

WAY OUT OF DESTITUTION

The fight against extreme poverty turns innovative to bring smiles to destitute families

A row of dilapidated adobe houses dot the slope of a loess hill in Zhaojiawa, a laidback village in Xinzhou, central Shanxi Province in north China. Many of them have been abandoned as their residents moved out of the village in search of greener pastures.

Some of the villagers who have stayed on are grappling with extreme poverty. Wang Sannu is one of them. The 68-year-old lives with her orphaned granddaughter and grandson, who are both mentally challenged. Their bedroom, bereft of any other furniture or ornament except a brick bed with newspapers pasted on the walls and the ceiling, mirrors their stark condition.

Xinzhou, due to its inhospitable loess land and steep ravines, is one of China's poorest places. The mountain-dominated landscape and drought-prone weather make it difficult for locals to eke out a decent living.

"Because of the drought, crops can be grown for brief spells only and the yield is low. The villagers live at the mercy of the weather," Ma Yuyin, Secretary of the Zhaojiawa Village Branch of the Communist Party of China (CPC), said.

With the Central Government's thrust on poverty alleviation, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited three households in Zhaojiawa on June 21 to inspect the work at the community level. Wang Sannu's family was one of the three.

Destitution to contentment

Disaster, illness, and higher education fees or wedding costs are some of the factors driving people into deep poverty in the villages.

Liu Fuyou and his wife, both in their 70s, live with Liu's 92-year-old mother in the village. All three are in poor health. The couple's five grown-up children have left the village and settled down in other places.

"Last year, my family's total income was under 7,000 yuan (\$1,029)," Liu said. "Most of it came from government subsidies for planting grain crops and converting farmland back into forest. Only about 500 yuan (\$74) of it was income from growing grain."

Xinzhou has begun taking targeted measures to alleviate poverty. A poverty alleviation work team is now stationed in an adobe house in the village. It has a computer and printer, and on the walls are charts and graphs, outlining poverty alleviation goals and analyzing the causes of poverty.

Under the targeted poverty alleviation policy, Wang Sannu and her two grandchildren now have the minimum living allowance. The grandmother also gets old-age insurance and assistance to people in extreme poverty. In addition, the two youngsters receive an annual allowance of 20,000 yuan (\$2,941) for orphans.

"Now the government is paying for most of our food and clothes," Wang said. "I am content."

In the past five years, 417,000 people were lifted out of poverty in Xinzhou, according to the city government's work report for 2016. The city has more than 3 million people and the plan is to move another 353,300 residents out of poverty by 2020.

Since Zhaojiawa's living conditions are poor, the local authorities plan to relocate its residents to places with better facilities, according to Wang Zhidong, Secretary of the CPC Kelan County Committee. Zhaojiawa is a village under the jurisdiction of the county.

Over 3,500 people in 115 villages in the county will be relocated to places with better living conditions like Songjiagou, a new village in Kelan which has been built to accommodate villagers moving out of poverty-stricken areas. With asphalt roads, running water, broadband Internet and cable TV, the new village's infrastructure presents a vivid contrast to that of Zhaojiawa. It also has a school, hospital, library and cultural center.

Zhang Guiming is one of the people who recently moved into the new village. His neat new home has modern amenities.

"In the hilly place where I used to live before, it was a struggle to get drinking water. Now I am living in a new house where I eat well, live well, and everything goes well," he remarked with satisfaction. "And I didn't have to pay a penny for the house."



On September 21, an official (first front) from the Fengpu Township of Ningde, Fujian Province, prepares red couplets with a family who had just moved to a new resettlement house thanks to poverty-relief efforts from the local government

Renewed efforts

The 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20) of China is waging a battle against poverty to achieve the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all aspects by 2020.

In November 2015, the Central Government made a decision to eliminate poverty by 2020. At that time, 70 million people were still living in poverty in China.

