

## Article

# Crisis-Assisted Policy Advocacy in Water Environment Governance: The Policy Game Mechanism of Grassroots Organizations

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**Abstract:** In grassroots water environment governance, political–community dialog is an unavoidable issue. Traditional policy analysis tools emphasize top-down stages and sequences, often ignoring the essential role of social factors (organizations, resources, or individuals)—outside the policy subsystem—in policy advocacy. The Advocacy Alliance Framework (ACF) provides a perspective on the role of social factors in policy changes and the interaction mechanism driving the relevant stages and alliances. In this study, we re-examine the key elements of the ACF and extract the grassroots logic of policy advocacy by discussing how actors act from policy divergence to policy learning, constructing an action framework to explain grassroots social policy advocacy in China. We find that policy advocacy depends on the joint influence of multiple elements such as the alliance members, alliance belief system and alliance resources. Therefore, social forces can better intervene in the policy agenda and achieve effective political–community dialog by identifying the relevant elements.

**Keywords:** policy advocacy; water environment governance; grassroots organization; crisis boost; advocacy coalition framework



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## 1. Research Background and Questions

In grassroots water environment governance, the policy advocacy function of grassroots organizations has gradually become an important manifestation of policy transmission, citizen participation in social governance, and positive political–society interaction. In terms of the governance of some social public issues (especially in the field of environmental protection), due to the continuous deepening and strengthening of the participation of social organizations (NGOs), the game relationship of public policies has demonstrated new vitality. The role of localized grassroots organizations in “advocacy” in political–society interaction and coordinated governance has become increasingly prominent, and their policy advocacy has effectively promoted “policy-oriented learning” (the modification of policy beliefs or implementation methods) [1], paving an effective path for social forces to intervene in a policy agenda. In G City, the concept of “opening the door to water environment treatment” clearly indicates that a series of novel water environment treatment actions must be fully integrated with public participation to demonstrate that “1 + 1 > 2”. Concerning water management in G City, many local grassroots organizations have played an important role in public participation and even in fostering the public’s realization of its collective value appeal. Among these grassroots organizations, many have been active on the frontline of environmental protection and water management for numerous years.

These organizations have formed an increasingly benign, normalized, and cooperative policy advocacy mechanism during their interactions among political and social organizations over the long term that is of considerable research value.

In December 2016, the central government of China issued the “Opinions on the Comprehensive Implementation of the River Chief System”, fully implementing the “River Chief System”. In March 2017, the government of G City held a conference on the comprehensive implementation of the River Chief System, and the battle for “clear water, a green shore and beautiful scenery” officially launched. The first step entails establishing a four-level system of city, district, town, street, and village and a four-level River Chief System. The second step is introducing a series of supporting policies and systems to drive the implementation of the River Chief System and improve the ability of river chiefs and management units at all levels to perform their duties. The third is using technical means to mine the value of information data.

In this study, we conduct a case study of water environment governance in G City to answer the following research questions: What are the policy advocacy motivations of local grassroots organizations in the field of environmental protection and water management? How can one promote policy advocacy actions through crises? What are the key mechanisms for promoting success? Therefore, the policy innovation and governance actions of the “River Chief System” in water environment governance in G city are selected as the case data for this research. Officially registered citizen voluntary groups called grassroots organizations are constantly emerging in the prevention and control of river pollution, and their policy advocacy capabilities are also constantly being highlighted. We explored the action logic of various actors in the interactive advocacy process, and then summarized a mechanism for grassroots organizations to implement advocacy in the field of environmental governance policy innovation. In addition, the achievements of China’s policy advocacy practice and governance innovation can be used as examples to better develop and improve the connotation of the advocacy alliance framework, and provide reference for subsequent behavior and research.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Policy advocacy is widely considered a decisive feature of social organizations [2–4]. In Western research on organizational advocacy, some scholars have narrowly summarized advocacy as “supporting or opposing a certain policy, bill, and behavior in a way that affects voting” [5]. Some scholars broadly define policy advocacy as “an attempt to directly or indirectly affect public policy” [6]. While studies on the relationship between the government and society in China were initiated in the first years of the 21st century, the discussion on the relationship between the state and society began in the 1980s. Research on policy advocacy has promoted the understanding of policy learning and games among academics, especially in the field of policy analysis.

