

# Research on How Digital Technology Drives the Reduction of Burden and Empowerment in Grassroots Governance

## -- A Case Study of Huai'an City's "Code-based Deliberation" Platform

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### ABSTRACT

As the cornerstone of national governance, grassroots governance is currently generally confronted with the problems of heavy tasks and low efficiency. The root cause lies in the sharp contradiction between unlimited tasks and limited resources, which is specifically manifested in the sharp increase in affairs due to the downward shift of governance focus, the generalization of responsibilities, insufficient coordination between vertical and horizontal sectors, shortage of staffing, and weak power allocation. Against this backdrop, grassroots governance is undergoing a profound digital transformation. The state has actively promoted the "Internet + grassroots governance" model and data resource integration through a series of policies. Digital technology offers potential for reducing the burden and enhancing the capacity of grassroots governance. This study explores through the case of the "Ma Shang Yi" platform in Huai'an City how digital technology specifically functions to reduce the burden and enhance the capacity of grassroots governance, reveals its internal operational mechanism, and seeks a long-term path for the continuous improvement of grassroots governance efficiency.

### KEYWORDS

Grassroots Governance; Burden Reduction and Capacity Enhancement; Digital Technology.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Grassroots governance is generally regarded as the cornerstone of national governance and a fundamental project for achieving the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. However, at present, grassroots governance generally presents problems such as heavy tasks and low efficiency. The contradiction between an overwhelming number of tasks in the grassroots and limited resources has become prominent. The formation of these problems has multiple causes: On one hand, the governance focus has shifted downward, resulting in an increase in political, administrative, and temporary affairs at the grassroots level; the responsibilities of grassroots units have been overly generalized and they refuse to take on the burden; the relationship between the grassroots levels is not ideal, and problems such as insufficient coordination among government departments occur frequently. On the other hand, there are few grassroots positions, and officials have multiple positions and responsibilities; the upward communication channels for public opinions are not smooth, social forces are weakly mobilized, and participation is insufficient; grassroots organizations are at the bottom of the political system, and the power allocation is inadequate.

In recent years, grassroots governance has been undergoing a digital transformation wave, with digital technologies reshaping the methods and models of grassroots governance. In 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Modernization of Grassroots Governance System and Governance Capacity", proposing the "Internet + Grassroots Governance" model, aiming to enhance the construction of grassroots intelligent governance capabilities. In March 2023, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the "Plan for the Reform of Party and Government Institutions", proposing the goal of establishing the National Data Bureau, to comprehensively coordinate the planning and construction of digital China and digital society, and integrate digital technologies into grassroots governance to enhance the intelligence level of grassroots governance. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed to improve the grassroots governance platform supported by informationization, providing a direction for the digital advancement of grassroots governance. In practice, the creation of digital platforms such as the "One Thing You Need to Handle at Most" reform in Zhejiang Province, "One Net Service" in Shanghai, and "Responding to Complaints Immediately" in Beijing have depicted the real picture of digital technology's involvement in grassroots governance, and it can be seen that digital technology provides more possibilities for reducing the burden and enhancing the capabilities of grassroots governance.

The application of digital technology in grassroots governance scenarios, with its advantages such as more precise governance, more convenient governance, and more efficient governance, has reshaped the process and structure of resource utilization and flow. Therefore, the research question of this article is: In grassroots governance, how does digital technology play a role to achieve the reduction of governance burden and enhancement of governance capacity? What is its operating mechanism? How can we truly achieve the long-term improvement of grassroots governance efficiency?

## **2. CASE SELECTION AND DATA SOURCES**

This article adopts a single-case study, taking the "Code for Discussion" platform in Huai'an City as the research case. In 2021, the Huai'an Municipal Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, in order to implement the important instructions of the state and Jiangsu Province on the work of the People's Political Consultative Conference in the new era and play its important role in the grassroots governance system, jointly promoted the goal of modernizing the grassroots governance system and governance capacity, carried out the exploration of the "Code for Discussion" work. The "Code for Discussion" platform utilizes digital technology and sets up exclusive WeChat QR codes in 1732 negotiation and deliberation rooms at the four levels of the city, county district, town and street, and village community, enabling the public to reflect on the issues and demands they are concerned about in grassroots governance through scanning the QR code.

