

Why is it so difficult to reduce the burden on grassroots-level governments? The generation mechanisms and governance pathways of grassroots burdens in inspection, supervision, and performance assessment

Jincan Tan

Hebei GEO University, Shijiazhuang, China

1542338818@qq.com

Abstract. Despite the continuous intensification of policies aimed at reducing the burden on grassroots-level governments, the actual burden has shown little sign of abating, giving rise to the so-called "burden reduction paradox." Taking inspection, supervision, and performance assessment as the analytical entry point, this paper examines the structural mechanisms underlying the persistent reproduction of grassroots burdens from the perspective of the relationship between vertical administrative lines (*tiao*) and territorial governments (*kuai*). The findings reveal that three interlocking mechanisms jointly constitute a system of burden reproduction. First, the fragmented distribution of authority across vertical administrative lines results in the accumulation of overlapping tasks, while multiple assessment systems converge at the grassroots level, creating intense administrative pressure. Second, the asymmetry between authority and responsibility gives rise to cascading policy intensification, as higher-level governments shift risks downward through the territorial management system, causing tasks to be amplified at each administrative level. Third, information asymmetry fuels the expansion of documentation-oriented governance, with quantitative indicators increasingly substituting for actual performance, thereby encouraging formalistic practices. The interaction of these three mechanisms structurally locks the objectives of burden reduction policies into misalignment with their implementation instruments. Accordingly, this paper proposes four governance pathways: optimizing the performance assessment framework, strengthening coordination between vertical administrative lines and territorial governments, ensuring the alignment of authority with responsibility, and advancing institutionalized burden reduction.

Keywords: grassroots burden reduction, *tiao-kuai* relations, inspection, supervision, and performance assessment, burden reproduction, formalism

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

In 2018, the General Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee issued the *Notice on Coordinating and Standardizing Inspection, Supervision, and Performance Assessment*, identifying a range of problems in existing inspection and assessment practices, including excessive categories, overly frequent inspections, overlapping supervision by multiple authorities, and an excessive emphasis on documentation at the expense of substantive performance. The document called for controlling both the overall number and frequency of inspections at their source. In 2019, the central government designated the year as the Year of Grassroots Burden Reduction. In August 2024, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued the *Several Provisions on Rectifying Formalism to Reduce the Burden on Grassroots-Level Governments*. The document introduced twenty-one measures covering the streamlining of official documents, stricter control over meetings, the standardization of inspection, supervision, and performance assessment, the regulation of temporary personnel transfers, and the consolidation of government digital applications. It also explicitly prohibited the arbitrary transfer of administrative responsibilities to township governments, subdistrict offices, villages, and community organizations.

In 2025, the institutional framework for grassroots burden reduction was further expanded. The central government successively introduced supporting regulations concerning document review procedures, consistency assessments between document issuance and grassroots burden reduction objectives, and stricter regulation of "one-vote veto" mechanisms and responsibility agreements. The *Regulations on Government Data Sharing*, which came into effect on August 1, 2025, stipulate that government data obtainable through interdepartmental sharing may not be repeatedly collected from grassroots authorities. In addition, the central government's special working mechanism for rectifying formalism and reducing grassroots burdens convened implementation meetings in February and October 2025 to further advance these reforms. Despite the continuous introduction of policy measures addressing the same issue between 2018 and 2025, the perceived burden on grassroots governments has not declined accordingly. Under the logic of territorial administration, administrative responsibilities have been progressively shifted downward from vertically organized functional departments to grassroots governments. Consequently, township governments and subdistrict offices, operating under limited staffing and administrative resources, have been required to undertake an increasing number of tasks assigned by higher authorities. This phenomenon, whereby policy efforts to reduce burdens continue to intensify while the actual burden remains largely unchanged, has been conceptualized as the grassroots burden reduction paradox [1]. Empirical studies of downward supervisory extension have likewise found that although expanded supervision improves regulatory compliance, it simultaneously imposes additional administrative burdens on grassroots governments [2]. Against this background, this paper addresses the following question: Why does the burden on grassroots governments remain difficult to reduce despite repeated central policy initiatives, and what structural mechanisms account for this persistent phenomenon?