### 2.1. Literature Review

NGOs play the role of “regulator” to absorb and buffer social conflicts and are an important channel for resolving social conflicts generated in public policy processes [7,8]. However, state corporatist theorists believe that authoritarian states often use social organizations as a tool for governance and social control [9]. In other words, social organizations can serve as “bridges and bonds” in interactions between state and society, but the government may selectively respond to the needs of some privileged social organizations and use resource dependence as a breakthrough to influence the actions of all relevant social organizations. In fact, social organizations can become embedded in the interactions between government and society through their own bridging role; thus, they develop and strengthen themselves using national resources and social needs. In terms of the specific path of advocacy, previous studies have suggested that NGOs influence the policy process by “proposing policy plans, participating in policy implementation, monitoring the policy process and propaganda activities, forming public opinion and providing public

education" [7]. The policy advocacy strategies of social organizations can be classified into two categories: direct advocacy or indirect advocacy. Direct advocacy strategies are further divided into information strategies, representative strategies, judicial strategies, lag strategies, and cooperation strategies. Indirect advocacy strategies include alliance strategies, media strategies, embarrassment strategies, protest strategies, and daily strategies [10–12]. Although social organizations' policy advocacy plays an important role, such participation by social organizations in China still has problems, e.g., low participation rate, nonpoliticization of participation content, and noninstitutionalization of channels. As nongovernmental participating forces, it is difficult for NGOs to foster effective interaction with the decision-making mechanism within the government's system, seriously hindering the agency of their role [13–15]. Some studies have demonstrated the negative impact of government funding, suggesting that social organizations do not restrict or refute government policies due to resource dependence. Other studies suggest that the requirements of formalization and specialization prompt social organizations to focus on internal operations and organizational maintenance, redirecting their attention from external policy dynamics and policy effects.

Western NGO studies generally suggest that policy advocacy and public service are two important functions of organizations [6,16]. Some studies have shown that the strength of political relevance impacts policy advocacy among grassroots environmental NGOs in China [14,17,18]. However, this finding is based on the perspective of resource dependence and organizational legitimacy. Regarding the development status of environmental NGOs in terms of policy advocacy, some scholars suggest that in the development of environmental NGOs, their activities have gradually expanded; that is, they have begun to address deep-seated issues and influences. Such forces have also expanded [19,20]. For example, the shelving of the Nu jiang River's hydropower development is considered a milestone in China's environmental NGOs' influence on public decision making [18]. The activities of environmental NGOs have shifted from environmental education to policy advocacy and interest expression, networked coordination and collaboration, and more active involvement in the policy process.

Overall, policy advocacy is widely considered one of the main functional characteristics of NGOs, whereby their policy advocacy practices and experiences merit in-depth exploration and study. Western studies have shown that it is insufficient to evaluate only the ability and influence of local grassroots organizations to promote policies at the national level. Indeed, through effective policy advocacy strategies, local grassroots organizations can promote the introduction and transformation of local policies [21]. Due to the development of social and economic conditions and changes in the applications of technology, the strategies of policy advocacy have also become increasingly diverse. Via the role of a policy broker and the Advocacy Coalition Framework, policy brokers can use brokering strategies to change policy beliefs, resulting in policy learning and change. The Advocacy Coalition Framework and a narrative analysis reveal how common misconceptions can hinder revitalization efforts [22,23]. Natural Disaster Insurance Review (NDIR) findings indicated that a well-resourced and powerful coalition of insurers was the dominant advocacy coalition in the NDIR and that consumers and their at-risk communities were represented by a relatively under-resourced coalition. Insurance alliances often dominate disaster investigations and can overturn their findings [24]. Moreover, some scholars have verified "the notion that major policy change will not occur as long as the advocacy coalition that instated the policy status quo remains 'in power' in a jurisdiction" [25]. While verifying the impact of political opportunities and the resources of organizations on policy advocacy, it was found that the level of government support, the political connections, and the income of an organization have a positive effect on policy advocacy, but the number of staff, location, and the level of registration have no significant effect [26].

