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Poverty fight grounded in success

By Alexis Hooi | China Daily | Updated: 2020-07-20 09:51



Robert Lawrence Kuhn in Hainan province in November 2017 for his documentary and CGTN TV series on China. [Photo/China Daily]

Renowned China expert lays out country's impressive efforts, grassroots focus in taking on monumental challenge

Editor's note: *As China aims to eliminate extreme poverty and be a "moderately prosperous society" (xiaokang shehui) in time for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China next year, we talk to leading experts for their take on the country's commitment.*

Located in some of the poorest areas across the country, the communities are the focus of targeted, antipoverty measures suited to their specific conditions.

For renowned China expert Robert Lawrence Kuhn, there is actually an invaluable element that is common among the impoverished beneficiaries of the national drive to improve their lives.

"Every single poor family has its own customized file. It is a notebook. And each one has a page with all the family members listed. It has the plan that they are trying to achieve, the plan how they will get out of poverty," Kuhn said.

"Every month there is an entry about how they are doing. What are their problems? Every poor family in the country has someone responsible for them. The information is all taken and digitized and sent to Beijing. A central office compiles all that data."

"At the grassroots level, each village has one individual responsible for knowing every single poor family in that village—normally it is a young Party secretary assigned there. Each family has its own targeted plan," he said.

"That's what targeted poverty alleviation means. I had understood that. But when I actually saw the piles of books representing every family, in several different villages, it made a strong impression on me."

For more than three decades, Kuhn has worked with China's leaders and advised the Chinese government on the country's development. In December 2018, he was awarded the "China Reform Friendship Medal" by President Xi Jinping and Chinese leaders, on the 40th anniversary of China's historic reform and opening-up.

Kuhn has written over 30 books and his expertise is also widely presented through international media organizations. Most recently, in his major work communicating the story of China, Kuhn has been asked to focus on China's poverty alleviation campaign. It has been a monumental challenge that China has risen up to, he said.

"China's poverty alleviation campaign is one of the most remarkable stories of modern times in the broadest sense, not just for poverty alleviation itself, but also in terms of the advancement of human civilization. The story really needs to be appreciated more, certainly in the West, but also in China," Kuhn said.

In one of his latest projects, Kuhn is the host and writer of *Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty*, the first in-depth documentary of its kind about China's poverty alleviation drive to be broadcast abroad, showcasing the country's strategies and structures in eradicating extreme poverty. The film was directed by Peter Getzels and executive produced by Adam Zhu.

Production took two years and the film crew visited poor households in six areas—Guizhou, Gansu, Shanxi, Sichuan and Hainan provinces and the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. Kuhn and his team interviewed government officials at the central, provincial, city, county, township and village levels, recording a large quantity of firsthand information.

Other than the targeted, customized plan of each family to lift them out of absolute poverty, Kuhn said another impressive aspect of the poverty alleviation effort was how the local officials are "dispatched to impoverished villages to manage poverty alleviation, often for two years. Moreover, Party officials at the front lines in fighting poverty cannot leave their current post and cannot be promoted unless and until they fulfill their specific, numeric, poverty-alleviation goals. We watched local officials being held accountable, their careers at stake".

"Those individuals were Party or government officials who were on their way up in their career. They were generally in their early 30s or late 20s even," he said.

"Some of these individuals had good, up-and-coming jobs in the provincial capital, or the major cities, working in government. And now they're working in the poorest areas.

"This was not like a career detour. They were on their optimum career path.

"Because in the Chinese system, that grassroots experience is exceedingly important. It will actually help their careers and help their promotion opportunities. When you build this type of motivational behavior into the system, the system itself sends the message to those people who want to advance their career that this is how you do it—this is the shortest path for your career advancement: work at the grassroots level, learn how poverty is being alleviated," Kuhn said.



In a remote part of Hainan province during poverty alleviation research and filming in 2017. [Photo/China Daily]

"I met one official, for example; he had worked in a provincial capital, in water resources, as maybe a deputy division head. He went to this village where he focused on building a sewage and water system for that village of some 200 families or so, most of whom were poor. He took the task as a matter of not just a goal to achieve, but also as a matter of pride, that he was going to improve their lives and he was going to make this happen under his watch," he said. "These assignments became a badge of honor and a mechanism for career advancement. As noted, these administrative behavioral structures motivate officials to work toward objectives set by the Chinese government. As such, to understand how it works in China may be helpful for other countries, other cultures, so they may discern how to adapt China's poverty alleviation system to their own conditions and cultures."

Kuhn said his experience on the ground "led to insights about how China's extraordinary poverty-alleviation program actually works".

"Although poverty is being fought the world over, there is nothing anywhere like China's relocation of whole villages on a massive, national scale—moving people from remote rural areas to cities and suburban areas, providing homes and jobs, giving them a real chance at a better life," he said.

Kuhn cited one trip to Huishui county in Guizhou province, where whole villages were being relocated from remote mountain hamlets to a new community 70 km away.

"I learned that housing is free for villagers who relocate here. A family of four receives up to 80 square meters of living space, 20 per person. The government also covers all basic amenities, including sofas, beds, kitchenware, and TVs," he said.