1.2. Research approach and methods

This paper focuses on the burdens experienced by grassroots governments in the process of inspection, supervision, and performance assessment. Drawing on the analytical perspective of *tiao*–*kuai* relations—the interaction between vertically organized functional authorities (*tiao*) and territorially organized local governments (*kuai*)—it examines how the configuration of authority, the allocation of responsibilities, and the

operational logic of these two administrative dimensions contribute to the continuous generation, accumulation, and persistence of grassroots burdens. The paper proceeds through six stages: problem identification, literature review, theoretical framework, mechanism analysis, governance pathways, and conclusion.

The study primarily employs policy document analysis and secondary literature analysis. The policy analysis covers central government documents on grassroots burden reduction issued since 2018, with particular attention to institutional arrangements governing inspection, supervision, and performance assessment. The literature review is used to construct an analytical framework linking power allocation, responsibility transmission, assessment implementation, and burden reproduction, thereby explaining the structural misalignment between the objectives of burden reduction policies and the instruments employed to implement them.

2. Literature review

2.1. Characterizing the phenomenon of grassroots administrative burdens

Research tracing the sources of burdens borne by township governments suggests that grassroots administrative burdens can be categorized into top-down institutional burdens, bottom-up responsive burdens, and internal burdens arising from dysfunctional organizational incentives. Rather than occurring incidentally, these burdens are deeply embedded in the organizational operation of township governments [3]. The extension of supervisory mechanisms to the grassroots level has also generated extensive compliance requirements. To demonstrate compliance with higher-level regulations, grassroots governments have been compelled to devote increasing amounts of human and material resources, making administrative overload an unintended consequence of the expanding supervisory system [2].

From the perspective of state governance transformation, scholars argue that the upward concentration of goal-setting authority, the simultaneous implementation of multiple policy agendas, and the disorderly downward expansion of supervisory authority have jointly reshaped the structure of grassroots administrative affairs. In practice, the burdens most strongly perceived by grassroots officials stem less from substantive policy tasks than from unreasonable administrative procedures and working arrangements [1]. These studies provide rich empirical descriptions of the forms and intensity of grassroots burdens, effectively answering what these burdens are. However, their primary focus remains on describing observable phenomena, while offering relatively limited discussion of the institutional conditions that continuously generate and reproduce such burdens.

2.2. Behavioral explanations of formalism

Research on organizational behavior demonstrates that under China's pressure-based governance system, grassroots governments often adopt collaborative coping strategies to respond flexibly to policy directives, inspections, and supervision imposed by higher authorities. Such behaviors are institutionalized adaptations rather than merely reflections of individual officials' moral choices [4]. The combined pressures of performance evaluation and accountability have further shifted the behavioral logic of grassroots officials from pursuing recognition to avoiding responsibility. This shift manifests in strategies such as maintaining the appearance of busyness without substantive action, concealing information, and diverting attention from underlying problems [5].

As governance practices become increasingly reduced to visible documentation—including registers, forms, photographs, and other documentary evidence—administrative records have gradually displaced

substantive performance as the primary basis for evaluation. Consequently, documentation-oriented management has evolved into documentation formalism [6]. Similarly, political task pressures generated through interactions between vertically organized functional departments and territorially organized local governments at the county level have compelled grassroots governments to rely on formalistic responses to satisfy higher-level administrative demands [7]. Moreover, the imbalance in *tiao–kuai* relations has been identified as symbiotically linked to the continued evolution of grassroots formalism [8]. Collectively, these studies explain how grassroots burdens are manifested through formalistic behavior. However, such behavioral strategies are themselves consequences of institutional pressures rather than their underlying causes, leaving unresolved the more fundamental question of the institutional origins of those pressures.