In terms of research design, selecting the "Code for Discussion" platform in Huai'an City as a case mainly has the following reasons: Firstly, the "Code for Discussion" platform utilizes emerging digital technology to build a digital governance pattern of "People's Political Consultative Conference + Internet + Grassroots Governance", providing possibilities for reducing the burden and enhancing the capacity of grassroots governance in practice, which is closely related to the research question of this article. Secondly, the "Code for Discussion" in Huai'an City is a typical case of digital social innovation. Since its establishment, it has achieved certain accomplishments and has a trend of continuous operation, receiving high recognition from the Central Committee and the Jiangsu Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, and has been promoted nationwide. This indicates that the case is typical, and the operational logic and mechanism behind its success are worthy of exploration. Finally, the case is accessible and the data is relatively comprehensive. The researcher conducted in-depth contact and communication with the Municipal Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, District/County Committees of the Chinese

People's Political Consultative Conference, grassroots government organizations, grassroots self-governing organizations and residents in Huai'an City, conducted semi-structured interviews, and observed the entire process of negotiation and deliberation, and finally recorded and organized the information to systematically and comprehensively grasp the relevant data.

### **3. THE HUAI'AN PRACTICE OF LEVERAGING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY TO REDUCE BURDEN AND ENHANCE CAPACITY IN GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE**

#### **3.1. Sufficient Governance Impetus**

Subsequently, in order to further respond to policies such as the "13th Five-Year National Information Plan" and the "Implementation Opinions of the Jiangsu Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference on Network Deliberation and Remote Consultation", as well as the requirements of the digital transformation of grassroots governance in the era, with the financial support of the local government, a digital platform for smart political consultation was created, which became the prototype of the "Code for Deliberation" platform. In 2021, the leaders of the provincial committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference made an important instruction on promoting the innovation of political consultation work. The "Smart Office" and "Discussing Office" of the committee combined with the actual situation of the smart political consultation digital platform and the real needs of grassroots governance, utilized the emerging "QR code" technology to create four sections: "Code for Soliciting Issues", "Code for Suggestions", "Code for Negotiation", and "Code for Investigating Conditions", and jointly launched the "Code for Deliberation" platform.

Under the continuous promotion of high-level political momentum from the provincial CPPCC, the central and local party committees and governments, the "Code for Discussion" platform in Huai'an City, leveraging the existing "Discussing Matters When Needed" mechanism and the existing consultation and deliberation rooms, adopted the "One Room, One Code" work plan. Through scanning the WeChat QR code, all parties involved in governance can easily report practical problems and demands in grassroots governance. After the topics are approved by the grassroots party committee, they will organize the participation of the masses, the government, the CPPCC and grassroots self-governing organizations to conduct consultation and deliberation work on the issues. Moreover, due to the relatively complete committee team and management requirements of the Huai'an Municipal CPPCC, the committee members can be effectively linked to townships and streets. Additionally, as all the committee members are elite personnel from their respective fields, they can utilize their own resources and advantages to assist in conducting consultation and deliberation work.

#### **3.2. Optimized Governance Process**

The operation process of the "Code-on-Proposal" platform in the governance of grassroots affairs can be divided into four stages: The first stage is the issue generation stage. In this stage, all entities such as grassroots residents, the party committee and government, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and grassroots self-governing organizations can submit relevant governance demands by scanning the QR code of the consultation and deliberation room to "pose the question". During the process of "posing the question", there is no need to submit identity information, and it can be written by the staff of the village committee, community volunteers, or by using remote transmission of the QR code method, etc. The technical barrier is relatively low, which is conducive to the extensive participation of the public. Secondly, the same-level party organizations of the consultation and deliberation room conduct "examining the question" based on the principle of "five deliberations and five non-deliberations".

The second stage is the information integration stage. In this stage, the first step is the public announcement of the topic, that is, after the topic has been approved, the relevant parties involved in the examination and the public can access the topic again through the QR code of the consultation room and express their doubts or approval, and leave comments. The second step is the pre-decision research, that is, after the topic is determined, the proposer, members of the CPPCC, representatives of the Party and government departments, representatives of the village committee and community committee, and relevant stakeholders will conduct pre-decision research according to the situation, in order to clarify the actual circumstances related to the topic, draft solutions, and optionally write a research report.

The third stage is the negotiation and decision-making phase. First, a meeting is held by the party committee and government, members of the CPPCC, the question setter, and relevant stakeholders. The meeting can be held either online or offline. The online meeting breaks the traditional spatial constraints on the negotiation and deliberation activities, and residents, local celebrities, and experts in the city can also participate. The participation method is flexible, the participation scope is wide, and it breaks the limitations of time and space. Next is the public announcement stage after the formation of the negotiation resolution. That is, the resolution formed at the negotiation meeting is uploaded again to the "Code-on-Consultation" platform through the QR code of the consultation room, and the public can supervise and comment.

