

Adapting Social Security to Plateau Conditions, Ethnic Diversity and Ecological Protection in Qinghai, China

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Abstract: A common social security system can impose unequal costs on people who live at different distances from services, use different languages or depend on livelihoods shaped by conservation policy. This article examines how these differences affect institutional fit in Qinghai, China. It combines welfare geography, institutional-fit theory and research on administrative burden in a documentary case analysis of official statistics, policy instruments, service reports and published studies. Three connected problems emerge: population-based resource allocation can overlook the cost of serving dispersed settlements; standardized procedures can conflict with language needs and pastoral work schedules; and conservation payments or jobs can leave the continuity of social protection unresolved. Regional institutional fit requires geographically informed service funding, accessible administrative procedures and explicit connections between ecological livelihoods and social insurance. These arrangements depend on coordination between national rules, provincial resource allocation and local delivery. The analysis develops propositions and observable indicators for testing these mechanisms. Its central implication is that common entitlements need context-sensitive implementation, with the costs of obtaining and maintaining protection included in assessments of equality.

Keywords: Social Security; Institutional Fit; Administrative Burden; Ethnic Diversity; Ecological Compensation; Qinghai

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1. Introduction

For a household in a remote pastoral settlement, formal insurance coverage answers only part of the social security question. An entitlement also has to survive the journey to a service office, an unfamiliar application procedure and changes in work or residence. China's Fifteenth Five-Year Plan places fairness, accessibility and sustainability within the same social security agenda.^[1] Pursuing these objectives requires administration across sharply different territorial conditions. A common document requirement can take minutes to satisfy near a service centre and require another journey from a distant settlement. Equality in the entitlement therefore raises a further question about the work required to obtain it.

Social security in ethnic minority regions has been studied through the development of institutions and their relationship with citizenship and a shared sense of national community.^[2] The connection between social security, common prosperity and community building is also an established research concern.^[3] These concerns give institutional adaptation its distributive and political significance. If a person repeatedly fails to complete a claim, an increase in aggregate coverage says little about that person's experience of the system. The same difficulty can have different origins: a journey that cannot be repeated, an

explanation that is not understood, or an interruption in contributions during a change of work. Identifying the origin matters because additional expenditure or a new digital channel addresses only some of these problems.

Earlier research examined differentiated institutional provision in relation to social risks and the circumstances of ethnic minority regions.^[4] Mobile social security services were proposed as a response to the organization of rural public provision.^[5] The practices and administrative organization of social security services have received separate attention.^[6] Local implementation is consequently part of the existing research agenda. A further analytical task is to connect the point at which access fails with the resources, procedures and distribution of responsibilities needed to address it. The relevant distinction is between an initiative that brings a service closer on one occasion and an arrangement that sustains usable access through ordinary programme administration.

Research on benefit take-up explains why legal eligibility cannot settle this issue: information, application costs and programme design can keep eligible people outside public programmes.^[7] In a dispersed setting, these barriers can reinforce one another. Unclear information may require a visit; a missing document may require a return journey; a change of residence or work may place the next administrative step with a different office. The cost of a claim then depends on the sequence of transactions rather than the distance to the nearest building alone. A service that completes the first step but leaves subsequent decisions unresolved may improve a transaction count without securing the benefit.

Qinghai brings several such relationships into the same provincial setting. Plateau geography and dispersed settlement affect how public agencies reach residents and how residents reach agencies. Language use, pastoral mobility and locally situated ways of seeking assistance shape the encounter with administrative procedures. Conservation responsibilities introduce further questions about paid ecological work, household income and continuing social protection. For a ranger living in a remote pastoral community, these conditions can overlap within one household. Treating geography, ethnic composition and ecology as separate background characteristics would miss the points at which a response to one problem depends on another administrative process.

The three conditions have different implications for institutional design. Settlement dispersion concerns the cost of maintaining contact. Language and work schedules concern whether the interface can be understood and used. Conservation concerns how changes in work and income connect with insurance and assistance over time. Ethnic identity alone specifies none of these service requirements. The practical questions concern a resident's language needs, location, livelihood and encounter with a particular procedure. This approach makes differences observable at the point of delivery while retaining a common basis for social rights.

Regional institutional fit describes the relationship between these circumstances and the rules, resources and procedures through which social security operates. Its standard is whether a resident can understand, obtain and maintain the applicable entitlement at a reasonable cost. National rules establish rights and safeguards; provincial arrangements allocate resources and connect responsibilities; local administration organizes contact and resolves claims. Adjustment at one level can be ineffective when another retains a conflicting procedure or controls a necessary decision. Local discretion needs both resources and a clear route of accountability if it is to improve access consistently.

This relationship is especially consequential where ecological protection changes livelihoods. Current compensation, earnings from a conservation post and long-term social insurance are distinct elements of household security. Their connection has to be established through the responsibilities attached to each arrangement. An income payment can help with contributions, yet the payment does not itself identify who administers insurance, how occupational risks are covered or what happens after a post ends. The continuity of protection therefore belongs within the analysis of conservation livelihoods alongside the level of current income.

The Qinghai case supports a documentary examination of these institutional connections. Official statistics establish the demographic and administrative setting; policy documents identify formal responsibilities; service accounts record particular responses. The resulting explanation links territorial costs with resource allocation, service interfaces with the completion of claims, and conservation livelihoods with continuity of protection. It yields propositions that can be tested using claimant experiences and administrative records. For economic and public management research, the central issue is how the allocation

of resources and decision-making authority changes the cost of using common entitlements, and how those costs are distributed between agencies and residents.

2. Regional Institutional Fit

2.1 Welfare, Territory and Institutional Scale

Welfare geography places the distribution of well-being within the spatial organization of society.^[8] The location of resources matters alongside their aggregate amount. The location of an office changes the practical opportunity to use an entitlement. This difference concerns the conversion of public provision into usable protection. It can persist even when eligibility rules and nominal benefits are identical. Regional institutional fit therefore requires attention to the relationship between public resources and the work that residents must perform to obtain them.

