Article

Social Adaptation of Relocated Residents in Guizhou: A Social-Ecological Systems Approach

Yuanfei Hu[1,*], Lin Xu[2]

[1]School of Economics and Management, Kaili University, Guizhou 556011, China.

[2]School of International Education, Kaili University, Guizhou 556011, China.

*Corresponding author: Yuanfei Hu, 465603484@qq.com.

Abstract: This study investigates how relocated residents in Guizhou Province navigate everyday life after being moved into newly established communities under China's targeted poverty alleviation policy. Using the lens of social-ecological systems (SES) theory, the research looks beyond economic statistics to examine how individuals—young and old, male and female—adapt in more personal, social, and structural ways. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach across 64 resettlement sites, the study reveals distinct challenges shaped by age, gender, and the institutional context. Older adults face difficulties adjusting to new urban livelihoods and experience a loss of social identity. Women encounter tension between household responsibilities and limited work opportunities. Children struggle with unfamiliar behavioral norms and emotional insecurity. By tracing how micro-level (individual), meso-level (community), and macro-level (institutional) forces intersect, the paper builds a layered understanding of adaptation. In response, it proposes a "Three Sectors, Five Dimensions" community support model that brings together professional social work, grassroots participation, and targeted policy tools. The study offers a grounded and practical contribution to current debates on forced relocation and adaptive governance, with implications for China and other Global South contexts undergoing similar transitions.

Keywords: social-ecological systems; poverty-induced relocation; social adaptation; community support; Guizhou

1. Introduction

Relocation as part of China's targeted poverty alleviation strategy－known in policy terms as Yidi fupin banqian(易地扶贫搬迁)－has reshaped the lives of millions by moving residents from environmentally fragile or impoverished areas into new settlement zones. Guizhou Province stands out in this process: during the 13th Five-Year Plan period, it resettled approximately 1.92 million individuals—equivalent to one-sixth of the national total—under a joint directive issued by the Guizhou Provincial Party Committee and the provincial government (Guizhou Provincial Party Committee & Guizhou Provincial People's Government, 2019). While the logistical challenges of physical relocation have largely been addressed, a deeper question now takes centre stage: how well are people adapting socially and psychologically to their new environments? To support this transition, the provincial Department of Civil Affairs introduced community-based social work stations in resettlement areas as part of a broader policy initiative (Guizhou Provincial Department of Civil Affairs, 2020). While the logistical challenges of physical relocation have largely been overcome, a deeper question now takes centre stage: how well are people adapting socially and psychologically to their new environments? Official measures—including the rollout of community-based social work stations (Qianminfa [2020] No. 7)—have aimed to support this transition.

However, existing research shows that relocated residents still face multiple challenges such as difficulties in livelihood transition, barriers to community integration, and cultural adaptation conflicts (Lyu et al., 2019). Current research on land-based poverty alleviation and relocation has obvious theoretical limitations. On the one hand, most studies focus on policy implementation or economic impacts (Wang, Li & Wang, 2017), lacking a systematic analysis of the adaptation process of the residents; on the other hand, existing social adaptation studies are mostly carried out from a single dimension, such as identity (Wang & Jiang, 2020), failing to integrate micro-individuals, mesocommunities, and macro-policy interaction. This fragmented perspective makes it difficult to explain the complexity of relocation adaptation, especially the lack of attention to the specificity of minority-populated areas. Although the research on social work intervention has begun, it generally

suffers from the problems of generalized service model and weak theoretical support, and has not yet formed a systematic intervention framework.

This lack of an integrated framework is especially problematic in areas like Guizhou, where many relocatees come from ethnic minority backgrounds and face layered vulnerabilities. Moreover, although social work has been introduced into these communities, it often lacks the conceptual clarity and tailored approach needed to address such diverse needs. This study aims to bridge that gap. By applying the SES framework, it offers a more holistic way to understand and respond to the adaptation experiences of relocated populations—both as individuals and as members of complex communities embedded in larger institutional structures.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts the social-ecological systems (SES) framework, which conceptualizes individuals, communities, and institutions as interconnected actors within multi-level adaptive systems. These systems are shaped by feedback loops, environmental contexts, and governance arrangements that jointly produce social outcomes (Berkes et al., 2003; Cernea, 2000). The SES perspective has been widely applied in sustainability and systems theory to examine resilience, cross-scale interactions, and institutional adaptation (Folke, 2006), and more recently extended to spatial and governance dimensions of adaptation in relocation and environmental change (Liu et al., 2023). However, its use in poverty relocation contexts remains underexplored. Extending SES to this field, the study develops an integrated "individual–community–policy" model to analyze the dynamic processes influencing adaptation.