However, previous studies on policy advocacy have mainly focused on its role, strategy, dilemma and external factors. Hence, although such research has provided useful perspectives and empirical summaries, there are still certain limitations. First, empirical

studies on policy advocacy remain relatively scarce, while grassroots organization policy advocacy studies on water environmental governance are even rarer. Typically, such studies have primarily focused on the development of grassroots organizations, their level of political relevance, whether they are specialized, and the strength of resource dependence among them. Second, there is a lack of research on the relationship between the internal operating mechanism and internal factors of policy advocacy in grassroots organizations. Therefore, in this study, the core concepts and theoretical connotations of the ACF are introduced to summarize and analyze the elements of policy advocacy and the interactions between them, which directly affect the internal mechanism of policy advocacy, strategic choice and advocacy effectiveness.

## 2.2. Theoretical Tools and Applications: From Stage Analysis to the ACF

The stage analysis model is a theoretical tool that has been widely used in policy process analysis. This model was created by Lasswell et al., who divided the policy process into different stages based on a range of models, from the traditional rational model to the bounded rational model. Ranging from notions of gradualism to discontinuity–equilibrium, there are also various relevant theories, such as institutional theory, game theory, or group theory. However, the traditional stage model ignores many policy processes and their influencing factors, which it can neither cover nor explain. On the one hand, the stage analysis model fixes the policy process in a certain stage, ignoring the causal relationships in the operation of a policy system and often neglecting how the development of the policy process moves from one stage to the next (the change and the mechanism). On the other hand, the stage analysis model entails layer-by-layer progress and step-by-step evolution according to the order of the stages, which contradicts the realities of dynamic changes and susceptibilities to interference. In addition, its long-term phase analysis focuses on scanning the internal “blocks” of a government, rendering it difficult to interpret the influence of external variables on the policy process. Lindblom thus first proposed taking into account the “changing environment”. However, it was not until the “multistream model” of Kingden that the changes (factors) outside a policy subsystem, such as “policy concept” and “window of opportunity”, could be truly realized.

Based on criticism of the policy stage analysis model, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (2011) have studied and determined many useful factors of analysis tools including “causality”, “multiple flow model”, “selection theory”, “group theory” and “pluralism”. Accordingly, they have proposed a more comprehensive theoretical analysis tool, the advocacy coalition framework [1].

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (2011) argue that in the past, analytical models paid too much attention to the game of interests and policy changes within a policy subsystem (right side) while ignoring the important impact of external variables (left side) on the policy process and changes. A narrow policy subsystem is a black box that can compromise interests and is often not a key node that promotes the transformation of a policy belief system. The theoretical framework of advocating alliances posits that the core force of policy change should come from variables outside the policy subsystem. These external variables are mainly the impact of a combination of variables in external events: socioeconomic conditions, changes in important interest alliances, impacts of other policies, changes in public perceptions, and other social alliance forces. Therefore, the core elements of the conceptual advocacy coalition framework include a belief system, policy subsystem, external factors, advocacy alliance, and policy-oriented learning. Its core focuses are as follows: (1) a belief system and policy-oriented learning [1]; (2) a relationship between the policy subsystem and external variables; and (3) individuals who are categorized in different policy advocacy alliances, which are used to establish belief classifications. The core content of this study based on the ACF is shown as in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Conceptual implications of the ACF.

Concept Category	ACF	Core Content of This Study
External factors	External factors are highly respected and emphasized components in the policy advocacy coalition framework that must be considered—one of the most valuable creations and breakthroughs of the ACF.	Local grassroots organizations are the core subjects of policy advocacy, and thus alliances such as “social organizations, the public, experts and scholars, and the news media” with the same beliefs become the objects of external alliance expansion—one of the key changes in this study.
Policy learning	Policy-oriented learning in the ACF is essentially the mutual learning and revision of an alliance’s belief system; in policy advocacy, this is actually an interaction that pervades the entire process.	Policy learning is the interaction and game between the elements of an alliance’s policy advocacy: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The elements of the alliance members;</li> <li>2. The elements of their belief system (core beliefs and secondary beliefs);</li> <li>3. Other resource elements.</li> </ol>
Policy subsystem alliance	With the development of the ACF, policy subsystem alliances (broadly speaking) have been expanded; hence, the external subsystems of a policy should be included, e.g., social organizations with beliefs, the public, experts and scholars, the news media, and street bureaucrats.	In this study, external forces have been listed as a separate category. Therefore, a policy subsystem adopts the narrow concept in the ACF diagram, mainly defined as a government-led water environment treatment policy alliance rather than a policy network that includes all actors.