In China, sub-national variation in social health insurance reflects local fiscal resources, social risks and interactions between central and local institutions.^[9] Local differences consequently require interpretation. A higher expenditure level may respond to greater need, higher delivery costs or a more generous programme. A lower expenditure level may accompany either efficient provision or insufficient provision. Spending alone cannot distinguish these possibilities. The relevant comparison asks what protection is available, which risks it addresses, and what it takes for eligible residents to use it. This approach connects the distribution of resources with the organization of administration without treating every territorial difference as evidence of institutional failure.

Institutional-fit theory supplies a complementary account of the relationship between rules and their setting. Fit, interplay and scale concern the compatibility of institutions with the systems they govern and with other institutions.^[10] In social-ecological research, fit involves the relationship of institutions to processes with spatial, temporal and functional dimensions.^[11] Scale mismatch arises when the organization of management responsibilities is poorly aligned with ecological variation, disrupting functions or producing inefficiencies.^[12] These concepts invite examination of where responsibilities are located and how they connect. Their application to social security requires specifying the administrative relationship at issue rather than assuming that an ecological concept explains welfare outcomes directly.

Social security brings several such relationships into view. Household risks unfold over a life course, whereas applications, contribution payments and eligibility checks occur at particular moments. Financing and administration involve different government levels, while residents encounter programmes through local procedures. A person changing work or residence may need continuity across administrative boundaries even though each agency operates within its own jurisdiction. The analytical question is whether the agencies' separate decisions form a workable sequence for that person. A locally convenient procedure can transfer work to another agency or leave the claimant responsible for resolving an institutional boundary.

The temporal dimension deserves equal attention. A payment can address a current income shortfall while leaving future contribution obligations unresolved. An accessible first application can be followed by a difficult renewal. Fit therefore concerns entry into protection and its maintenance through changes in work, residence and household circumstances. The duration of a programme and the duration of the risk it addresses need to be considered together. For a household supported by an ecological post or payment, the arrangement's duration has to be considered alongside obligations that continue after it ends.

The relevant institutional boundary also depends on the task. A county may be an appropriate unit for organizing visits, while the financing of unusually costly delivery requires a wider allocation decision. A household may need an explanation from one local office and a determination from an agency elsewhere. Under the proposed framework, the question is whether responsibility follows the task far enough to bring it to completion. This permits different geographical arrangements for funding, assistance and adjudication without assuming that every function should operate at the same scale.

Local fit must be assessed against a common rights baseline. Context-sensitive implementation should make eligibility, benefits, portability and procedural redress usable across places and groups. Differentiation can concern staffing, assistance, service locations or schedules while retaining that baseline. Its justification rests on a demonstrable obstacle and a plausible means of reducing it. A procedure that is familiar to administrators is not necessarily easy for residents to complete; equally, a locally popular arrangement is not sufficient evidence of equitable treatment. The assessment must connect the adjustment to

the entitlement it helps people exercise.

2.2 Access and Administrative Burden

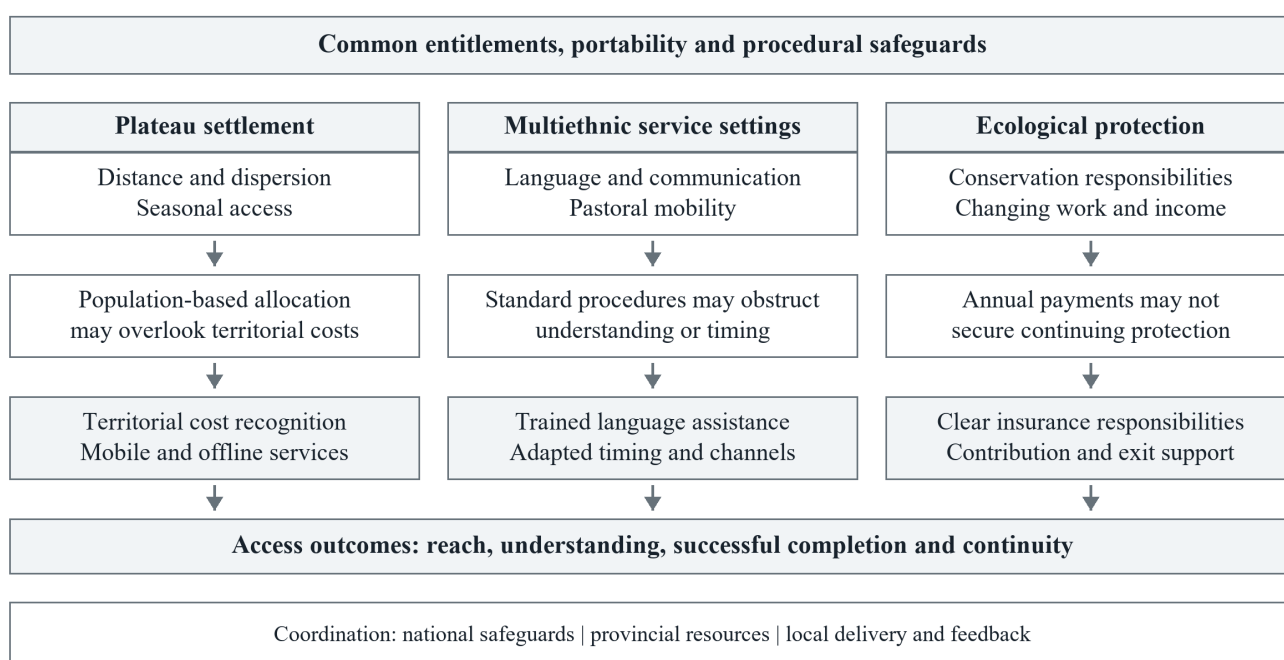
Access includes the fit between users and the availability, organization, affordability and acceptability of services.^[13] A related framework distinguishes the abilities to recognize a need, seek care, reach services, pay and engage with provision.^[14] These distinctions make access a sequence of relationships. Transposed to social security, they direct attention to whether residents know what protection is available, can approach the responsible institution and can complete the relevant transaction. Opening an office changes one part of that sequence. Its practical value also depends on understandable information, suitable hours and the assistance available when a claim cannot be completed immediately.

