populations regarding land ownership opportunities. This, in turn, enhances farmers independence in decision-making and improves their economic and social standing.

Social protection policy a major role in poverty reduction in general, and particularly in alleviating poverty in rural areas. Therefore, improving social protection programs is considered a crucial mechanism for poverty reduction. This includes revising legal frameworks, increasing funding for social programs, and simplifying bureaucratic procedures. As a result, social programs become more accessible to a larger portion of the population, thereby reducing inequality and improving the quality of life of the extremely poor rural population.

Discrimination is both a cause and a consequence of poverty, regardless of whether it occurs in rural or urban areas. To eliminate or at least mitigate various forms of discrimination, rural development programs must encompass all categories of the population. The expected outcomes of this mechanism and its corresponding measures include poverty reduction, improved status of certain rural population groups, and decreased inequality.

Poverty and inequity in rural areas represent complex and multidimensional phenomena that require an integrated approach and long-term strategic action the implantation of the analyzed mechanisms highlights the importance of combinig economic, social, and institutional measures to enable sustainable development and improve living standards. As [12] emphasized, overcoming poverty is not solely about increasing income but about expanding individuals real freedoms and capabilities. It is crucial to ensure coordination among government policies, local initiatives, and international support to create conditions for more inclusive growth. Only through such

comprehensive cooperation is it possible to reduce the gap between rural and urban areas and to advance social justice in the long term.

3. Rural poverty and policy design for its elimination in developed countries

Financing agricultural development and promoting technological progress in agriculture significantly contribute to the reducing of rural poverty. The best example can be found in the countries of the European Economic Community after the Second World War, particularly during the initial years of implementing the Common Agricultural Policy. The development of entrepreneurship – which integrates primary agricultural production, processing, and service provision, such as agritourism – has proven especially effective. In the initial phase of development, policy measures were primarily focused on increasing productivity and income, followed by the establishment of advisory systems and, finally, the construction of physical and institutional infrastructure in rural areas. This approach to agricultural policy is known as the “top-down” model, and it aims to improve the quality of life and living standards of the rural population.

Measures within relevant sectoral policies have led to a reduction in rural poverty across the European Union, from 29.9% of the population at risk of poverty in 2010 to 23.9% in 2017. In the United States, rural poverty declined by 2% between 2013 and 2017 [13].

The primary root causes of rural poverty include:

- Vulnerable population groups: the elderly, women, refugees, migrants, and persons with disabilities;
- Social policies originally designed to address the needs of vulnerable groups in urban areas, which therefore must be adapted to the specific needs of rural population;
- A high degree of dependence on agriculture, where income levels are conditioned by agroecological – particularly climatic – factors, resulting in fluctuations in household income;
- Distance from urban centers and limited access to education, healthcare, and other services that influence quality of life;
- Characteristics of rural labor markets: restricted employment opportunities, seasonal work in agriculture and tourism, commuting distance (for those employed in cities), and lower wages;
- Lower levels of education among rural population compared to urban inhabitants, which directly affects employability, access to adequately paid jobs, and consequently, quality of life.

Limited access to preschool education, the closure of village schools due to depopulation, high household cost associated with sending children to towns for primary or secondary education, and the overall quality of rural education systems all contribute to an inadequate level of formal education and reduced learning efficiency among rural children compared to their urban peers. This is undoubtedly one of the most significant constraints on development and a key trigger of poverty. Countries such as Australia and Canada, participants in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have demonstrated that students from rural areas score, on average, twenty PISA points lower than their urban counterparts – a difference equivalent to approximately half a year of schooling [14].

Education has proven to be a critical determinant of both the presence and intensity of poverty. Based on the World Bank definition of extreme poverty – daily consumption of 1.9 USD per person – it is possible to identify common characteristics and construct a global profile of a poor individual. Typically, this is a young person living in rural area, engaged exclusively in agriculture, and possessing a low level of formal education [15].