The fourth stage is the implementation phase of decision-making. This involves the administrative and political departments at the grassroots level carrying out the resolutions of the meeting, converting the consensus reached through consultation into practical governance measures. The handling results of the affairs are publicly displayed on the "Code-on-Chat" platform and are subject to public supervision. In addition, the "Code-on-Chat" platform has also connected with the 12345 hotline platform and the channels through which members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference submit consultation proposals based on social conditions and public opinions. Other channels for public feedback, such as the 12345 hotline and the channels for submitting consultation proposals by members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, have also been integrated into this platform. Different governance affairs are centralized and processed in accordance with the above four steps, reducing the possibility of public departments shirking responsibility and unnecessary repetitive work.

Through the operation process of the "Code-on-Peace" platform, more entities have participated in the governance of grassroots public affairs, gathering more public opinions and wisdom. Moreover, this process is clearly defined by policy documents and can be strictly followed in actual operations, demonstrating strong standardization.

### **3.3. Long-term Governance Outcomes**

To ensure the long-term effectiveness of the governance results, the "Code for Discussion" platform has made three stipulations: Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of the supervision process. For matters that have reached consensus, the administrator of the consultation and deliberation room should clearly record the outcome of the consultation and the time frame for its implementation, and fill in the names of the leading responsible persons, the entities responsible for implementing the resolution, the various time points for advancing the resolution, the progress of task completion, etc. for supervision. The public can also scan the "QR code" of the consultation and deliberation room for external supervision. Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of feedback on issues. For basic governance issues that have not been fully implemented, there is a process to restart the consultation and deliberation activities to analyze the reasons for the unresolved issues and explore new solutions. For controversial issues and people with different opinions during the consultation process, if no response is given during the consultation process, the convener of the consultation and deliberation and the administrator of the consultation and deliberation room should do a good job in explaining

and clarifying. For opinions and suggestions that exceed the authority and responsibility scope of the current organization and need to be urgently resolved, the administrator of the consultation and deliberation room will provide feedback through the "Code for Discussion" platform, converting them into proposals for the People's Congress or social conditions and public opinions. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of classifying governance affairs. When handling issues and reviewing proposals for the People's Congress, the issues and proposals will be classified into three categories: those that can be directly handled and completed, those that require subsequent continuous tracking, and those that will not be replied to and handled as A, B, or C. This improves the efficiency of handling issues and proposals and can also identify the grassroots governance problems that need to be continuously followed up through classification, facilitating the real handling and implementation of grassroots affairs. The above three measures for the governance results of grassroots affairs are conducive to converting short-term issue resolutions into long-term decisions made by the Party and government, public welfare projects, governance methods, and consensus among grassroots people.

## **4. THE OPERATIONAL MECHANISM OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN REDUCING BURDENS AND ENHANCING CAPABILITIES OF GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE**

### **4.1. Resource Exploration and Activation**

According to the resource dependence theory, organizations must draw resources from the surrounding environment in order to survive and achieve their goals. Since resources are the foundation of power and many resources are not self-sufficient for the organization, organizations need to explore external resources.[1] In the governance practice of Huai'an City, the grassroots government is undertaking a large number of governance tasks but is facing a shortage of manpower and limited resources.

During the interview, the mayor of a certain town gave an actual example: "The task of reclaiming land for public spaces in our village is actually very difficult. This is because many of the issues are historical in nature. So we have to do a lot of ideological work. Some village officials tried to do it for a while but couldn't continue due to other responsibilities, and they couldn't fully devote themselves to this task. However, there are strict targets set by the higher authorities. Then there is the issue of developing the collective economy. Currently, it is required to maintain a stable income of over 500,000 yuan per year. This is quite a burden. We need to urge them. We can't just wait for them to pay it themselves. The work at the grassroots level is very complicated." (Interview materials: YGZZZ-20240801)