### 3. Research Methods and Case Selection

We adopted the “case study method” for an in-depth study of how local grassroots organizations carry out policy advocacy. Our reason for choosing this research method is that we sought to conduct a long-term and in-depth observation via recordings, interviews, and field studies. In combination with appropriate theoretical analysis tools or elements, the operating mechanism and evolution logic of our case study were analyzed and explained. According to Robert K. Yin, the case study method provides an in-depth description of social phenomena (stories) and is an effective way to deeply explore the mechanism or logic of a research problem.

The plan and idea of this study follows the 2017 implementation of the “River Chief System”, a large-scale water environment governance policy in China. During 2017–2020, we were rooted in the research field of water environment treatment in G City. During this study period, we visited and investigated many joint units in the river governor’s office (the environmental protection department, water department, agricultural department, urban management department, etc.). We also participated in numerous meetings related to water environment governance, discussions on water governance by river leaders at the grassroots level, and discussions among nongovernmental river leaders and environmental protection social organizations. A large amount of first-hand data was collected in field investigations and interviews, comprising policy interpretations, grounded observations, and personal experiences and participation. Thus, numerous relevant research topics on water environment treatment policy implementation, grassroots practice, and social organization were determined and much first-hand data from field investigations and interviews were collected, making the design of this study a reality. A possibility can also be the original intention and reason for the case selection and in-depth study. In this study, a researcher personally led a team in the target area’s community service center, social worker station, and permanent area of its river inspection team, evaluating many historical evolutions, policies, relevant actions, and social reports on the design of water environment governance. In this study, our case study was the policy advocacy of the “Le Xing Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team” in the “Red River Incident”, which was described in group discussions, focus group interviews, and in-depth individual interviews. This organization is active in grassroots environmental protection and water management, while the subsys-

tems of its policy advocacy concern only water environment management. Second, the “political relevance” of water management is relatively low, which has driven our research on organizational relationships. Variables such as power and resource “dependence” can be controlled to preserve the ability and characteristics of grassroots organizations. Third, our focus was on a nonprofessional environmental protection social organization, which has greater action tension and more case characteristics. Therefore, the fundamental goal of this study was to comprehensively collect and distinguish advocacy actions by means of interviews, participatory observation, and literature comparison, to analyze the game mechanism of different alliances, and to explain how each relevant party promotes policy learning during crisis events.

#### **4. Policy Advocacy Mechanism during a Crisis: Factor Game and Policy Learning**

##### *4.1. The Origin of Advocacy: The Endogenous Need to Improve the Living Environment*

“Si Ma Chong” is an ancient, important urban river in G City. It is located on Rainbow Street, LW District, G City. It covers an area of 1.06 square kilometers and travels through 11 communities, with more than 50,000 residents on both sides of the strait. With a total length of 6.75 km, it carries the rich history and culture of G City. Its water quality and the surrounding environment have always attracted the attention of neighborhoods. In the past, Si Ma Chong water was clear, and it was still drinkable in the 1960s. In the 1970s, there were still fish and shrimp in the river. However, with the rapid development of urbanization and industrialization, the population of residents along its shores increased rapidly. Large and small factories and workshops developed along its banks, discharging a large amount of industrial wastewater, seriously polluting the Si Ma Chong. “Black and smelly rivers” have “poor class V” water quality, which directly affects the normal life of residents in the Yanyong community. When the residents in Yanyong, who have been subject to this black and odorous water, dared to open their windows, they were tortured by the odor and mosquitoes, and they began to report such water quality and environmental problems through the government hotline. However, the situation was not effectively alleviated. Many residents in the community who were enthusiastic about their surrounding environment gradually became aware of the problems highlighted by Si Ma Chong’s quality and that they had little power via their individual rights protections and complaint systems. Thus, very eager to contribute their own strength to the community, they jointly formed a volunteer team to patrol the river.