2.3. Tiao–kuai relations and territorial governance

The isomorphic responsibility model has long been subject to systematic criticism for failing to distinguish the functional roles that should exist across different levels of government [9]. The relationship between vertically organized functional authorities (*tiao*) and territorially organized local governments (*kuai*) has continuously oscillated under the inherent tensions of China's unitary governance system, thereby shaping the fundamental configuration of grassroots governance [10]. As a core structural feature of China's governmental system, *tiao–kuai* relations have been widely recognized as a key determinant of governance effectiveness. An imbalance between the two dimensions is regarded as a major source of difficulties in grassroots governance, while the reform direction lies in establishing a streamlined and efficient grassroots administrative system [11]. In response to inadequate coordination caused by ambiguous divisions of responsibility between vertical and territorial authorities, scholars argue that governance should move beyond simple cooperation toward collaborative institutional embedding, thereby addressing grassroots burdens at the structural level [12]. Institutional innovation has likewise been identified as an important means of enhancing the adaptability of the *tiao–kuai* system and maintaining its resilience [13]. Moreover, the isomorphic responsibility model has been recognized as a long-standing institutional source of policy intensification through successive administrative layers, as the replication of identical responsibilities across hierarchical levels tends to amplify tasks during downward transmission [14].

The imbalance between authority and responsibility under the territorial governance system has also attracted considerable scholarly attention. Following the territorialization of China's pressure-based governance system, responsibilities have increasingly been concentrated at the grassroots level without a corresponding transfer of authority or administrative resources [15]. When confronted with multiple and overlapping tasks, grassroots governments have become dependent on coordination by higher-level vertical functional departments, and this downward coordination dependence has further expanded the scope of territorial governance [16]. In practice, responsibility agreements have frequently evolved from instruments for promoting policy implementation into mechanisms through which higher authorities shift responsibilities downward [17]. Accountability has consequently become the dominant mechanism for ensuring the completion of ambiguous policy tasks, fundamentally reshaping the nature of central–local government relations [18].

2.4. Research gap and positioning of this study

The three strands of literature reviewed above respectively explain what grassroots burdens are, how grassroots officials respond to them, and how institutional arrangements shape these burdens. However, they have yet to provide an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining the paradox whereby policies aimed at reducing grassroots burdens continue to intensify while the burdens themselves remain persistent.

Research specifically examining inspection, supervision, and performance assessment remains relatively limited. Existing studies have primarily established that inspection serves as a pivotal link connecting policy formulation with policy implementation [19], and that the shift in county-level governance from results-oriented management to process-oriented management has significantly increased the volume of compliance-oriented administrative tasks at the grassroots level [20].

Against this background, the present study identifies inspection, supervision, and performance assessment as its analytical entry point. Situated at the intersection of *tiao-kuai* tensions, these mechanisms function simultaneously as instruments through which higher-level vertical authorities monitor policy implementation, as primary channels through which territorially organized grassroots governments absorb external administrative pressures, and as recurring targets of central burden reduction reforms. By adopting *tiao-kuai* relations as the core analytical framework and constructing an explanatory chain linking authority allocation, responsibility transmission, assessment implementation, and burden reproduction, this study seeks to integrate phenomenological, behavioral, and structural explanations into a unified account of the persistence of grassroots administrative burdens.

3. Theoretical framework: *Tiao-Kuai* relations as an analytical lens for understanding grassroots administrative burdens

3.1. The *Tiao-Kuai* system and the allocation of authority and responsibility

The relationship between vertically organized functional authorities (*tiao*) and territorially organized local governments (*kuai*) constitutes one of the fundamental structural features of China's administrative system [11]. The *tiao* dimension refers to vertically integrated functional departments extending from the central government to local administrative levels, whereas the *kuai* dimension refers to local governments at different levels and their mechanisms for horizontal coordination. The organizational principles of this system emphasize vertical alignment within functional hierarchies and horizontal coordination among local governments. In practice, functional departments issue policy tasks through vertical administrative channels, while territorially organized local governments are responsible for implementation within their jurisdictions. Motivated by the specialized objectives of their respective policy domains, vertical functional departments tend to assign increasing numbers of tasks and performance assessment requirements to lower-level governments. Consequently, grassroots governments, operating with limited staffing and organizational capacity, are required to respond simultaneously to demands originating from multiple functional lines, resulting in fragmented resource allocation and intensified competition for administrative attention [11].