On June 23 this year, Xi chaired a meeting in Taiyuan, capital city of Shanxi, on eliminating extreme poverty, pledging more support for areas in extreme poverty. The meeting also called for more social forces to participate in the poverty alleviation work.

At a press briefing on July 5, Hong Tianyun, Deputy Director of the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development (LGOP), explained which areas in China suffer from extreme poverty.

Hong said the regions to be further supported mainly refer to "three areas," "three autonomous prefectures" and "three demographic groups." The "three areas" are Tibet Autonomous Region, the southern area of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and the ethnic autonomous areas inhabited by Tibetans and other ethnic minority groups in Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu provinces.

The "three autonomous prefectures" in extreme poverty are Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan and Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan.

The "three demographic groups" include people trapped in poverty because of illness. Statistics in 2014 show that 42.1 percent of the impoverished was caused by illnesses, especially serious and chronic diseases. The second group comprises those who became impoverished due to disasters or market fluctuations. The third is formed of the elderly, who need to be covered by social insurance because of their advanced age, illness and inability to work.

"More preferential policies should be produced for these areas and groups so that they

can exit poverty for good," Hong said.

In addition to national initiatives, provincial governments should eliminate poverty by 2020 in light of their own conditions, he said, adding that some provinces have done a good job.

Guizhou Province, for example, has listed 20 townships as areas in extreme poverty and focused its resources on alleviating poverty there. Hebei is targeting several counties in Zhangjiakou as key areas for extreme poverty alleviation.

"It is difficult to get the remaining poor people out of poverty through conventional ways, so we must use unconventional measures," Qu Tianjun, an official with the LGOP, said, alluding to e-commerce and the Internet as effective methods of poverty alleviation.

In November 2016, the LGOP issued a guideline on promoting targeted poverty alleviation through e-commerce. The goal is to set up e-commerce poverty alleviation stations in around 50 percent of the poverty-stricken villages by 2020.

To connect people in need of assistance with those keen to offer their help, the LGOP launched a website on October 16, 2016.

By July 12 this year, the website, Zgshfp.

com.cn, had witnessed 80,895 registered users who described themselves as poverty-stricken. There were over 39,500 offers of help and 545,795 yuan (\$80,423) had been donated.

Many requests for help are very specific. For instance, on July 12, a user from Yongzhou in Hunan Province named Liu Jialian posted a message, saying life had grown harsher after one side of her house collapsed following a flood. Her request was for rice and edible oil.

Of all the requests, 20 percent had been met, Hong said at the July 5 press conference. The authorities will next verify the requests and make sure that the donations reach the right person. They will also get in touch with the relevant government departments and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to persuade the latter, especially those operating in poverty-stricken areas, to boost local industrial and economic development.

Getting more players

The government has been encouraging enterprises, non-governmental organizations and individuals to participate in the poverty alleviation work. Since 2014, 68 centrally administered SOEs have assisted almost 15,000 poverty-stricken villages, mainly supplying water and electricity and paving roads, Qu said.

An industrial poverty alleviation development fund has been established and till now, 26,500 private enterprises have been mobilized to assist 21,000 poor villages. This has benefited 3.8 million impoverished people.

The Evergrande Group, a Fortune Global 500 firm engaged in real estate, finance, health and culture travels, began to offer assistance to Dafang, a county in Bijie, Guizhou, since December 2015. Their plan was to invest 3 billion yuan (\$442.1 million) in three years and lift 180,000 people out of poverty by 2018.

This year, Evergrande decided to invest another 8 billion yuan (\$1.2 billion) to help all the poor counties in Bijie. The company is using various means to alleviate poverty. It supports rural cooperatives that hire people in straitened circumstances and so far, has given loans to more than 180 vegetable and animal husbandry cooperatives.

"We not only provide fund, but also talented people, technology, management teams and ideas," Yao Dong, Vice President of the group, said.

Non-governmental organizations are also being mobilized to participate in poverty alleviation. Qu said more policies will be introduced to encourage them to engage in poverty relief work. ■