In September 2012, the Rainbow Street Family Comprehensive Service Center in the basin (“Family Comprehensive Service Center”) was established, whereby the emergence of community social workers offered some opportunities for solving the problem. Through on-site investigations, the social workers from the comprehensive service center learned of the residents’ desire and need to improve their flooding problems and protect the community environment through spontaneous actions. Therefore, they started to plan the integration of these community forces, hoping to use community social organizations to enable them. Nurturing and promoting the environmental improvement of Si Ma Chong, in early 2013, social worker A of Rainbow Street participated in a “Leshui Xing in City G” activity planned by the professional social organization “New Life and Environmental Protection Promotion Association” (GEP), which had been deeply inspired. Under this impetus, the volunteers spontaneously formed the grassroots organization “Le Xing Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team”, which was formally established. During the team’s growth, social worker A and the team members became committed to building partnerships and a “three-community linkage” model among social workers, professional social organizations, and grassroots organizations; thus, the organization’s beliefs were consolidated and its ability to act greatly improved. These social workers and professional social organizations played a vital role in the cultivation and growth of the Le Xing Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team. In September 2013, social worker A resigned, and the enthusiastic resident “Uncle MR” took over the team’s responsibilities. The services became linked to river patrol and

flood protection activities to innovate the team's operational mode, improve its social influence, and achieve more effective water environment treatment advocacy goals.

#### 4.2. Crisis Boost: The "Red River Incident" and "Should Not Make" Phone Calls

The strong policy advocacy aspiration of the "Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team" transformed its advocacy behavior from passively attracting "attention" to "proactively" reporting and defending rights. On 16 May 2015, after heavy rain in G city, the waters of the Si Ma Chong suddenly turned red. At that time, the enterprise secretly discharged sewage and then immediately rushed to the edges of the river to have members of the Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team patrol them. After several rounds of communication, the government's water management unit sent personnel from the environmental protection bureau within the jurisdiction. However, the environmental protection bureau personnel in charge of the site survey briefly evaluated the situation and simply judged it to be muddy water; they warned Dai not to make a fuss: "This call should not be made into a situation".

Uncle MR and Dai, who were in charge of the "Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team", were very dissatisfied with the arbitrariness of the environmental protection personnel and bureaucratic shirking of responsibilities. On May 17th, the water conservation team commissioned Dai to write an article discussing their collected photos and water. The popularity of the article, "Si Ma Chong turns into a red river, do you say I 'should fight'?", quickly exploded via its transmission in WeChat Moments, attracting the attention of various major media. The Southern Metropolis Daily published this event, placing it on the headline of GA04 on 19 May 2015 (Source: [http://epaper.oeeee.com/epaper/G/html/2015-05/19/content\\_3421733.htm?div=0](http://epaper.oeeee.com/epaper/G/html/2015-05/19/content_3421733.htm?div=0) (accessed on 11 November, 2022)). "Should not make phone calls" was then seen in other major newspapers, attracting the attention of the deputy head of the district, who immediately called an emergency meeting to "improve the River Chief System and encourage the public to call directly to receive feedback" (Source: <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-329-538226-1.shtml> (accessed on 11 November, 2022)) This meeting emphasized that attention should be given to any call from the public and that the content of each complaint and contact information of the complainant should be recorded in detail. The Le Xing Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team once again became a focus due to the "Red River Incident". In this case, the overwhelming media coverage, focused on who "should not be called", pushed a government-led water environment treatment alliance to the forefront. The Le Xing Si Ma Chong team went from a small-scale community grassroots organization to a famous advocacy group, forcing the government-led water environment treatment coalition to make policy concessions and behavioral amendments, entailing a wide range of social impacts on water environment management in G City.

