Riding the Relocation Express
An ethnic group in southwest China joins the national drive for progress
By Wen Qing

A 26-year-old moved into his new apartment. Living on the cliff edge
improving housing and transportation and alleviation policy, it has made progress by
Mu’endi, paying only a token sum of money. Those living below the national poverty line,
mountains have been re-billeted here. The community in Zhaojue, a county in Liangshan Yi
-lollipops. The only store in the community bustles with the unique embroidery of their community.
Young women sit on the lush green lawns, chatting and laughing in the warm sun.

Mu’endi is a newly built relocation community in Zhaoyang, a county in Liangshan Yi,
among to move into the new apartments in Mu’endi, paying only a token sum of money. Those living in the Mu’endi community
those living in Atulieer, an isolated village in southwest China. Over 6,000 people
poor villages to help and other social plans.

For Mouse Labo, one of the biggest benefits is that his children can now have quality education, which motivated him to move
down from his old village Atuleier. "The living expenses in the community are bound to be higher than those in the village. That’s why I and other villagers at first hesitated to move in here," he said. Beside, in the old village, they could grow corn, potato and other vegetables to feed themselves. "In the past, many villagers did not like to relocate," he said. "Now people’s mindset has changed.

Besides being a devoted son, husband, and father, Mouse Labo is also an Internet celebrity, with nearly 100,000 followers on Douyin, the Chinese version of short video platform TikTok. He became the cynosure of all eyes with a special skill—free climbing, which he acquired in the old village. It’s no mere hobby or adventure sport but an essential skill for those living in Atuleier, an isolated village surrounded by steep mountains.

For the over 300 villagers living there, the only way to get out of the village was by climbing down a wood and vine ladder hanging on the almost vertical cliff, which led to the village being dubbed the cliff village.

Even children needed to acquire free climbing skills to go down to school. Mouse Labo started climbing down and up when he was just 4 years old. Why there is no paved road to this village? The complicated geography is the main reason, Ji Fengsen, deputy head of Zhaoyang, the county where Atulieer is located, attributed it to the village being in a fault zone in the Hengduan Mountains that is prone to geological disasters such as landslides and rock falls, making road construction extremely difficult.

Besides natural hurdles, the prohibitive cost also scuppered the local government’s road building plan. “Building one road to Atuleier is estimated to cost about 60 million yuan ($88.8 million).” Ji said. In 2019, Zhaoyang’s total revenue was 219 million yuan ($32 million). For a county with many poor villages to help and other social plans to implement, it was simply an unsustainable sum.

The people in Atuleier mostly living by growing corn, potatoes and oranges. An average family’s annual income was only a few hundred dollars as they could not sell their goods much due to transportation hardships. So why did people choose to live in such a closed and remote area in the first place?

Before the People’s Republic of China was founded, different Yi tribes fought against themselves endlessly and Atuleier, situated on a cliff that is easy to defend, was a safe haven. The people seeking refuge here were also attracted by the abundant sunlight, warm climate and fertile soil. Once they settled down, they were reluctant to leave,” Ji said.

However, strengths may turn into weaknesses when the external environment changes. As the chaos ended and the outside world entered a period of speedy development, secluded Atuleier missed that opportunity.

To address that, the village built a steel ladder to replace the old frayed ladder of wood and vine with local government fund of 1 million yuan ($150,000). Under the guidance of three technicians from Yunnan Province, the villagers did most of the work themselves, including lugging up steel tubes, generators and construction materials.

The market value of the new apartment is estimated to be about 300,000 yuan ($44,000). Mouse Labo is the sole wage earner in his family and his earnings were erratic in the past. Life in Mu’endi is convenient for it has amenities such as shops, a recreation center for the elderly, and community reading rooms for children. Moreover, a primary and middle school and a hospital are under construction, so are factories and agricultural parks that will provide jobs.

The village is a window to observe the poverty alleviation policy, which has made progress by improving housing and transportation and extending the industrial chain to create new communities and given assistance and incentives to develop tourism or agricultural specialties to help themselves.

Growing a better life
While new apartments and new roads are a good beginning, industrial development and jobs are essential for sustainable growth. Ciqu Laza’s family fell into poverty when her two sons died, leaving her with five grandchildren to bring up. The septuagenarian gets various government allowances, which meant a lot of labor but a meager income. Now besides their wages, they can also earn more money by leasing their land to the village.

While new apartments and new roads are a good beginning, industrial development and jobs are essential for sustainable growth. Ciqu Laza’s family fell into poverty when her two sons died, leaving her with five grandchildren to bring up. The septuagenarian gets various government allowances, which meant a lot of labor but a meager income. Now besides their wages, they can also earn more money by leasing their land to the village.

Before the plantation came up, Ciqu and other villagers grew potato or buckwheat, which meant a lot of labor but a meager income. Now besides their wages, they can also earn more money by leasing their land to the planters. They can earn a rent of 10,000 yuan ($1,474) every year.

The blueberry plantation, established in 2016, is a flagship project for poverty alleviation in Butuo County. According to Shang Zhiyong, Deputy Director of the Bureau of Commerce in Butuo, the abundant sunshine and the soil are highly suitable for large-scale blueberry cultivation. “China’s blueberry market has a huge potential to tap,” he said.

The 240-hectare plantation has been co-funded by the local government and Tian Zhimel, a leading agricultural company in Sichuan, which sent technicians to instruct the villagers how to manage the plantation. When the blueberries ripen, the company sends personnel to buy them at a guaranteed price, which has greatly reduced risks.

Developing agriculture is creating jobs and perking up farmers’ income. But still more can be done to add value to agricultural products. “We plan to build a cold storage and extend the industrial chain to create more profits,” Shang said.

(Reporting from Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province)