With respect to the allocation of authority and responsibility, China's administrative system follows a logic of downward delegation of implementation responsibilities. Decision-making authority and the authority to formulate standards remain concentrated within higher-level vertical functional departments, while implementation authority and territorial responsibility are transferred to grassroots governments. This institutional arrangement does not inevitably generate administrative burdens. However, when the downward transfer of responsibilities is accompanied by the upward concentration of assessment authority, without corresponding increases in staffing quotas or fiscal support, grassroots governments become trapped in a structural imbalance characterized by extensive responsibilities, limited authority, and inadequate personnel resources [10, 15]. Empirical investigations indicate that higher levels of government typically feature increasingly specialized departmental divisions and larger staffing complements, whereas lower administrative levels operate with broader functional responsibilities and fewer personnel. At the grassroots level, a single

office—or even a single official—may simultaneously serve as the liaison for multiple higher-level departments. This mismatch between the upright pyramid of administrative tasks and the inverted pyramid of human resources creates persistent structural tensions within grassroots governance [11].

3.2. Three logics of burden generation in inspection, supervision, and performance assessment

Applying the *tiao–kuai* analytical framework to the field of inspection, supervision, and performance assessment reveals three interrelated logics through which grassroots administrative burdens are generated. The first is the logic of task accumulation. Different vertical functional departments independently rely on performance assessments to advance policy objectives within their respective jurisdictions. As a result, assessment tasks from multiple functional lines converge at the grassroots level. Differences in departmental priorities and persistent information barriers make effective coordination and consolidation of these assessment requirements difficult to achieve. The second is the logic of responsibility decentralization and risk avoidance. Under the principle of territorial governance, performance indicators are successively decomposed through the administrative hierarchy, with grassroots officials ultimately designated as the primary persons responsible for implementation outcomes. To minimize risks within their own policy domains, higher-level functional departments continuously expand the scope and number of assessment indicators, thereby transferring institutional risks downward until they are ultimately absorbed by grassroots governments [15, 17].

The third is the logic of documentation-oriented governance under conditions of information asymmetry. Because higher-level authorities cannot directly observe the day-to-day implementation of grassroots administrative work, they rely heavily on documentary evidence and statistical records to evaluate policy execution. Consequently, performance assessment increasingly shifts from evaluating substantive outcomes to evaluating documentary traces, allowing documentation to substitute for actual performance [6, 20]. These three logics correspond respectively to the fragmentation of authority, the imbalance between authority and responsibility, and information asymmetry embedded within the *tiao–kuai* administrative system. The following sections examine the operational mechanisms of each in greater detail.

4. Three mechanisms underlying the generation of grassroots administrative burdens in inspection, supervision, and performance assessment

4.1. Task accumulation through fragmented vertical authority

The first mechanism arises from the task accumulation effect generated by the fragmented operation of vertically organized functional departments. Taking a county government as an example, its higher-level functional counterparts encompass dozens of policy domains, including agriculture and rural affairs, natural resources, ecological environment, emergency management, and market regulation. Each department maintains its own annual performance assessment requirements and typically insists that the work within its jurisdiction be evaluated independently. The 2018 *Notice on Coordinating and Standardizing Inspection, Supervision, and Performance Assessment* stipulated that, in principle, each department should conduct only one comprehensive inspection or assessment annually and encouraged the consolidation of inspections through joint interdepartmental teams wherever possible. In practice, however, differences in assessment cycles, evaluation indicators, and statistical standards have made genuine integration difficult to achieve. Consequently, joint inspection teams often exist only in form: officials from different functional departments

continue to examine documentation separately, ask independent questions, and require grassroots governments to prepare multiple sets of materials tailored to different reporting standards.

This mechanism reflects a persistent mismatch between the continuous expansion of assessment tasks and the limited administrative capacity available at the grassroots level. Although a single annual assessment by one department may appear manageable, the cumulative effect of assessments conducted by dozens of departments within the same township results in an exceptionally high inspection frequency. More importantly, the preparatory work required before inspections often consumes substantially more administrative resources than the inspections themselves. Completing forms, compiling supporting documents, organizing administrative records, arranging inspection venues, and preparing briefing reports each require considerable time and effort. As a result, preparing for inspections diverts grassroots governments' attention away from substantive policy implementation toward demonstrating compliance through administrative presentation, leading documentation-related work to occupy an increasingly prominent position in daily administrative operations [6, 12].