"But how can these rural men, who were farmers, learn new, non-farming jobs? I joined a cooking class and got to know one of the former farmers, who was learning to be a chef. I spent time with three generations of his family and several of his friends. Almost everyone was appreciative of their new lives," Kuhn said.

"But not everyone," Kuhn added; "that would be unrealistic. One recently relocated villager told me that the government misrepresented how much income he and his family would get, but it was too late to return to the village because their homes had been demolished as soon as they agreed to be relocated."

"Moreover, not everyone from the villages agrees to move to the new communities. After all, the farms have been their lives for generations. I traveled to Daijing village to meet the Party secretary. His job was to convince the few remaining villagers to relocate. It is policy that neither he nor the government can force people to relocate."

Kuhn stressed the importance of confronting corruption in poverty alleviation work.

"In such a massive country, with such large flows of funds, and with officials' careers on the line, there is risk of abuse and manipulation. While cheating and stealing in poverty alleviation are not unexpected, it is especially unseemly," he said.

"With career stakes high and funding vast, cheating and stealing are no surprise. Of the 122,100 cases of corruption in China in 2017, 48,700—more than one-third—related to poverty alleviation work," Kuhn said.



On the road to Guizhou province villages in November 2017. [Photo/China Daily]

"I applaud the government in releasing these unflattering statistics! China will not allow falsifying data, or misappropriating funds, to undermine its poverty alleviation goals," he said.

Another impressive feature of poverty alleviation was the system put in place to stem fraud, called "third-party evaluation", Kuhn said.

"The governing idea is that since the independent evaluators would be coming from completely different regions, they would not likely know any of the officials whom they would be evaluating and thus not be swayed by personal relationships.

"The task is to evaluate both the successes and the challenges of the poverty alleviation process—and to assess how officials were doing their jobs," he said. "To ensure that the local officials do not prepare for inspection visits, the evaluation team decides where they will go only at the last minute, often the same morning of the inspection.

"When officials are pressured to meet their firm objectives in a compressed period of time, some may cut corners or fudge numbers," Kuhn said.

"I commend the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development for its independent checking and inspecting, avowing that if there is any false

reports or fraud, officials will be held accountable and dealt with seriously, so that the results of poverty alleviation can stand the test of history and the people. The greater the transparency of government, the greater the confidence in government," he said.

"Between 2015 and 2019, all across China, almost 3 million Party officials were working on the front lines of rural poverty alleviation (that's cumulative—some 750,000 at any given time). Officials know that their careers prosper or falter based on their poverty-alleviation results."



Robert Lawrence Kuhn is a public intellectual, China expert, international corporate strategist and investment banker, and media commentator. He was awarded the "China Reform Friendship Medal". He has focused on China's poverty alleviation; he is host and writer of *Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty* (director, Peter Getzels; executive producer, Adam Zhu).

Achieving goals

The feats achieved so far in China's fight against poverty are essential steps toward fulfilling the country's stated aim to be a "moderately prosperous society" in time for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China next year, Kuhn said.

"After all, how could China claim to be a moderately prosperous society if any of its citizens continued to live in absolute, extreme or abject poverty? No matter how large China's GDP,

no matter how large China's income per capita, China could not claim to have achieved this goal unless and until every citizen was living above the line of absolute poverty," he said.

"Today, in the Western world, especially in the US, there is concern about China's actions and suspicion of China's motives. While all political systems have trade-offs, poverty alleviation, to me, is the best disrupter of such stereotypes," he said.

China was on track to meet its target of eradicating extreme poverty in rural areas and eliminating regional poverty by 2020 when the COVID-19 epidemic struck and some may question whether it can still achieve its goal, Kuhn said.

"During an inspection tour in Northwest China's Shaanxi province, President Xi urged enhanced efforts to overcome the negative impact of the COVID-19 epidemic and ensure that the country does achieve its original poverty-alleviation goals in 2020," he said.

Again, Kuhn's latest work on the ground helped him to experience "firsthand the impact of President Xi's remarkable statement: 'I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else.'"

Still, China's targeted poverty alleviation drive faced or faces at least four challenges, Kuhn said.

"First, is the data reliable? There is an obvious conflict if the same officials who do the poverty alleviation remediation work also do the poverty alleviation assessment work. As noted, I've seen independent auditors, often unannounced, checking and spot-checking—but I still hear talk that some data is suspect, because local officials are under such great pressure. That's why central authorities have become even more committed to independent checks, punishing officials convicted of fraud," he said.

"Second, there is natural conflict between officials who want to bring people out of poverty, in order to benefit their careers, and village people who want to remain classified as poor, in order to maximize their subsidies. These are normal human motivations and individual cases often test the wisdom of officials.

"Third, what's to prevent those who are pushed just over the line of extreme poverty, after the excitement dies down, after 2020, from falling back down below it? For China's poverty reduction to be counted a true success, it must be sustainable," Kuhn said.

"Fourth, living barely over the line of extreme poverty, far below standards of living enjoyed by China's urban middle class, hardly makes for a society of common prosperity, China's long-term goal. The fight against poverty cannot end in 2020," he said.

"To truly eliminate all poverty in China, and to do it sustainably, poverty alleviation programs must continue to be an ongoing process and an ongoing priority in China. It is, indeed, a Long March."

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