Administrative burden directs attention to the work people undertake in dealing with the state.^[15] Learning costs include finding out about a programme and its eligibility requirements; compliance costs include applications, documentation and re-enrolment; psychological costs include stress, stigma and loss of autonomy associated with the process.^[16] These categories distinguish the source of an obstacle from its visible consequence. A missed deadline may follow from unclear information, difficulties obtaining a document or inability to attend during the available hours. Recording the missed deadline alone leaves the administrative problem unidentified.

Distance can amplify several costs at once. Travel for document verification is a compliance cost, while uncertainty about which documents are required is a learning problem. If the first visit fails, the resident may have to repeat both the journey and the preparation. The resulting burden cannot be understood by counting office visits without asking what made another visit necessary. For the framework developed here, the transaction includes the claimant's preparation and follow-up as well as the time spent at the counter. This definition makes the allocation of work between institutions and residents explicit.

Some burdens can be reduced by shifting verification work from individuals to public agencies, including the use of administrative information already available to eligibility staff.^[15] Such a shift changes who performs the task. It still requires an agency with the authority, information and capacity to do so. An assessment of fit therefore asks both whether a requirement serves a necessary programme purpose and whether residents are the appropriate people to carry out the required coordination. Simplification should retain an identifiable decision-maker and a means of correcting errors. Otherwise, an easier initial transaction may leave a person with little control over a later adverse decision.

Figure 1. Regional institutional fit in social security. Arrows represent proposed relationships between conditions, administrative responses and access; they are not estimated causal effects. Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis.



Ethnic composition enters this analysis through specific service circumstances. Research on community-based conservation shows how a single community label can conceal differences in interests, power and local institutional relationships.^[17]

The corresponding implication for service design is to examine actual language proficiency, location, work schedules and opportunities to obtain assistance. An ethnic population share cannot establish which individuals need translation or which form of assistance they prefer. Nor does a common ethnic identity make livelihood circumstances uniform. Adaptation should follow the obstacle encountered in programme use, with room for residents to use different channels.

Four dimensions organize the analysis: fit with risk, delivery cost, the service interface and governance scale. Risk fit concerns the protection required by observable exposures. Cost fit concerns the resources needed to deliver that protection under local conditions. Interface fit concerns language, timing, channels and assistance. Scale fit concerns the allocation of authority and responsibility. These dimensions are connected but distinguishable. Additional funding may enable a mobile service without resolving a referral between agencies. Clearer information may reduce unsuccessful visits without changing the cost of reaching the office. Assessing the connection between a proposed adjustment and the unresolved step helps identify what further action is required. Figure 1 connects these conditions and administrative responses to access and continuity.

3. Research Design and Case Context

The study uses an explanatory documentary case analysis to develop mechanisms and propositions. Qinghai was selected because plateau settlement patterns, a multi-ethnic population and nationally important conservation responsibilities overlap within one provincial system. Examining their intersection makes it possible to ask how different administrative pressures meet in the same programme or household livelihood. Case-based inquiry offers depth for examining relationships within a bounded setting, although its representativeness and ability to estimate average causal effects are separate questions.^[18]

The evidence comprises population and administrative statistics, national and provincial policy documents, official accounts of service delivery, and published research. These materials serve different analytical purposes. Statistics establish the setting and reported scale of provision. Policy texts establish formal arrangements and assigned responsibilities. Service reports identify particular practices. Published studies supply concepts and findings from specified settings. Their combination allows a reported response to be related to the administrative problem it is intended to address, while retaining the distinction between a formal rule, an account of implementation and an observed outcome.

Documents were read for four connected elements: the condition affecting programme use; the point of mismatch; the reported institutional response; and the mechanism that the response might address. This reading follows the administrative sequence. For a mobile service, for example, the relevant question is which part of the transaction can be brought closer to residents and which parts still depend on another office. For conservation-related livelihoods, the question concerns the connection between a payment or post and continuing social protection.

The unit of explanation is thus the relationship between a programme requirement and the circumstances in which it is met. Provincial totals describe the broader setting, but a particular mismatch concerns a specified task: understanding a notice, making a payment, verifying eligibility or transferring a record. Keeping that relationship explicit limits the inferential step from an official description to a proposed mechanism. A reported visit can support a statement about outreach; a claim about reduced travel requires evidence of which journeys it replaced. Similarly, a compensation rule can establish an intended payment arrangement, while its implications for insurance continuity depend on the connection between that arrangement and the relevant insurance rules.

The province covers 722,300 km² and comprises two prefecture-level cities and six autonomous prefectures. The 2020 census recorded approximately 5.924 million residents, of whom 49.47% belonged to ethnic minorities.^[19] An official account identifies 54 minority ethnic groups and reports that ethnic autonomous areas occupy 98% of the province.^[20] These figures establish the territorial and demographic setting. They do not locate every service user or describe the assistance any individual requires. The large territorial share of autonomous areas is an area measure, while the minority population share is a demographic measure; neither can substitute for information about residents' journeys, language use or encounters with administrators.

For 2025, Qinghai reported 4.5824 million participants in basic pension insurance: 1.6475 million in enterprise employee schemes, 2.5689 million in urban–rural resident schemes and 0.3660 million in government and public-institution schemes.

Basic medical insurance covered 5.4797 million people; unemployment and work-injury insurance recorded 0.7079 million and 1.1928 million participants respectively.^[21] The categories have different eligibility and reporting bases. Their counts describe participation in particular programmes, not a single population with identical protection. Adding pension, medical and employment-related insurance counts would count participation across programmes rather than distinct protected individuals. Dividing the 2025 figures by the 2020 census population would also combine different reporting years. The analysis retains the original programme categories and dates.