It addresses three central questions: (1) What systemic barriers do different population groups—children, elderly, and women—face in their adaptation? (2) How do micro-level (individual), meso-level (community), and macro-level (institutional) systems interact to shape adaptation outcomes? (3) How can social work interventions enhance these outcomes through coordinated, multi-tiered strategies?

Guizhou Province was selected for its prominence in China's relocation efforts. The study focuses on 64 communities established between 2019 and 2020, all part of a province-wide "Social Work and Volunteer Service Station" programme

administered by professional agencies. These sites span all prefectures and represent varied scales and ethnic compositions, offering both representativeness and analytical richness.

The study adopts a mixed-methods design, drawing on (1) household surveys to capture individual-level outcomes; (2) semi-structured interviews with residents, social workers, and local officials to interpret lived experiences; and (3) policy document analysis to understand macro-level governance. It contributes on three levels: theoretically, by applying SES to a new empirical context; empirically, by identifying adaptation patterns across social groups and systems; and practically, by proposing a scalable intervention model—the "Three Sectors, Five Dimensions" framework—for use in resettlement governance, particularly in Global South settings.

3. Findings

The findings are organized around the three-tiered structure of the social-ecological systems (SES) framework. Adaptation unfolds across individual, community, and institutional levels, each shaped by distinct challenges and cross-cutting dynamics. Some patterns reaffirm prior assumptions, while others reveal the uneven complexity of real-world relocation.

3.1. Patterns of Individual-Level Adaptation

3.1.1 Children: Behavior, Norms, and Emotional Security

Children's adaptation challenges span behavioral adjustment, rule socialization, and emotional wellbeing. Reports from multiple sites noted conflicts with urban space use, such as trampling greenery and vandalism. A school volunteer observed, "Some kids treat the new playground like farmland." About 17% of children were under grandparental care, often lacking emotional support. Key needs included tutoring (49.5%), enrichment activities (44.5%), and safety education (47.5%). These patterns reflect developmental vulnerabilities magnified by sudden environmental change.

3.1.2 Elderly: Livelihood Disruption, Social Isolation, and Identity

Loss

Among older residents, livelihood disruption was perhaps the most visible challenge. Many who had once relied on small-scale farming found themselves with few alternatives in urban settings. In case HS-MT-012, a 52-year-old man explained, "I used to grow everything we ate. Now I rely on my son's salary and the government card." Social networks also suffered. Residents in high-rise units reported fewer interactions and more isolation. In CG-YB-020, an elderly woman shared, "In the village, we'd chat at the door every evening. Now, people shut their doors." The spatial layout of new communities discouraged spontaneous bonding. Identity struggles were common, especially among long-settled rural dwellers. Around 64% of elderly respondents reported needing health support, and 70% hoped for cultural or recreational engagement. However, deeper interviews revealed a sense of "not belonging." One respondent remarked, "This is home, but it doesn't feel like it." These stories reflect a complex interplay of practical, emotional, and identity-based barriers. Livelihood transition programmes alone are unlikely to succeed unless paired with interventions that promote social inclusion and psychological security.

3.1.3 Women: Role Conflict and Service Access

Women's adaptation issues were closely tied to structural constraints. Post-relocation data showed a sharp rise in female non-employment, from 13.69% to 40.95%. A local social worker explained, "Many women now stay home full-time, not by choice, but because childcare and jobs don't match." Educational background played a role. Only 15% of women surveyed had finished senior secondary school, limiting their job options. Several women had turned to informal employment, such as home-based sales or cleaning work, often with little income stability. In terms of health, reproductive services were underutilized. Over half of women acknowledged the need, but cultural stigma and financial concerns kept them away. A mother of three said, "We heard about the clinic, but I wouldn't go alone." Requests for parenting help (30%), safe leisure activities, and steady income sources were consistent across sites. These results indicate the need for gender-sensitive services that move beyond surface-level welfare provision.

3.1.4 Cross-Cutting Mechanisms: Motivation, Education, and Emotional Attachment

Not all differences were demographic. Three psychological and social mechanisms stood out across groups: motivation for relocation, educational capital, and emotional attachment to place. Relocation motivation shaped how people adapted. Self-driven migrants often saw opportunity and acted accordingly, while others, described by officials as "policy-compliant," waited passively. One social worker noted: "Some families just wanted to qualify for housing. They haven't settled mentally." Education was consistently associated with better adaptation. Those with higher attainment found jobs faster, accessed services more easily, and built broader social ties. In contrast, low-education respondents often avoided formal institutions and expressed distrust of officials. Emotional attachment—especially among older residents—affected adaptation deeply. About 43% expressed longing for their original villages. As one respondent put it: "The soil here is better, but I left my people behind." These factors interact with systemic conditions to shape highly varied adaptation pathways. Recognizing this diversity is essential to tailoring effective interventions.