Currently, the "Le Xing Si Ma Chong" Water Conservation Team has 16 members (individual mobility changes, relatively stable), mainly retirees who reside around the river, including volunteers, nongovernmental river chiefs (after the above conflict, they became employed in the LW district), and other advocates in the Rainbow Subdistrict and Nanyuan Subdistrict Office—they receive no salary, no social security, and have no title (nonsystem liaison status). At present, the team has a relatively clear organizational structure, and its internal division of labor consists of two groups: the Si Ma Chong inspection group and the comprehensive service group. The main activities of the inspection team are to inspect the surface reach of Si Ma Chong every Wednesday, examine its water quality, monitor these records, interview the residents of Yanyong, publicize any water environment treatment, report any problems in a timely manner, and supervise the improvement effects. According to its statistics, the "Le Xing Si Ma Chong" team has been patrolling for 7 years. Meanwhile, it has participated in the joint patrol of more than a dozen other urban rivers, including the Che Bei Chong, Hai Zhu Chong, Wu Chong, Sha Bei Chong, Xin Jie, Li Chi Wan Chong, and Dong Hao Chong. These team members have provided more than 8000 h of service, and their total inspection distance has reached nearly 6000 km. More than 20 environmental protection activities have been organized. More than 400 questionnaires have been collected from residents. The "Si Ma Chong Pollution Source Distribution Map"

and other examples of water environment treatment information have been submitted to the functional departments for local advocacy, and more than 600 pieces of information have been shared with society via patrolling media (news media, Weibo, WeChat, etc.). Sharing these experiences has led to and promoted public participation in water environment treatment. Hence, since an effective, interactive relationship has been established with the official River Chief System, private river chiefs and residents, this water environment control has entered the stage of benign advocacy (the specific data are quoted from the speech of a representative of the civilian river chief, “Uncle MR”, who is currently in charge of the Si Ma Chung River Protection Team, and the statistics of other team members).

4.3. The Emergence of Alliances and the Identification of Elements: Policy Learning and Game Preparation

Policy advocacy is not an easy task. In a policy system, grassroots coalitions and government-led coalitions have varying natural differences, e.g., in problem perception, situation analysis, and policy preference; however, the theoretical connotation of advocacy coalitions should be emphasized. This is the advocacy impact of an “external” grassroots alliance-style force or element on a powerful policy subsystem and the policy learning and changes that it may promote. Policy learning is a process that summarizes both an advocacy mechanism and logic, that is, the game involving various elements when grassroots organizations face government-led policy subsystems in water environment treatment advocacy. Therefore, based on the core meaning of the theoretical ACF, we conceptualized the elements of policy learning in policy advocacy and generated an analysis framework to explain policy advocacy actions and element games in this study (Figure 1).