Participation statistics leave a further question open: what happens when a participant needs to use the programme? A count cannot show the time required to resolve a record discrepancy, obtain an explanation or maintain contributions through a livelihood change. Those questions connect the provincial context to the access framework. They also explain why the documentary analysis considers procedures alongside enrolment. A reported expansion in provision and a reported effort to make provision easier to use concern different stages of social protection.

Sanjiangyuan National Park adds a cross-regional dimension. Its approved plan covers 190,700 km², including a 105,800 km² core protection zone and an 84,900 km² general control zone.^[22] Conservation benefits extend beyond the communities carrying local protection responsibilities. The resulting division between beneficiaries and local costs makes the scale of public financing relevant to social protection. Within the framework, conservation responsibilities matter through their connections to work, income and the administration of continuing entitlements.

Official accounts can establish that a service or post exists. Their evidential value for population reach, uptake and household security depends on what is actually reported. A description of an initiative provides a concrete institutional response to examine, but an unreported difficulty cannot be treated as absent. The analysis therefore uses documented practices to specify how an adjustment might work and where the sequence could remain incomplete. Findings from published studies inform these explanations within their stated contexts. Table 1 distinguishes the three pathways and their observable points of failure.

Table 1. Territorial conditions and proposed mechanisms of institutional fit. Source: Authors' analysis of the case materials cited in Sections 3 and 4.

Condition	Point of mismatch	Proposed response	What needs to be observed
Dispersed plateau settlement	Population-based resources overlook travel and service costs	Recognize territorial costs; combine mobile, office and offline provision	Travel and repeat visits; unfinished claims; seasonal service availability
Language use and pastoral mobility	Standard procedures conflict with understanding or work schedules	Trained language assistance; flexible timing; traceable representation	Understanding of decisions; successful completion; continuity during mobility
Conservation livelihoods	Current payments or jobs do not specify continuing protection	Clarify insurance responsibilities; coordinate contributions, retraining and exit support	Contract and insurance arrangements; interruptions; protection after a post ends

4. Institutional Mismatches and Responses

4.1 Plateau Settlement and Service Costs

Dispersed settlement changes the resources required for face-to-face administration. An office serving a small population over a large territory has to cover journeys and staffing time that an equally staffed urban office can spread across many more transactions. The difference concerns the cost of completing the same task. A population-based allocation formula can overlook it, particularly where the budget counts residents but makes no allowance for the routes connecting them to services. An office may then satisfy its staffing standard while lacking the capacity to visit distant settlements at a useful frequency. The distinction between fixed and variable costs matters for funding. Maintaining a service point requires a minimum commitment of staff and equipment even when daily demand is low. Outreach adds costs that depend on distance, road conditions and the number of settlements reached during a journey. Some demand can be handled remotely; other matters require assistance with documents or personal contact. An allocation based only on completed transactions would miss the cost of maintaining those options. It could also reward agencies for concentrating effort where transactions are easiest to complete, leaving expensive

cases outside the performance record.

Digital provision changes these costs, but an internet connection alone does not make an administrative procedure usable. Research on material digital access identifies differences in devices, subscriptions and maintenance expenses even within a population where internet use is widespread.^[23] In Qinghai, the relevant administrative question is what a resident can complete using the connection and equipment available at the time of the claim. Uploading a readable document, correcting a record and receiving a decision may impose different requirements. Counting logins would conceal a process that repeatedly ends with an instruction to visit an office.

Continuity deserves attention alongside first entry. A study of South Africa's Child Support Grant associated documentation problems with interruptions and disconnections in benefit receipt.^[24] The implication for service design is to examine the sequence after enrolment: which information must be renewed, who notifies the claimant, and how an incomplete response is handled. A remote resident who discovers a documentary problem only after travelling has incurred costs before any substantive decision is made. An online application that transfers the same unresolved problem to a physical counter has changed the channel without completing the work.

Qinghai's medical insurance agency reports Xizang-language and age-friendly mobile services, together with developments in cross-provincial direct settlement.^[25] A Haixi account describes bilingual assistance, village service points and mobile teams reaching pastoral communities, including visits on horseback during periods of pastoral movement and harvesting.^[26] Provincial enrolment reporting also identifies home assistance, local service personnel and digital channels.^[27] These accounts establish the availability of several administrative responses. Whether they save residents a journey depends on the tasks staff can complete, the records they can access and what happens after the visit.

A proposed service sequence would begin with a check of the transaction before travel is required. A resident could obtain an explanation of the required documents through a local assistant or remote contact, choose an available channel and receive a record of any submission. Where an offline channel is needed, staff could collect the permitted material, record the date and identify the office responsible for processing it. A later system entry would require confirmation and reconciliation so that the resident can discover whether the submission was accepted. Offline provision should include a way to correct failed transfers; collecting papers without tracking their subsequent treatment would merely move the uncertainty elsewhere.

Funding could follow the resources needed to maintain this sequence. A provincial assessment could distinguish minimum service capacity from the additional cost of reaching dispersed settlements, using actual travel time and seasonal access alongside population. County agencies would need to show how proposed routes, staff cover and remote assistance address those costs. Budget review could compare similar service tasks across counties, rather than assume that altitude or territorial area alone determines expenditure. A large administrative area with concentrated settlement may require a different arrangement from one with numerous small, distant settlements.

Risk assessment would require a separate evidential basis. The resources needed to reach a settlement do not establish that every resident has the same health or occupational exposure. Additional delivery funding could be justified by the cost of contact, while any proposal to alter risk protection would need information about the activity, exposure and applicable insurance arrangement. Keeping those decisions separate would prevent a territorial funding adjustment from becoming an unsupported classification of people by altitude or ethnicity. It would also make expenditure review more precise: money intended to maintain outreach should be assessed against the availability and use of that service.