3.2. Community-Level Adaptation Dynamics

3.2.1 Neighborhood Disintegration and Rebuilding

Traditional neighbor ties did not survive relocation intact. In high-rise flats, daily encounters declined. "I don't even know the name of the person upstairs," one resident noted. Survey data backed this up: more than half of respondents reported feeling less socially connected than before. Some communities made efforts to revive local ties through social events and volunteer projects. These had mixed success. Where such efforts were locally led, residents felt more engaged. Where they were top-down, participation lagged.

3.2.2 Infrastructure and Service Fit

Facilities varied in effectiveness. In some places, residents appreciated public squares and well-maintained playgrounds. In others, poorly designed spaces went unused. "They built a cultural hall, but no one runs anything there," said one resident. Accessibility was a recurring concern—especially for seniors and women with small children. Design that ignored daily routines created frustration and disengagement.

3.2.3 Employment Constraints and Economic Insecurity

Though 77.17% of households depended on wage labor, many struggled to find stable jobs. In remote sites, employment was often limited to seasonal construction or short-term cleaning contracts. "We moved here for a better life, but now we live off odd jobs," said one father. Mismatch between skills and available jobs was also a problem, especially for older workers and women. Job placement programmes were available but rarely tailored.

3.2.4 Governance Transition and Participation Barriers

Residents used to informal dispute resolution found it hard to navigate formalized systems. "Before, we talked to the village head. Now it's forms and numbers," explained one respondent. Participation in community affairs remained low. Some residents didn't know how to join meetings; others said they didn't see the point. A local staff member admitted: "People still think of this place as temporary." These patterns suggest that community-level adaptation is not only a matter of physical relocation, but also of rebuilding trust, routines, and a sense of control.

3.3. Institutional-Level Conditions for Adaptation

3.3.1 Policy Architecture and Local Implementation Gaps

While national relocation policies provide structured guarantees, execution varies across communities. In some areas, residents praised prompt support and consistent outreach. Elsewhere, implementation lagged. "We were promised training, but no one came," said a 28-year-old man. Policy clarity also mattered. In places

where eligibility and benefits were well-communicated, residents reported higher satisfaction. In others, confusion bred frustration.

3.3.2 Resource Allocation and Perceptions of Equity

The move from informal to state-controlled distribution changed how residents accessed support. Some appreciated the fairness. Others missed personalized village networks. "Now it's all by application," said one woman, "but we don't always know how." Tailored services improved outcomes for vulnerable groups. One community created a special programme for single mothers, which saw strong uptake. But most sites lacked such targeted responses. Institutional adaptation depends on aligning intent with delivery. Where programmes are responsive, trust builds. Where they fall short, skepticism spreads. Both material support and communicative transparency are crucial

4. Discussion

Relocated residents' adaptation difficulties are best understood not as isolated experiences, but as the outcome of interacting pressures across multiple systemic levels. At the micro level, disparities in education, health, and relocation motivation significantly shape individual adaptive capacity. At the meso level, relocation disrupts established community support networks, and the rebuilding process often lags, weakening residents' sense of social belonging. At the macro level, inconsistencies in policy continuity and resource delivery further constrain system-wide effectiveness. These layers are interdependent: macro-level policy inertia slows meso-level service development; fragmented community networks fail to respond to individual needs; and individuals struggling with adaptation reinforce institutional skepticism—a pattern also observed in cross-national displacement studies (De Wet, 2006). Together, these form an "adaptation resistance chain." Social work, situated at the interface of individual and institutional systems, holds potential to mediate across levels and disrupt this negative cycle.

To respond effectively, this study proposes a multi-level social work intervention model grounded in the social-ecological systems (SES) framework. At the micro level, interventions should address both psychological and practical needs: motivational

counselling for "policy-loyal" migrants, life skills training for under-educated individuals, reminiscence therapy for the elderly, and family-based support to strengthen household resilience. At the meso level, the study introduces the "Three Sectors, Five Dimensions" (TSFD) framework, which calls for collaboration among community bodies, professional social workers, and civil organizations. Strategic focus areas include preserving culturally familiar public spaces, fostering peer support groups, delivering services through tailored coordination, facilitating rural–urban cultural dialogue, and strengthening participatory governance. At the macro level, the model recommends embedding social adaptation metrics into poverty alleviation assessments, adopting needs-based service allocation, launching anti-stigma campaigns, and institutionalizing the Social Work and Volunteer Service Station initiative as a long-term public service mechanism. This integrated approach aims to translate SES theory into practical, tiered strategies that align institutional intent with lived experiences on the ground.