These conclusions are further supported by empirical evidence from the United States. According to official data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, child poverty in rural area is particularly concerning. Among all age groups, children under the age of five are the most affected by poverty in rural America. Moreover, as in other countries, rural child poverty exceeds urban child poverty rates. In 2023, 13.6% of children in rural areas lived below the poverty line, compared to

10.6% of urban children [16]. Within the age structure of the rural poor, economic analyses show that children and youth under sixteen represent 26.7% - roughly on-third of the total rural poor – and constitute a segment of potential future labor force [17].

Several factors contribute to this situation in rural America. Chief among them are limited employment opportunities for parents, inability to secure higher-paying jobs, and restricted working hours. These factors significantly constrain rural parents ability to meet the basic needs of their children [18]. In addition to scarce employment opportunities, rural residents generally earn lower wages than their urban counterparts. Moreover, due to traditional lifestyles and often underdeveloped preschool systems, rural families frequently rely on a single employed parent, which directly results in a lower standard of living and, in many cases, pushes them below the official poverty line.

Another category severely affected by extreme poverty across rural America consists of part-time workers. According to official data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, this group accounted for 14% of the rural poor population in 2023 [16]. Empirical studies indicate that this group faces multiple challenges, including a shortage of jobs, limited working hours, and wages below the poverty threshold. The causes of part-time employment may be both economic and non-economic in nature. Furthermore, the rise in rural poverty is also linked to the decline in preschool facilities in both villages and small towns, whereas, in line with demographic and age-related trends, the number of elderly care facilities has shown an upward trajectory.

4. Reduction of rural poverty – the experience of the Peoples Republic of China

The fight against rural poverty in China has been actively pursued for four decades. During this period, strategies for poverty reduction have evolved, shifting in both focus and mechanisms [19].

Four key strategies have been implemented:

- Targeted poverty alleviation policy;
- Development of rural infrastructure;
- Industrial development and employment promotion; and
- Education and training.

Research based on two indicators – the Quality of Rural Life (QRL) and the Relative Poverty Index (RPI) – has shown that rural poverty in China declined from 250 million people in 1978 to 55.7 million in 2025 [20]. These data indicate that rural poverty reduction has consistently been among the top priorities in Chinas development agenda, and that this commitment was not merely declarative but actively implemented through concrete policy actions.

The targeted poverty alleviation policy was launched in 2013 as a central component of Chinas national strategy to eradicate poverty by 2020. This approach focused on identifying every poor household and providing specific support tailored to its individual needs. To ensure effective implementation, a comprehensive data collection system was established, resulting in the creation of a nationwide database for every rural community. Consequently, support programs for households were based on their unique constraints and development needs.

According to [21] the targeted poverty alleviation policy was implemented through the following mechanisms: registration of poor households, development of a national database, a “one household – one plan” approach, and the engagement of local actors. First, poor households were registered through the poverty card system, which gathered relevant data such as income levels, causes of poverty, household composition, health conditions, and educational background. These data were collected at the local level and integrated into a unified national database. A personalized support plan was then developed for each household in accordance with its poverty card profile. The success of this approach relied heavily on the participation of local officials – coordinators who possessed in-depth knowledge of local conditions and were directly responsible for field implementation. The strategy involved more than 800,000 local officials, ultimately enabling almost 99 million people to move out of extreme poverty. As a result of these efforts, 128,000 villages and 832 counties were officially removed from the national list of impoverished areas [22].

The development of rural infrastructure represented another major strategy for poverty reduction, focusing on both the construction of new and the rehabilitation of existing infrastructure in rural regions. One of the foundations of China's success in eradicating poverty was the strategic expansion of infrastructure in rural and mountainous areas. Infrastructure was not perceived merely as a physical precondition for development, but as a key driver of social inclusion, economic growth, and access to essential services [23].

Significant public funds were directed toward ensuring that underdeveloped rural areas had access to transport infrastructure, electricity, clean water, internet connectivity, and improved housing conditions. Infrastructure development proved highly effective in integrating rural populations into labor markets and educational systems, while also improving access to healthcare services.