Seeking support from both within and outside the system is an inevitable choice for grassroots governments in crisis management.[2] Meanwhile, the political consultative organization, which is also part of the grassroots governance system, takes the lead in establishing the "Code for Discussion" platform, bringing along the relevant resources of the political consultative organization, and deeply getting involved in the governance field of Huai'an City, thereby alleviating the huge governance pressure on the grassroots government. Similarly, the internal resources of the political consultative organization are also limited, so the "Code for Discussion" platform actively explores other resources in the governance environment of Huai'an City and integrates them.[3] According to Giddens' structural theory, the resources that can be activated and utilized by the "Code for Discussion" platform under the exploration of the political consultative organization can be divided into two categories. One is configurative resources, including: the local fiscal funds injected when establishing the "Code for Discussion" platform; the offline scene carrier of the platform - the consultation and deliberation room; all the data information collected, sorted, and feedback by the platform; the relevant governance subjects related to the platform, namely personnel. The other is authoritative resources, including: the leadership and regulation of the Party, the promotion and cooperation of the

government. These two types of resources are specifically manifested in a series of policy documents promoting and guiding the establishment and improvement of the "Code for Discussion" platform in the governance practice. Therefore, the resource exploration logic of grassroots governance in Huai'an City is expanding layer by layer and multi-centered, rather than being limited to the internal resources of a certain organization.

In terms of how resources are activated, the governance practice of "Code for Discussion" in Huai'an City adopts a mechanism where authoritative resources are embedded and utilized to reconfigure and allocate resources.

During the interview, the secretary of the Municipal Committee of the CPPCC said: "President Xi has repeatedly mentioned the spirit of 'When there is something to discuss, let everyone discuss it. This is the essence of people's democracy.' The Provincial Committee of the CPPCC has also been promoting the coordination between CPPCC consultations and grassroots consultations. It has determined that 2021 will be the year for consolidating and enhancing the 'When There Is Something to Discuss' consultation and deliberation work, and has held multiple meetings to make instructions and issued policy documents. In response to the call and to further solve the problems in governance practice, we have consulted a large amount of materials, referred to the 'Code to Express Opinions' of the State Council's Office, the 'Code to Handle Affairs' of Hainan Province, and we have established our own 'Code to Discuss' platform." (Interview materials: QJY-20240803)

Huai'an City seized the opportunity to leverage authoritative resources to address the grassroots governance issues that concerned the Party Central Committee and the government. In a certain environment, resources transformed into authority, which was a process of skillfully "taking advantage of the situation" by utilizing resources. With the leadership and promotion of the Party and the government, as well as clear policy instructions, the Municipal Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) secured financial funds to build the "Code-based Deliberation" platform. It also integrated multiple groups such as CPPCC members, grassroots self-governing organizations, grassroots residents, overseas hometown representatives, Party representatives and deputies to the People's Congress, and experts and think tanks for the platform's entry. By leveraging the negotiation and deliberation rooms used for promoting the "Discussing Matters Well" work as the physical carrier for placing QR codes and conducting activities, the "Code-based Deliberation" platform has sufficient resource reserves ready for utilization.

#### **4.2. Resource Integration and Linkage**

After completing the exploration and activation of resources, the organization should consider the issue of how to allocate the resources. The integration and connection of resources is essentially the process of resource allocation. Reasonable resource allocation can enable limited resources to achieve greater value and thereby enhance the subsequent resource utilization capacity. In the practice of the "Code for Discussion" platform in Huai'an City, the "code" serves as the link, and digital technology forms a pair of "virtual hands" around the "QR code", constructing a reasonable structure for resource allocation and achieving the integration and connection of resources to the same platform.

"The 'Code for Discussion' platform is based on the concept of 'one room, one code'. 1,728 grassroots consultation and deliberation rooms have been equipped with exclusive QR codes. By scanning these codes, users can access the 'Code for Discussion' platform to perform four functions: 'code-based proposal submission', 'code-based suggestions', 'code-based deliberation', and 'code-based situation inquiry'. The data information provided by the general public through scanning will be automatically transferred to the corresponding grassroots consultation and deliberation room backend, thus forming a basic '8+4-step method' of consultation and deliberation work pattern." (Interview materials: GL-20240803)

The rational allocation of resources enables the energy of grassroots governance to be dispersed among different social governance entities, thereby innovating the grassroots governance model and

stimulating greater vitality.[4] In the resource integration and linkages of the "Code for Discussion" platform, the mechanism of resource allocation adapting to the needs of grassroots governance was followed. From a virtual perspective, entities such as grassroots residents, members of the People's Congress, and members of self-governing organizations can all express their governance demands by scanning the code. In particular, the public can use the code to report relevant issues and personal needs. The information is transformed through digital technology into data and then flows and is allocated to the corresponding platform function sections. From a practical perspective, the governance issues reported by scanning the QR code in the discussion room can be transferred to the corresponding public departments and staff through the platform, and responded to and handled according to the negotiation and discussion process. In addition, in combination with the social conditions and public opinions information reported on the platform, based on the governance priorities of different counties and even different communities, the city-level CPPCC members are linked to the county districts, and auxiliary grassroots negotiation and discussion work is carried out around the governance issues, making the linkage more precise and scientific.