Overall, this intervention framework reframes fragmented efforts into a cohesive, scalable solution. By linking micro-level empowerment, meso-level network reconstruction, and macro-level policy responsiveness, the model offers a pathway toward inclusive adaptation and long-term relocation success—an imperative also noted in development-induced displacement contexts beyond China (Downing, 2002).

5. Conclusion

This study applies the social-ecological systems (SES) framework to analyze the social adaptation of relocated residents in Guizhou, with particular attention to the interactions among micro-, meso-, and macro-level systems. Through empirical analysis of 64 resettlement communities, it identifies how structural misalignments across systems generate adaptation barriers and how coordinated social work interventions can restore functional balance. The research contributes a theoretically grounded and operationally feasible model—the Three-Sector, Five-Dimension framework—demonstrating how SES principles can inform intervention design in the context of state-led relocation. A key policy implication is the importance of tailoring interventions to the differentiated needs of population subgroups, rather than adopting one-size-fits-all approaches—an approach consistent with recent calls for more

adaptive, post-relocation governance frameworks (Ning & He, 2024). While the study provides important insights, it is limited by its geographic focus on Guizhou Province. Future research should consider cross-provincial comparative studies to assess the generalizability of the proposed framework and to inform the development of regionally sensitive relocation policies. Overall, the findings offer both theoretical insight and practical guidance for enhancing post-relocation support mechanisms, contributing to the broader goals of poverty alleviation and rural revitalization.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, YH and LX; methodology, YH and LX; formal analysis, YH; writing—original draft preparation, YH; writing—review and editing, LX; funding acquisition, YH. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Cernea, M. M. (2000). Risks, safeguards and reconstruction: A model for population displacement and resettlement. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(41), 3659–3678. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4409836

[2] De Wet, C. (2006). Risk, complexity and local initiative in forced resettlement outcomes. In C. de Wet (Ed.), *Development-induced displacement* (pp. 180–202). Berghahn Books.

[3] Downing, T. E. (2002). *Avoiding new poverty: Mining-induced displacement and resettlement* (Vol. 52). International Institute for Environment and Development.

[4] Folke, C., Colding, J., & Berkes, F. (2003). Building resilience and adaptive capacity in social-ecological systems. In F. Berkes, J. Colding, & C. Folke (Eds.), *Navigating social-ecological systems* (pp. 352–387). Cambridge University Press.

[5] Guizhou Provincial Department of Civil Affairs. (2020). *Guidelines on establishing social work and volunteer service stations in resettlement communities* [Qianminfa (2020) No. 7] [In Chinese]. Guizhou, China.

[6] Guizhou Provincial Party Committee & Guizhou Provincial People's Government. (2019). *Notice on advancing follow-up support for poverty alleviation relocation* [Qiandangfa (2019) No. 8] [In Chinese]. Guizhou, China.

[7] Liu, F., Dai, E., & Yin, J. (2023). A review of social–ecological system research and geographical applications. *Sustainability*, 15(8), 6930. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15086930

[8] Lyu, J., Zeng, X., & Wang, S. (2019). Supportive policy, social integration and willingness of returning migration: Evidence from 530 households in ten counties of five provinces. *Journal of Nanjing Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 19(3), 29–40. https://doi.org/10.19714/j.cnki.1671-7465.2019.0036

[9] Ning, D., & He, L. (2024). From poverty alleviation to common prosperity: Research on the innovation of follow-up governance models for poverty alleviation relocation. *Chinese Public Administration*, 40(8), 109–117. https://doi.org/10.19735/j.issn.1006-0863.2024.08.11

[10] Wang, Y., & Jiang, L. (2020). Spatial reconstruction and social adaptation of poverty-stricken households relocated from inhospitable areas: A survey of X County in Jiangxi Province. *Social Science Research*, (1), 125–131. https://doi.org/10.19667/j.cnki.cn23-1070/c.2020.01.014

[11] Zhou, L., & Li, H. (2020). Social adaptation, political trust and satisfaction with poverty alleviation relocation policy: Based on a survey of relocated farmers in contiguous poverty-stricken areas of Hunan. *Finance and Economics Theory and Practice*, 41(6), 86–93. https://doi.org/10.16339/j.cnki.hdxbcjb.2020.06.012