4.2. Cascading policy intensification driven by the imbalance between authority and responsibility

The second mechanism stems from the structural imbalance between authority and responsibility within the *tiao–kuai* administrative system. Under the principle of territorial governance, higher-level functional departments tend to incorporate an expanding range of responsibilities into performance assessment frameworks. This practice serves not only to promote policy implementation but also as a strategy of institutional risk avoidance. By embedding policy responsibilities within assessment systems, higher authorities transfer implementation pressure downward while simultaneously creating documentary evidence that responsibilities have been properly assigned, thereby reducing their own exposure to accountability should policy failures occur [17]. During implementation, this mechanism manifests itself in successive policy intensification across administrative levels. Performance indicators established at the provincial level are supplemented with additional local requirements during municipal implementation, further refined at the county level, and finally accompanied by additional locally designed assessment tasks when transmitted to township governments. Consequently, the volume of assessment requirements ultimately confronting grassroots governments frequently exceeds that originally established by higher authorities [14].

The widespread use of one-vote veto mechanisms further compels grassroots governments to allocate disproportionate administrative resources to high-priority assessment items, even when these priorities do not correspond to the most pressing governance needs of the local community [15]. At the same time, the expanding scope of accountability pressures encourages grassroots officials to engage in excessive documentation, selective reporting of favorable outcomes, and the concealment of potential problems. Their behavioral logic consequently shifts from pursuing substantive policy performance to minimizing personal and organizational accountability risks [5, 18]. Ironically, burden reduction policies themselves may become an additional source of administrative burden during implementation. Higher-level governments frequently require grassroots authorities to conduct self-assessments and submit reports on the implementation of burden reduction measures, while some localities have introduced third-party evaluations to assess policy effectiveness. To demonstrate compliance with burden reduction initiatives, grassroots governments must therefore prepare yet another set of documentary materials, transforming burden reduction itself into a new round of inspection preparation. As long as performance assessment remains the principal instrument through which higher authorities supervise lower-level governments, efforts to reduce burdens through additional

assessment mechanisms inevitably face the risk that the very policy instrument intended to alleviate burdens instead reproduces them [1, 19].

4.3. Documentation-oriented governance under information asymmetry

The third mechanism originates from information asymmetry between higher- and lower-level governments. Higher-level authorities face inherent informational constraints in accurately assessing the actual performance of grassroots governments, as they cannot continuously observe the implementation of every administrative task. Consequently, designers of performance assessment systems tend to rely on indicators that are quantifiable, traceable, and comparable across jurisdictions, such as the number of policy documents issued, the frequency of meetings, inspection coverage rates, and the completeness of administrative records. Although these indicators possess a degree of formal objectivity, they often fail to capture the actual quality of governance or the public's lived experience of policy outcomes [20].

Once documentation-based indicators become embedded within performance assessment systems and generate competitive pressures among government departments, documentary evidence itself gradually replaces substantive performance as the primary target of grassroots administrative efforts. As a result, grassroots governments increasingly devote their attention not to improving the quality of governance, but to producing more comprehensive and polished documentation. Higher-level functional departments are not unaware of this tendency. However, given the absence of more reliable means of evaluating grassroots performance without documentary evidence, documentation-oriented management continues to be reinforced institutionally [6]. Both the 2018 and the 2024 central policy documents on grassroots burden reduction explicitly stipulate that administrative performance should not be judged simply by the volume of documentary records produced and that grassroots governments should not be required to submit excessive forms and reports. The repeated emphasis on these principles indicates that documentation-oriented governance remains a persistent and deeply rooted problem. Under inspection systems that rely primarily on documentary materials, grassroots governments often complete assessment requirements through tacit coordination and strategic adaptation between higher and lower administrative levels. Consequently, formalistic practices are continuously reproduced as a predictable outcome of institutional incentives rather than isolated instances of bureaucratic misconduct [4, 7].