Between 2012 and 2020, over 1.1 million kilometers of new upgraded rural roads were constructed [22], connecting remote rural regions with urban centers and markets. During the same period, nearly all rural areas gained stable access to electricity and safe drinking water, directly enhancing living standards and public health. Furthermore, internet access was extended to more than 98% of rural communities, enabling digital inclusion and expanding access to e-commerce, distance education, and online administrative and medical services. Within this strategy, over nine million people were relocated from extremely remote areas to newly built settlements equipped with essential infrastructure.

The key outcomes of this strategy include: more efficient distribution of goods, stimulation of rural entrepreneurship, increased school enrollment, reduced urban migration, and improved access to health and social services. In other words, infrastructure development exerted a positive influence on all socio-economic aspects of rural life [24].

Industrial development and job creation represented the third strategic pillar of China's poverty eradication efforts. These initiatives targeted the most vulnerable groups in rural areas, and the resulting enterprises were often referred to as "poverty reduction industries". Significant investments were directed toward developing agro-processing and marketing industries at the local community level. Additionally, rural populations were encouraged and supported to engage in agrotourism, while new industries such as e-commerce for agricultural products were developed [25].

The expansion of industrial activity in rural areas directly increased employment opportunities. The growth of processing industries created millions of jobs, enabling farmers to raise their incomes and escape poverty. Likewise, the development of rural tourism and e-commerce generated new opportunities for employment, particularly for young and women, contributing to social stability and the sustainable development of rural communities [26].

Education and training as a strategy for rural poverty reduction in China encompassed a range of initiatives across both formal and non-formal education systems. By investing in education and vocational training, poor rural residents were equipped with skills demanded by the labor market. The programs covered all levels – from basic education and technical training to scholarships for students from impoverished families. According to [19], the most significant measures implemented under this strategy included:

- Free basic education in rural areas;
- System „Targeted Poverty Alleviation through Education“;
- Vocational secondary education programs;
- Adult education and training; and
- Scholarship and “poverty reduction through higher education” initiatives.

For children from poor areas, the government allocated funds to provide nine years of compulsory and free education (primary and lower secondary), including coverage of textbook and accommodation costs. In 2013, China launched the “Targeted Poverty Alleviation through Education” campaign, identifying approximately 60 million people below the poverty line, with education serving as one of the primary instruments of support [22]. In accordance with the needs of rural economies, vocational secondary schools were established in fields such as agriculture,

electronics, tourism, crafts, and services. In this way, the secondary education system was reformed to align with actual labor market demands, ensuring sustainable long-term progress.

For marginalized groups in rural areas – particularly women and the elderly – training programs were organized to develop practical skills such as household management, food processing, handicrafts, and the use of digital tools. Human capital investment was recognized as a key condition for poverty reduction; thus, students from poor rural backgrounds were provided with free higher education, housing, and scholarships, coupled with an obligation to contribute professionally to the development of their local rural communities. This initiative operated under the slogan “one college student per poor household”.

As a result of these measures, school enrollment rates in rural areas increased significantly, particularly among students from impoverished regions at the secondary and tertiary levels. The primary school enrollment rate among rural children rose to 95% [22]. Education enabled young rural residents to access better-paid jobs and break the vicious cycle of poverty. Consequently, labor mobility increased, and entrepreneurship was strengthened. Through non-formal education and training programs, rural women became more active in the labor market, thereby substantially improving their socio-economic status.

5. Achieved results in rural poverty reduction in China and challenges for maintaining sustainable development

An analysis of China’s experience in reducing rural poverty over the past four decades reveals two key developmental modalities. The first modality involved the development of agriculture, that is agricultural growth based on labor – intensive activities. This approach characterized the 1980s, when nearly four-fifths of China’s rural population lived in poverty. During the 2000s, the expansion of the non-agricultural sector, together with growth in productivity and wages, contributed to significant improvements in living standards. As a result, the poverty rate fell to around 10% [27].

The trend of rural poverty reduction in China represents a global phenomenon. Between 1980 and 2019, the share of people living in poverty decreased from 96.2% to 0.6% [22]. Throughout this period, rural poverty declined at an average annual rate of –2.5%.

Table 1. Rural Poverty in China, 2015 – 2020.

