

OPINION / VIEWPOINT

China's victory offers clues to global campaign against poverty

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Shuanghu County, Tibet Autonomous Region, was removed from poverty list on December 9, 2019. As of Oct, 2020, about 35,000 resettlement areas have been built nationwide, and more than 2.66 million units of resettlement housing have been built for the poor. Over 9.6 million impoverished people have relocated into new homes.

Editor's Note:

Chinese President Xi Jinping solemnly declared "complete victory" in eradicating absolute poverty during a conference in Beijing on Thursday. China has lifted all rural poor people out of extreme poverty under the current standard, with 832 counties, 128,000 villages, and nearly 100 million impoverished people shaking off poverty. How did China make it? What does the role of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) play during the arduous process? Four foreign experts shared their views with the Global Times on China's successful poverty alleviation.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of The Kuhn Foundation and recipient of the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018)

China's success in eradicating extreme poverty is founded on three powerful principles: CPC leadership, General Secretary Xi's commitment, and CPC mobilization.

First, the operational leadership of the CPC is not just about giving directives and pronouncements but actually implementing programs and projects through the CPC organizational structure - central government and five levels of local government (provincial, municipal, county, township, village).

The five levels are run directly by Party secretaries - five levels of Party secretaries — and I followed their work on poverty alleviation, tracked each Party secretary's specific domains of responsibility as well as how their collective work articulated together. All these Party secretaries considered poverty alleviation to be their most important task — and I have been around China long enough to know that they weren't putting on a show for me, they weren't faking it, trying to impress me (perhaps thinking I might write, report or film something).

Second, the commitment of General Secretary Xi, who by voicing his personal leadership repeatedly and by allocating his personal time overtly, sets an example that leaders and officials must follow. Visiting poor villages has been a key part of Xi's more than 80 domestic inspections since he was elected general secretary of the CPC Central Committee in late 2012. Similarly, during the coronavirus epidemic, when Xi visited hospitals and spoke with frontline workers, the whole country got the message. Almost everywhere Xi goes, he stresses poverty alleviation and encourages Party cadres to visit impoverished areas regularly and interact with local people directly.

Xi has made poverty alleviation an emblem of his leadership. Alleviating poverty is what Xi cares most about and on which he spends the most energy. He said in 2017, "We should mobilize the energies of our whole Party, our whole country, and our whole society, and continue to implement targeted poverty reduction and alleviation measures."

Speaking at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO Summit in November 2017, Xi made the remarkable statement: "I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else." I know no other national leader who has made such an assertion.

Since the 18th CPC National Congress in late 2012, Xi has visited scores of poverty-stricken villages and households; on almost every domestic trip he makes, he makes a point to understand the local poverty situation and what is being done to alleviate poverty.

Third, the mobilization capacity of the CPC and the ability to command the country's resources in personnel and materials. For example, during the pandemic, assigning "sister" relationships between strong provinces and specific cities in Hubei, a strategy long

employed in poverty alleviation between eastern and western provinces and cities.

Although other developing countries have different conditions and cultures, China rightly believes its poverty alleviation experience can help.

Among developing countries, only China has achieved rapid development and large-scale poverty reduction, with the poor sharing the fruits of reform and opening-up over the four decades and with the intractably poor finally brought out of poverty over the last seven years or so. For good reason, China's poverty alleviation accomplishments have been called a developmental miracle.

When China's 2020 poverty alleviation mission is completed, China will have achieved the poverty reduction goal of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 10 years ahead of schedule. No other country has brought so many people out of poverty, and did so in such a short period of time. China asserts that these historic achievements validate the country's socialist political system, which means the continuing leadership of the CPC.

What can the world learn from China's success in poverty alleviation? Many things, to be sure. Certainly, China hopes to share its poverty reduction experience - all aspects of it - with the world community, especially the poorest nations.

But first, a caveat. Each country is different. Each culture has its own history; the natures of different peoples are indeed different. We cannot take programs from one country and impose them wholly, without adaptation, on another country.

However, the principles are what's important. And China's principles of poverty alleviation are clear: "targeted" poverty alleviation employs specific measures to fit specific circumstances and needs, and a clear organizational structure to implement those measures, monitor them, and check them.

Nonetheless, to me, what is even clearer is this. For a country to make a success of poverty alleviation, the No.1 criterion is that the leadership of the country must make an absolute and resolute commitment to accomplish it. Again, General Secretary Xi's unambiguous assertion: "I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else." This sends a powerful message to officials at all levels, indeed to the entire country.

So, this is the big lesson to learn: the senior leader of the country needs to make the overall mission of poverty alleviation a high priority for the nation. Nothing less will do.

Then, one individual needs to be empowered, by senior leadership, with the authority and resources to implement the national program.

Liu Yongfu, head of the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, explained to me his action-oriented mission; "22 provinces with large poverty-stricken populations have made a solemn pledge to the central government to complete poverty alleviation before the end of 2020. We treat this task as if it's a military order."

We think of poverty programs in terms of criteria, measures, mechanisms and procedures. And indeed, China has pioneered micro-businesses, education, relocating whole villages, eco-compensation, and social security. These can be adapted to other countries, as can the Party-led organizational system of implementing poverty alleviation through the "five levels" of local government.

Bottomline, though, what all countries should recognize in the fight against poverty is the critical importance of motivating officials to make poverty alleviation a priority in the hierarchy of values in their work. This can come only from the top down. This is a big lesson that China offers to the world.

While rightly celebrating China's historic eradication of all extreme poverty, a monumental accomplishment for the ages, President Xi set immediately to work in redressing relative poverty, recognizing the country's ongoing imbalance between urban and rural areas by calling for "rural vitalization" as "a historic shift" in focusing on agriculture, rural areas and farmers. Xi sent an unambiguous signal that wide urban-rural gaps are not acceptable, that rural areas and farmers are "the ballast" for the country, as he called for "rural vitalization" to ensure that farmers become affluent and well-off. Exemplifying this new development stage, China has established the National Administration of Rural Revitalization, a new agency to maintain momentum generated by the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development.

It reminded me of what Xi told me in 2006 when he was Party chief of Zhejiang Province. "It is fair to say that we have achieved some successes," Xi said when we met in Hangzhou; "nevertheless, we should have a cautious appraisal of our accomplishments." Xi emphasized that China cannot be satisfied with the status quo: "We should never overestimate our accomplishments or indulge ourselves in our achievements," he said. He called for China to aspire to "our next higher goal," and to appreciate "the gap between where we are and where we have to go." He described this as "a persistent and unrelenting process."

His words back then are fitting commentary on what he says as President in 2021, as China transitions from poverty alleviation to rural vitalization and ushers in a new stage of rural development.

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