4.4. The interactive reinforcement of the three mechanisms

The three mechanisms described above do not operate independently; rather, they are mutually embedded and reinforce one another. The expansion of assessment tasks by vertically organized functional departments, together with the cascading intensification of responsibilities across administrative levels, continuously broadens the scope of performance assessment. At the same time, documentation-oriented governance substantially increases the actual administrative costs associated with meeting these assessment requirements. Together, these mechanisms constitute a self-reinforcing cycle of burden reproduction. To strengthen policy implementation, higher-level governments introduce additional assessment requirements. These expanded assessments intensify the accumulation of tasks borne by grassroots governments. In order to demonstrate compliance, grassroots governments invest increasing amounts of time and resources in producing documentary evidence. The growing reliance on such documentation, in turn, further reinforces higher-level governments' path dependence on documentation-based performance assessment.

Within this institutional cycle, a structural misalignment emerges between the objectives of burden reduction policies and the policy instruments employed to achieve them. While burden reduction initiatives seek to decrease the number of inspections and assessments, their implementation continues to rely on

performance assessment itself as the principal governance instrument. Without fundamentally reconfiguring the allocation of authority and responsibility within the *tiao–kuai* administrative system, merely reducing the frequency of assessments can produce only limited improvements. It may even create additional burdens by requiring grassroots governments to demonstrate the effectiveness of burden reduction measures through yet another round of assessments [1, 12]. Consequently, effective governance reforms must move beyond a narrow focus on reducing the quantity of assessments and instead address the structural conditions that continuously reproduce grassroots administrative burdens.

5. Governance pathways: a multidimensional approach from burden reduction to structural reform

5.1. From reducing the number of assessments to optimizing the assessment framework

Existing policy initiatives have primarily focused on controlling the frequency and scale of inspections and performance assessments. While such measures help alleviate the immediate pressures associated with inspection preparation, they are unlikely to eliminate the underlying drivers of administrative burdens unless the structural characteristics of the assessment system itself are fundamentally reformed. The key to optimizing the assessment framework lies in distinguishing between process-oriented and results-oriented evaluation. For tasks that are quantifiable, readily observable, and characterized by clearly defined implementation cycles, assessment should focus primarily on outcomes, thereby reducing reliance on documentation of implementation processes. By contrast, for policy areas requiring gradual implementation whose effects cannot be readily observed in the short term, annual assessments should be reduced in favor of medium- and long-term evaluations.

Moreover, a burden impact assessment should be incorporated into the design of performance assessment systems. Before any new assessment requirement is introduced, its potential administrative burden on grassroots governments should be systematically evaluated. The results of this assessment should serve as a key criterion in determining whether the proposed assessment is warranted. In this way, the administrative burden imposed on grassroots governments becomes an *ex ante* institutional constraint on assessment design rather than an issue addressed only through *ex post* remedial measures.

5.2. From fragmented departmental assessments to *tiao–kuai* coordination

Addressing the accumulation of multiple assessment requirements requires stronger coordination among vertical functional departments as well as enhanced information sharing between the *tiao* and *kuai* dimensions of the administrative system. From a technical perspective, an integrated information platform for grassroots governance and performance assessment should be established to enable single-point data submission with multi-agency sharing, thereby eliminating repetitive reporting across different functional departments. The *Regulations on Government Data Sharing*, which came into effect in 2025, formally establish both the obligation to share administrative data and the prohibition against repeatedly collecting information already available through government data-sharing mechanisms, providing a direct institutional foundation for this reform. Institutionally, the mechanism of joint interdepartmental inspection teams should be normalized. Territorial governments should take the lead in integrating assessment requirements from multiple vertical functional departments so that assessments can be conducted simultaneously within a unified framework and during the same inspection period.

This approach is consistent with the concept of collaborative institutional embedding, which advocates neither weakening vertical functional departments nor simply strengthening territorial governments, but rather integrating the professional expertise of the *tiao* system with the coordinating capacity of the *kuai* system [12]. The *tiao-kuai* administrative structure itself also provides opportunities for institutional innovation. Through long-term administrative practice, grassroots governments have already developed practical experience in coordinating multiple policy tasks across different functional lines, and these practices can be incorporated into the formal design of performance assessment institutions [13].