Performance assessment would then follow unresolved work as well as completed work. Useful records include repeat visits for the same matter, applications returned for missing information, time between assisted submission and decision, and cases still awaiting a responsible office. A fall in office visits could indicate easier remote completion or abandoned attempts; those possibilities require different responses. Measuring the cost borne by residents would make it harder to treat an agency's savings as a service improvement when the same work has been shifted to households.

4.2 Language, Mobility and Administrative Procedures

A service interface comprises notices, contribution schedules, document requirements, explanations and routes of review. Translation of the application form addresses only one part of that process. Residents also need to understand which scheme

applies, what a requested document establishes and how to respond when their account differs from the administrative record. These are consequential exchanges: a misunderstanding about a date or category can persist after an otherwise courteous encounter. The administrative purpose of language assistance is accurate communication throughout the transaction.

Evidence from a US primary-care natural experiment associated clinician language-proficiency assessment and on-demand video interpretation with greater professional interpreter use, while gaps persisted in partly language-concordant encounters.^[28]

The finding directs attention to the organization of assistance, rather than an assumption that some shared vocabulary is enough. In social security administration, staff must distinguish an explanation of a rule from a judgment about eligibility. A resident may communicate comfortably about everyday matters yet need help understanding a contribution record or the reasons for a refusal.

Earlier research treats mobile provision as an approach to rural social security public services in ethnic regions.^[5] Field research located in Banma and Jiuzhi counties also places social security within the construction of public services in Xizang Plateau pastoral areas.^[29] Mobility connects the location of provision with its timing. An outreach visit can be geographically close and still fail to coincide with the period when a household can attend. Conversely, a well-timed visit accomplishes little if its staff can provide information but cannot receive or resolve the relevant transaction.

A proposed administrative schedule would use information about service users' availability to arrange assistance before deadlines become urgent. This need not imply changing a statutory deadline at county discretion. Agencies could provide earlier explanations, offer appointments through more than one channel and clarify any authorized representation or remote-submission options. For pastoral households, communication about where assistance will be available would need to reach people before they move. The relevant information concerns the timing and location of contact; a broad ethnic category cannot supply it.

Language support also requires decisions about responsibility. A local intermediary may explain how an application works and help a resident describe circumstances, but the deciding agency should remain responsible for its reasons. The intermediary should have a defined task, training in the terms used by the relevant programme and a route for asking an authorized officer about uncertainty. Where an explanation concerns a disputed record, an informal reassurance cannot substitute for an answer that can be reviewed. Recording the question and the agency's response would help prevent different explanations from circulating between residents and offices.

Practical quality control could focus on the points where misunderstandings have administrative consequences. Guidance should explain unfamiliar categories in ordinary language while preserving their legal meaning. Staff could ask applicants to explain their understanding of the next required step, rather than infer comprehension from agreement. If interpretation is used, the record should distinguish the applicant's account, the assistance provided and the official decision. These safeguards would be particularly useful where a person receives help from relatives or community members, whose ability to communicate does not necessarily include knowledge of insurance rules.

Assistance has costs of its own. Relying on occasional volunteers would leave availability uncertain and make supervision difficult. A funded arrangement could recognize the time spent explaining, translating and following up a claim, including work that produces no immediately completed transaction. It should also give residents a choice of contact where possible. Dependence on a single intermediary can make a complaint difficult when that person is closely involved in the initial application.

Completion records could distinguish problems of communication from problems of authority, documentation or payment. If a translated explanation repeatedly ends in referral to another office, the obstacle may lie in the procedure itself. If residents can explain the rule but cannot attend during the available hours, additional translation will not address the timing conflict. Following the whole transaction allows an agency to assign a response to the actual point of failure, rather than treating every difficulty experienced by a minority-language user as a language problem.

4.3 Conservation Livelihoods and Continuity of Protection

Ecological compensation and social security meet within household livelihoods while retaining different administrative purposes. Conservation can change opportunities to use resources, the work residents perform and the income available

for household expenditure. Payments for environmental services have a specific connection to conditional incentives and environmental benefits received beyond the service provider.^[30] A household payment consequently needs to be understood through the arrangement that creates it. Its amount alone does not establish whether it compensates for restricted resource use, purchases a service or remunerates work under a managed post.

The argument for direct conservation payments likewise links incentives to conservation objectives.^[31] This relationship raises a financing question when households rely on the income over time. The duration of a conservation commitment, the interval between payments and the household's need to make social insurance contributions may differ. A payment adequate for its environmental purpose need not arrive at the moment when a contribution is due. Equally, a household's continued insurance participation does not demonstrate that the conservation conditions attached to a payment have been met.

China's Regulations on Ecological Protection Compensation provide for vertical fiscal transfers, interregional compensation and market-based arrangements, permit several forms of support and require funds to be used in accordance with their prescribed purposes.^[32] Coordination with social protection would therefore require an account of which institution finances each task. An ecological programme could explain its payment conditions and provide the information needed for contribution guidance. An insurance agency would determine participation and contribution matters under the applicable scheme. Any public subsidy for contributions would need its own lawful basis and funding arrangement. Calling these activities coordinated would not authorize the transfer of a restricted environmental allocation into an insurance fund.

Official reporting describes more than 17,000 ecological rangers in the core areas of Sanjiangyuan National Park and reports monthly remuneration of RMB 1,800 for a named ranger.^[33]

Research on the park examines compensation standards from the perspective of ecosystem service value.^[34] A separate study addresses coordination among ecological, social and economic development in Sanjiangyuan.^[35] These subjects connect the distribution of conservation benefits with local livelihoods. The administrative questions concerning work arrangements, contribution responsibilities and protection after a post ends require more specific records than a count of posts or a current payment figure.

A ranger post brings several distinct relationships into view. The organization assigning tasks needs to identify the work expected, the period covered and the person responsible for its administration. The payment record establishes what was paid and when. The relevant employment or service arrangement determines which responsibilities attach to the work under the applicable rules. Insurance records establish participation and contribution history. Treating one of these records as evidence of all the others would conceal a gap precisely where responsibility needs to be clear.