Through the "Code-on-Peace" platform, information resources, human resources and venue resources of grassroots governance have been integrated and linked, forming a resource allocation pattern of "online and offline integration, inside and outside the venue combination, joint efforts between superiors and subordinates, and aggregation of codes both inside and outside".

### **4.3. Horizontal and Vertical Integration of Resources**

Fragmentation of administrative divisions has always been one of the governance dilemmas faced by local governments.[5] The various functional departments of local governments are administratively led by the horizontal local governments, but operationally they are led by the vertical superior functional departments. This is not only a problem of the distribution of power and responsibility, but also a problem of "duty homologation" in the administrative system. As a result, a series of common problems in grassroots governance such as "unclear duties, functional misalignment", "shirking responsibility, passing the buck" have emerged. However, in the governance practice of Huai'an, digital technology has successfully created a governance system that is integrated from top to bottom.

From the perspective of horizontal integration, first of all, the "Code for Discussion" platform in Huai'an has integrated various public opinion feedback platforms and channels, including the 12345 hotline platform, the proposal channels of CPPCC members regarding social conditions and public opinions, and the consultation and deliberation channels of grassroots people. The integration of such platforms is essentially the integration of grassroots governance information, which is conducive to fully summarizing governance tasks, reducing duplicate processing of tasks, reducing the phenomenon of mutual evasion among public departments, and improving governance efficiency. Secondly, the "Code for Discussion" platform in Huai'an uses a common "QR code" as the link, integrating eight governance entities including the Party committee and government, the subject of deliberation, the CPPCC organization, CPPCC members, overseas hometown heroes, Party representatives and people's congress representatives, expert think tanks, and the people. In the "horizontal" structure, it achieves "one code connecting eight parties", and each entity discusses and deliberates on the problems of "worries, urgencies, expectations, and difficulties" in grassroots governance and solves them together.

As mentioned in the interview, the secretary of the CPPCC of Huai'an City said: "The 'Code for Discussion' platform has a relatively key idea, which is 'one code connecting eight parties and good for discussion'. We have clearly defined the 'eight parties' connected by this code, allowing all sectors of society, especially the vast number of people, to participate in the consultation and deliberation of grassroots governance throughout the process." (Interview materials: QJY-20240803)

From the perspective of vertical integration, the "Code for Discussion" platform adopts a "systemal coding, four-level joint" working method. It involves collaboration at the county, city, town, and

village levels, strengthening interactive communication and consultation on issues and problems in grassroots governance, and promptly sharing information. From the vertical perspective, this joint governance mechanism enables the transmission of governance tasks not to be merely one-way from top to bottom. Grassroots organizations and the public can also use "QR codes" to convey governance needs upward, breaking through the traditional hierarchical barriers and making the governance system and model oriented towards governance issues.

The "Code-on-People" platform in Huai'an utilizes digital technology, leveraging its strong ability to transmit information across levels and walls as well as its characteristic of data sharing, to effectively address the long-standing problem of information asymmetry in the bureaucratic system. It accelerates the vertical integration from the top to the grassroots of various public departments and governance entities, and also promotes collaborative operations among different horizontal entities. The governance mechanism of vertical and horizontal integration emphasizes the joint participation and governance of multiple entities, jointly forming an efficient and collaborative digital governance ecosystem, which solves the problem of heavy governance tasks and low efficiency at the grassroots level.

## 5. SUMMARY

At present, grassroots governance is facing deep-seated problems such as limited institutional efficiency and insufficient allocation of governance forces. Grassroots organizations are under great pressure and challenges. On one hand, there is a shortage of grassroots personnel; on the other hand, the tasks are heavy, with numerous locations, long lines, wide coverage, and numerous matters, making it difficult to specifically implement responsibilities and resulting in poor supervision. It is also difficult to achieve a refined and modern governance system. In the governance practice of the "Code for Discussion" platform in Huai'an City, digital technology serves as a tool to realize the governance concept and plays a bridging role. With the advent of the digital and intelligent era, currently embedding digital technology into grassroots governance to enhance governance effectiveness has become a hot topic in both academic circles and local government practices. However, unreasonable application of technology is prone to fall into the trap of technical execution and lead to problems such as digital formalism and "digital suspension". Therefore, we should treat digital tools with the correct concept, build a reasonable and complete utilization mechanism, explore the integration path of digital technology and grassroots governance, and avoid the problem of digital platforms being idle.

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