Year	Population Living in Poverty (million)	Share of Total Population (%)
2015	55.75	5.7
2016	43.35	4.5
2017	30.46	3.1
2018	16.6	1.7
2019	5.51	0.6
2020	0	0

According to the report of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, remarkable results have been achieved in the field of rural poverty reduction (Table 1). The development of China and its rural regions is

guided by the following core principles: humanity, innovation, coordination, ecology, openness, and shared prosperity [28].

Despite these outstanding achievements, there remains potential for further productivity growth through labor reallocation across sectors and regions, particularly given that the share of agriculture in GDP and employment remains relatively high. Future poverty reduction will therefore constitute a fundamental condition for achieving broad-based and sustainable development.

The poverty alleviation fund serves as the financial backbone of China's poverty reduction efforts. It functions as a network of financing mechanism utilized within the framework of the national poverty eradication strategy. The fund's four main purpose are:

- Development of local infrastructure (roads, water supply systems, and electricity networks);
- Population educations;
- Agricultural and entrepreneurial development; and
- Relocation of population from extremely poor and inaccessible areas.

Three major financing models have proven particularly effective: a multi-level funding structure (combining central, provincial, and local resources), a partnership-based approach, and precise targeting mechanisms. The multi-level funding model is essential since the Fund operates as a multilayered mechanism, allocating resources to projects based on regional needs and performance outcomes. However, recent evidence suggests that certain mechanisms – such as fiscal responsibility frameworks – may risk weakening local economic resilience at the microeconomic level [29]. The partnership approach emphasizes that financial support must be accompanied by technical assistance, training, and targeted aid. Finally, precise targeting refers to designing support programs in such a way that resources are directed straight to the most vulnerable households in individuals.

Between 2012 and 2020, China reduced its extremely poor rural population by 100 million people. By the end of 2020, the government officially declared the achievement of its goal – the eradication of extreme poverty [28].

Empirical studies that poverty reduction plans have had a stimulating impact on economic development in poor areas, primarily through industrialization and improved production efficiency. Cost-benefit analyses demonstrate strong economic returns and long – term sustainability. Nevertheless, despite rapid economic growth, income inequality remains high [30]. China's experience clearly demonstrates that poverty reduction cannot be achieved without strong political commitment and well-designed sectoral policies [31].

A key priority for the future is preserving the achievements already made, as China continues to face several challenges. One major risk is the potential return to poverty, since millions of people still live just above the poverty line. These households are particularly vulnerable to illness, natural disasters, and the loss of seasonal employment. Therefore, experts recommend a strategic shift from “poverty eradication” to “poverty prevention”. This transition would ensure sustainable development through the active engagement of relevant sectoral policies [32].

Sustainable development is also threatened by regional disparities and inequality, given the significant gap between eastern, urbanized provinces and western, mountainous ones. Spatial isolation limits the development potential of many areas characterized by underdeveloped infrastructure and small markets, which in turn hampers their capacity to attract investment [33]. In addition, China faces several structural challenges: rural depopulation and aging, limited diversification of the rural economy, and persistent environmental problems. Addressing these issues will be crucial to maintaining the achievements of poverty eradication and ensuring the long-term sustainability of rural development.

6. Conclusions

Regardless of its specific manifestation, poverty as a socio-economic phenomenon is consistently more prevalent in rural than in urban areas. For this reason, the primary objective of rural development policy must be the reduction and eventual elimination of poverty. Poverty contributes directly to the depopulation of rural regions, thereby constraining not only their sustainable development but, in many cases, their very survival.

In pursuit of sustainable rural development, numerous countries around the world have introduced mechanisms for reducing rural poverty through their sectoral policies – particularly rural development, health, education, and social policies. In this regard, China has made remarkable progress, and the strategies implemented there could serve as a valuable model and guidance for other nations seeking to achieve similar goals.

Nevertheless, what emerges as an imperative is the preservation of the results achieved in poverty reduction and transformation of these achievements into long-term sustainability. This remains an exceptionally important task – not only economic standpoint, but also from the demographic and ecological dimension of sustainable development.

Funding: This research was funded by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. The contract number is: 451-03-137/2025-03/200117 from 4.2.2025.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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