An administrative review of each type of post would provide a starting point, with the responsible agencies establishing its legal character and the corresponding obligations. This review should avoid inferring an employment relationship merely from the existence of regular remuneration. It should equally avoid assuming that an environmental programme's designation removes responsibilities that otherwise apply. The resident needs an accessible explanation of who handles payment disputes, who receives a report of an injury and which office can answer an insurance question. Agencies would need procedures for referring an issue whose legal classification is contested.

An occupational-risk procedure could specify how an incident is reported, which records the responsible organization maintains and where the resident can seek a decision about protection. The existence of an accident payment would need to be distinguished from the determination of any employment or insurance responsibility. Records should allow an unresolved question to be reviewed without requiring the claimant to settle a disagreement between departments personally. Payment reports do not identify the occupational-risk arrangements attached to each post.

Household compensation requires a different inquiry. A payment to a household or community does not identify which members have insurance, who makes contributions or whether the payment is available when needed. Contribution guidance could help recipients review those matters without presuming how compensation should be spent. Records used for assistance should distinguish a change in payment timing from a loss of eligibility or a change in household circumstances. Otherwise, an apparent contribution problem might be answered with enrolment publicity when the immediate difficulty concerns cash flow or an unresolved administrative record.

People whose livelihoods change through conservation restrictions also need consideration when they do not occupy ranger posts. Their administrative needs may concern employment services, retraining or access to assistance under the relevant eligibility rules. A service network organized entirely around ranger rosters would fail to identify this group. A proposed referral arrangement could allow local staff to record a reported livelihood change and direct the resident to the office able to assess the relevant entitlement. Referral would begin an assessment; it would not confer eligibility on the basis of residence in a conservation area.

Contribution continuity can be examined at identifiable transitions: entry into a post, renewal of its funding, a change of work or residence, and exit. At each transition, the resident should be able to establish which contribution record applies, whether an action is required and where a correction can be requested. An exit process could include an explanation of the existing insurance position and available employment or assistance services. Where a person moves between schemes, the responsible office would need to explain the applicable transfer or continuation procedure. Continuity requires an agency to check whether the required step was completed.

Evaluating these arrangements requires attention to duration and additionality. A review of payments for environmental services distinguishes payment activity from evidence of additional environmental gains and examines the need for appropriate impact evaluation.^[36]

Social protection requires a parallel distinction between current income and continuing protection. Evidence from Indonesia shows that an antipoverty cash-transfer programme reduced forest loss under that programme's conditions.^[37] The finding makes interactions between household security and environmental behaviour worth examining, but it supplies no estimate for ranger posts in Qinghai. Local analysis would need to follow the relevant livelihood transition, insurance record and environmental outcome separately before asking how they interact.

4.4 Coordination across Government Levels

The same resident can encounter geographic, communication and occupational questions within one application. A mobile team may reduce travel yet lack authority to resolve a contribution record. A bilingual assistant may explain a payment without being able to identify the office responsible for an injury claim. Coordination needs to specify what happens when a transaction moves beyond the competence of the person who first receives it. Adding another contact point without allocating that responsibility can multiply referrals.

Polycentric governance directs attention to interacting decision centres and learning across scales, while recognizing problems of inconsistent policies and coordination.^[38] In social security, local knowledge is useful for organizing contact and identifying recurring obstacles. Decisions about entitlements and fund responsibilities may require authority beyond the locality. A proposed division of work would keep common rights and portability safeguards within the relevant national rules, place territorial cost assessment and cross-departmental arrangements at provincial level, and assign counties the organization and tracking of delivery. Community participation would supply information and assistance without becoming a substitute for an accountable public decision.

Funding arrangements should distinguish unequal fiscal capacity from costs whose benefits extend beyond the paying jurisdiction. Fiscal-federalism analysis treats equalization and compensation for interjurisdictional spillovers as different reasons for transfers.^[39] Applied to Qinghai's administrative problem, that distinction suggests separate questions: can a locality finance ordinary services, what additional resources does its settlement pattern require, and which conservation responsibilities serve beneficiaries elsewhere? A single undifferentiated claim of regional disadvantage would make it difficult to judge the purpose or adequacy of a transfer.

Provincial coordination could connect those questions to a documented division of responsibilities. Counties could submit costed plans for service routes and assistance, together with unresolved cases requiring a higher-level decision. Provincial agencies could compare the costs of similar tasks, identify which responsibilities can be funded through existing lawful arrangements and explain where a change requires further authorization. Funding for ongoing service capacity would need to be distinguishable from a short campaign allocation. Otherwise, a county might expand outreach while the additional resources last and then lose the capacity on which residents have begun to rely.

An accountable referral process would identify a receiving office and retain the original submission date and material where the rules permit. Residents should be able to discover which agency currently holds the matter. A returned referral would need a reason that identifies the unresolved question, rather than a general instruction to contact another department. Aggregated records of repeated returns could reveal a conflict of instructions or an unallocated responsibility requiring provincial resolution. A county could correct a local training problem directly; a conflict between scheme rules would need a different route.

Shared information should remain connected to a defined transaction. Combining health, income and household information can reduce repeated documentary demands, but it also creates responsibility for access and correction. A proposed arrangement would specify which office can request each item, what action it supports and how a resident can challenge an error. An automated indication of a possible interruption should lead to human review before a consequential decision. Recording an explanation in a shared system cannot replace communicating it in a form the person can understand.

Feedback would become useful when it changes a procedure or allocation. A recurring problem could lead to revised guidance, a different service schedule or an explicit higher-level decision about responsibility. Agencies should be able to trace that response back to the problem recorded locally and check whether cases still remain unresolved. The resulting record would connect the authority to alter rules with the practical knowledge of their use, while leaving a resident with a named office responsible for the next action.