5.3. From territorial accountability to the alignment of authority and responsibility

The persistent accumulation of grassroots administrative burdens fundamentally stems from the structural imbalance between extensive responsibilities and limited authority. Addressing this problem requires a renewed alignment between administrative responsibilities and the resources available under the territorial governance system. Whenever implementation responsibilities are delegated to grassroots governments, corresponding evaluations should simultaneously be conducted regarding the personnel, staffing quotas, and financial resources necessary for effective implementation. The delegation of responsibilities should therefore be matched by a parallel transfer of administrative resources. The 2018 central policy document explicitly emphasized that responsibilities should not be delegated without providing the necessary implementation conditions; this principle now requires stronger institutional guarantees during policy execution [11, 15].

With respect to accountability mechanisms, greater institutional space should be created for fault tolerance and reasonable exemption from liability. Where implementation deviations are not the result of intentional misconduct, where officials have exercised due diligence, and where no serious adverse consequences have occurred, reasonable tolerance should be extended. Such institutional safeguards would reduce the incentive for grassroots officials to engage in excessive documentation, selective reporting of favorable information, and other defensive administrative behaviors driven by fear of accountability, thereby allowing performance assessments to reflect governance outcomes more accurately [5, 18].

5.4. From policy-based burden reduction to institutionalized burden reduction

The *Several Provisions on Rectifying Formalism to Reduce the Burden on Grassroots-Level Governments* issued in 2024 introduced a series of targeted measures, including streamlining official documents, strictly controlling meetings, regulating temporary personnel transfers, and reducing redundant government digital applications. The supplementary institutional arrangements introduced in 2025—including consistency assessments for policy documents, stricter regulation of one-vote veto mechanisms, and standardized responsibility agreements—indicate that grassroots burden reduction is gradually evolving from isolated policy initiatives into a more comprehensive institutional framework. The effectiveness of this transformation depends upon both the rigidity and the sustainability of policy implementation. A regular feedback mechanism should therefore be established to monitor the implementation of burden reduction policies, providing grassroots governments with institutional channels through which implementation problems can be reported and administrative grievances addressed. At the same time, such mechanisms should avoid reproducing the paradox of relying on additional performance assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of burden reduction initiatives.

In the long run, reducing grassroots administrative burdens requires a transition from campaign-style governance toward institutionalized governance. Only by embedding the principle of burden reduction into the routine operating rules of the administrative system—making it the default norm of government operation

rather than a temporary objective of periodic political campaigns—can the institutional cycle of burden reproduction be fundamentally interrupted [1, 19].

6. Conclusion

The persistent difficulty of reducing grassroots administrative burdens does not primarily stem from a lack of policy initiatives or inadequate implementation by frontline officials. Rather, it reflects the existence of a self-reinforcing system of burden reproduction jointly sustained by the allocation of authority and responsibility within the *tiao–kuai* administrative system and by the institutional design of inspection, supervision, and performance assessment. Focusing on inspection, supervision, and performance assessment, this study identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which grassroots administrative burdens are continuously reproduced: task accumulation resulting from the fragmentation of vertical functional authority, cascading policy intensification arising from the imbalance between authority and responsibility, and the expansion of documentation-oriented governance driven by information asymmetry. Together, these mechanisms form the structural foundation of the paradox in which higher-level governments pursue burden reduction while grassroots governments continue to experience increasing administrative pressures. On this basis, the paper proposes four governance pathways: optimizing the performance assessment framework, strengthening coordination between the *tiao* and *kuai* dimensions of government, achieving a better alignment between authority and responsibility, and institutionalizing burden reduction.

The analysis presented in this study is primarily grounded in a structural perspective centered on *tiao–kuai* relations. Consequently, it pays relatively limited attention to the behavioral strategies adopted by individual grassroots officials and to regional variations in administrative practice. Future research should therefore examine how the effectiveness of burden reduction policies differs across grassroots governments operating under varying levels of socioeconomic development and administrative capacity. When the professional dominance of vertically organized functional departments, the territorial responsibility borne by local governments, and the steering function of performance assessment together constitute the institutional environment in which administrative burdens are generated, meaningful burden reduction inevitably requires fundamental adjustments to the operation of the administrative system itself. Accordingly, reducing the burden on grassroots governments is not merely a technical issue of policy implementation; it represents a fundamental institutional challenge concerning the allocation of authority, the distribution of responsibility, and the design of supervisory mechanisms within the broader process of modernizing China's system of state governance.

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