5. Discussion and Empirical Propositions

5.1 Equality in the Use of Common Entitlements

Regional institutional fit changes the basis on which equal provision is judged. Equal spending per participant can purchase different amounts of usable service when travel, staffing and communication costs differ. Conversely, higher expenditure in a remote county can finance an ordinary level of access rather than a higher level of benefit. Assessing equality requires distinguishing the resources that reach households from the resources needed to administer an entitlement. Otherwise, territorial cost compensation may be mistaken for preferential treatment, while the expenses absorbed by claimants disappear from the comparison. The relevant costs extend across a claim's duration. An application completed in one visit may require several days of preparation, help from relatives and travel during working hours. A short processing time after formal acceptance can coexist with a long interval before the agency accepts the documents. Evaluation should therefore begin when a person first seeks information and continue through the decision, payment and any review. Comparing only completed applications would miss residents who abandon a procedure or never approach the office. Household accounts of attempts and administrative records of accepted cases would need to be examined together.

Some differences can be offset through additional resources. More staff time may compensate for longer journeys; trained assistance may reduce the difficulty of a form. Rights safeguards have a different status. A high completion rate cannot compensate for an inaccessible appeal procedure, and quicker processing cannot justify excluding a group that needs an offline channel. Under the proposed framework, a locality would first be assessed against requirements for lawful eligibility, reasoned decisions, review and protection of personal information. Delivery performance would then be compared within that baseline. A failure against a requirement would remain visible even where other indicators improved.

This distinction makes local discretion assessable. Agencies could adjust appointment times, outreach routes and explanatory materials while recording why the adjustment addresses a particular obstacle. Eligibility decisions and contribution obligations would remain traceable to the applicable rules. A claimant should be able to obtain assistance without relying on a personal relationship with the intermediary. Where local practice changes substantive eligibility or removes a route of review, it would require correction rather than a favourable score for responsiveness.

Policy feedback connects these encounters with a further question. Public programmes can shape citizens' resources, experiences and orientations toward the state.^[40] For Qinghai, the proposed relationship runs through the treatment residents receive when seeking protection. A future study could distinguish satisfaction with an outcome from perceived fairness of the procedure and understanding of a common entitlement. A favourable decision may improve satisfaction without changing perceptions of equal treatment. A reasoned refusal accompanied by an effective review route may have a different relationship

with those perceptions. Measuring these responses separately would allow the proposed citizenship pathway to be tested without treating benefit receipt as evidence of stronger identification.

5.2 Propositions and Observable Measures

Table 2 separates the rights baseline from adjustments to delivery. Its indicators would support diagnosis at county and claimant levels, with the two units connected through actual service encounters. County expenditure describes available resources; claimant measures describe what those resources make possible. Neither can substitute for the other.

Table 2. Proposed indicators for assessing regional institutional fit. Source: Authors' proposed operationalization; no indicator scores were calculated in this study.

Dimension	Observable indicators	Interpretation
Common rights baseline	Eligibility rules; portability; reasons for decisions; review channels	Required safeguards assessed separately from average performance
Risk and delivery cost	Time and expenditure applying; repeat visits; outreach frequency; offline availability	Whether resources recognize the cost of reaching dispersed residents
Service interface	Trained language assistance; understanding; completion and referral; timing of applications	Whether procedures are usable across language and livelihood settings
Livelihood continuity	Contribution interruptions; insurance responsibilities; occupational-risk arrangements; exit support	Whether protection continues through changes in conservation work or income
Governance scale	Cost-sharing arrangements; referral resolution; feedback and corrective decisions	Whether authority, resources and responsibility meet at the necessary level

The first proposition concerns territorial costs: among otherwise comparable schemes and transactions, the gap between enrolment and successful use should be greater where allocation follows population counts without recognizing settlement dispersion and travel conditions. A test would compare time to completion, repeat journeys and abandoned attempts against the actual availability of outreach and assisted processing. Distance alone would be insufficient. A distant settlement served regularly by an authorized team might impose less claimant effort than a nearer settlement with irregular opening hours. This comparison would help establish whether the mechanism operates through service organization rather than remoteness as such.

A second proposition concerns the match between procedures and users. Communication support and timing adjustments should improve completion where a documented language or scheduling barrier exists. Their expected effects should vary with the transaction: explanatory assistance may matter most when rules are unfamiliar, while flexible appointments may matter more for a recurring certification that coincides with seasonal movement. An intervention that changes notices but leaves the required visit unchanged would provide a useful negative case. If learning costs fell while repeat journeys persisted, the remaining obstacle could be located more precisely.

The third proposition concerns protection over time. Among people entering or leaving conservation work, explicit responsibility for contributions and referral should be associated with fewer avoidable interruptions than arrangements that record remuneration alone. Observation would need to distinguish a missed payment, a lawful change of scheme, a delay in transferring records and a loss of eligibility. These events have different implications. A monthly panel could follow contribution records around entry and exit, supplemented by explanations from participants and responsible agencies. Residents affected by conservation who do not receive a post should also enter the sample, since a post-based register cannot represent their experience.

The fourth proposition concerns interdependence. Improvements in outreach should have weaker effects where a later administrative step remains unresolved. A team may reach a household and explain the rule, yet leave it waiting for a decision from another department. Testing this proposition would require recording the sequence of referrals and the authority available at each stage. A combined intervention should be assessed against the specific bottlenecks it removes, rather than assumed to outperform a simpler service because it involves more departments.

5.3 Comparison, Identification and Differences among Users

A future county panel would need repeated measures of both administrative changes and claimant outcomes. Exposure should reflect the service actually available: completed outreach visits, hours of trained language assistance, continuity of staffing and authority to process a transaction. A policy announcement or the purchase of a vehicle would establish a weaker measure of exposure. Records should distinguish planned from completed visits, especially during periods when travel is difficult. Dates would allow the analysis to establish whether a change in provision preceded a change in completion or continuity.

Counties receiving additional assistance may already face unusually severe problems. Comparing their outcomes directly with better-connected counties could therefore make a useful service appear ineffective. Within-county changes and comparisons with counties showing similar earlier trajectories would offer a more informative starting point. Where implementation is staggered, an event-based design could examine outcomes before and after introduction, provided that adoption timing and concurrent reforms are investigated. Parallel changes in staffing, contribution subsidies or digital systems would need separate documentation. A design that cannot distinguish them would estimate the effect of the combined reform rather than attribute it to mobile provision alone.

Geographical conditions would enter as modifiers of that relationship. Altitude changes little over a county panel, whereas winter access, road connections and service schedules can vary. Rather than interpret a coefficient on altitude as the effect of plateau conditions, a study could examine whether a given service change has different consequences across settlement patterns. Comparison should also account for who moves between counties and who remains in the observed population. Improved access might bring previously unrecorded claimants into the system, temporarily increasing the recorded number of difficult cases even as provision improves.

Differences among users need equal attention. Language preference, literacy, disability, access to a working device, care responsibilities and mobility should be measured directly where relevant to the transaction. Ethnic identity can describe sample composition, but it cannot identify which assistance an individual requires. Within-group comparisons would reveal whether the same service reaches residents with different resources. Reporting the average alongside the distribution of journeys or processing time would also show whether gains are concentrated among already accessible users. Small subgroup samples would require cautious interpretation and protection against disclosure.

Administrative records alone would leave an important selection problem. They mainly describe people who have entered a procedure. A household sample could include eligible nonusers and people who stopped after seeking informal advice. Questions would need to separate lack of need, a deliberate decision not to participate, uncertainty about eligibility and unsuccessful attempts. These explanations should not be collapsed into a single category of noncompliance. Where respondents cannot recall dates or expenditure, a short prospective diary around a transaction could provide a better basis for measuring effort than a distant retrospective estimate. Comparative process tracing would examine how these measured differences arise. Following the same type of claim through a pastoral settlement, a resettlement community and an accessible urban fringe would keep the administrative task reasonably consistent while varying its setting. Researchers could compare successful cases with unresolved cases, including places where resources increased without an improvement in access. Interviews with claimants, intermediaries and decision-makers would then be checked against notices, referral dates and case records. Contradictory accounts would help identify where an official description of service availability diverges from its use. For ecological livelihoods, the comparison would need to extend beyond current post holders. Selection into ranger work may depend on household circumstances that also affect insurance continuity. Matching on observed characteristics could improve comparability, but it would not resolve unobserved selection. Where documented assignment rules create a credible comparison, researchers could examine their implications for identification. Otherwise, the analysis should concentrate on transitions within households and the administrative sequence linking a post to protection. Ecological outcomes, current income and insurance continuity would remain separate outcomes, allowing improvements in one to coexist with difficulties in another.

5.4 Administrative Feedback, Tradeoffs and Transferability

Measurement can also guide routine administration. Counties could classify recurring obstacles by the authority needed to

resolve them. Incorrect advice may require training; incompatible records may require a procedural change; an unresolved financing responsibility may require a provincial decision. A referral record should identify the receiving office and a response date. Counting referrals without checking resolution would reward the transfer of a problem between agencies. Repeated obstacles would provide a basis for revising the rule or resource allocation responsible for them. Greater coordination creates its own costs. Mobile teams require travel and staff cover that may reduce office availability elsewhere. Combining services can save household journeys while lengthening each visit and requiring more specialized support. Evaluation should record these displaced costs alongside the benefit to remote users. Where a less costly assisted channel resolves a simple task, sending a full team may add little. Complex claims involving several responsibilities may justify the additional coordination. Service choices should follow the task and the barrier rather than a preference for one delivery model.

Information sharing raises a further design question. A reminder about an interrupted contribution may require a small set of records; it does not justify unrestricted access to health or household data. Proposed monitoring should specify which information each task needs, who can correct it and how an incorrect flag reaches human review. Researchers would also need a method of contacting nonusers that does not disclose their circumstances to neighbours or intermediaries. Participation and complaint channels should remain usable by people who do not wish to share information beyond the relevant agency.

Transferability depends on identifying the mechanism in the receiving setting. Another mountainous area may share travel costs while differing in language use, fiscal arrangements or conservation employment. An urban migrant population may face record transfers and work schedules without the same geographical barriers. Applying the framework would require establishing the transaction, the people experiencing difficulty and the level of government able to change it. A successful instrument in Qinghai would warrant replication only where these relationships are sufficiently similar. Cases in which ordinary provision already works would be equally useful: they would indicate where further differentiation adds cost without improving access.

6. Conclusions

Social security coverage becomes effective through encounters between households and agencies. In Qinghai, the costs and organization of those encounters are shaped by dispersed plateau settlements, language use, pastoral mobility and livelihoods connected with ecological protection. The documentary materials identify existing responses, including mobile assistance, multilingual services and conservation employment. Their relationship to sustained access depends on how responsibilities, resources and procedures connect across a claim and through changes in livelihood. Regional institutional fit places those connections within an account of equality. Territorial differences can justify additional delivery resources when they increase the cost of making common entitlements usable. They also require procedures suited to observable barriers. Eligibility, review and accountability provide requirements against which these adjustments can be assessed. A rise in average completion would be insufficient if people needing another channel continued to be excluded. Conservation work brings the temporal dimension into focus. Current remuneration and continuing protection involve related but distinct responsibilities. Identifying contribution administration, occupational-risk arrangements and support at exit would make it possible to follow the relationship beyond the number of posts or the size of a payment. Provincial coordination matters where local agencies cannot settle these responsibilities or finance the additional service costs themselves.

The proposed empirical agenda would follow households from initial enquiry to decision and, where relevant, through movement between work and insurance arrangements. Comparisons would include nonusers, unsuccessful cases and localities where an intervention produces little change. Such observations would allow future research to determine which barriers are reduced, whose costs fall and where an unresolved step still prevents the use of a common entitlement. They would also give administrators specific grounds for changing resources or procedures when a formally available service remains difficult to use.

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