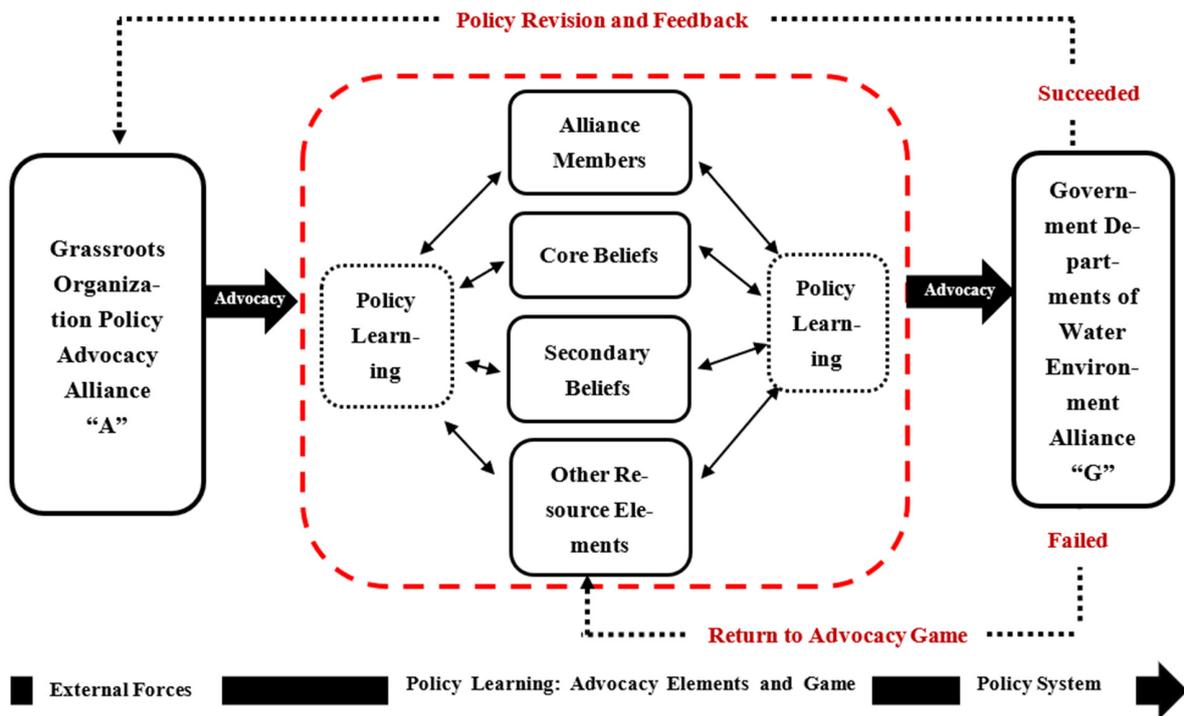


Figure 1. The framework of policy advocacy logic and factor game of grassroots organizations in this study. Therefore, we can clearly understand how grassroots organizations carry out policy advocacy in water environment governance. What are the factors that affect the evolution of the policy advocacy mechanism? According to the core concept and analysis framework, the factors that affect the game between different alliances can be conceptualized as in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Alliance elements in crisis events.

	External Force-Led Alliance	Government-Led Coalition
Alliance member elements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "Le Xing Si Ma Chong" Water Protection Team</li> <li>2. GEP professional environmental protection society organization</li> <li>3. Social worker station (Comprehensive Family Service Center)</li> <li>4. News media</li> <li>5. Residents near the river</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. District and subdistrict two-level river chiefs' offices and their counterparts (the river chiefs' office is a joint office composed of multiple departments such as environmental protection, water affairs, agriculture and forestry, housing construction, urban management, and water conservancy)</li> <li>2. Residents' committees and villagers' grassroots river chiefs</li> </ol>
Core beliefs of the policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fundamental goal: Restore the rivers and clear their shores to restore the ecological environment</li> <li>2. Organizational performance: Expand social impact and affect the direction of water governance</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy objectives: For Si Ma Chong, the removal of black water and odors—water restoration</li> <li>2. Expectation for political achievements: Balanced economy, environmental protection and social stability</li> </ol>
Secondary organizational beliefs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Power proposition: Open dialog, foster diverse participation, ensure multidimensional supervision</li> <li>2. Report acceptance: Overall planning and coordination that is efficient and convenient</li> <li>3. Governance mode: Proactive and consistent</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Power claim: Administrative authority, strong management and control, arbitrariness</li> <li>2. Report acceptance: Coordinating the relationships among the sections and procedures</li> <li>3. Governance: Passive personnel, slow progress in governance</li> </ol>
Other resource elements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Social conditions and public support</li> <li>2. Concern of experts/social media</li> <li>3. Information asymmetry</li> <li>4. Some social donation resources</li> <li>5. Social trust and social mobilization (informal communication) ability</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Statutory authority</li> <li>2. Professional environmental protection team</li> <li>3. Extensive, sufficient and complete information</li> <li>4. Abundant capital investment</li> <li>5. Large internal team</li> </ol>

Accordingly, this case shows that while the members of the grassroots organization "Le Xing Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team" have repeatedly advocated for water environment treatment, the effect of these efforts was not obvious. However, after a period of development and evolution, they gradually expanded their action and influence. Finally, due to the continuous expansion of the influence of a particular event through the media, this grassroots alliance was effectively socialized, and the game involving the various advocacy elements in this alliance evolved with emergent focal events. The mechanism of this game is thus to first promote contact and interaction between the two parties in the alliance; when the belief systems of these two parties conflict (whether in terms of a secondary or core belief), this kind of interaction is not possible. The policy advocacy mechanism may therefore entail conflict, evolving amid continuous divergence due to disparities in the information, technology, or financial resources available to both parties.

*4.4. Advocacy Mechanism: Policy Learning via a Factor Game*

A comparison of the above element tables clearly indicates that there are differences among the elements of the two parties advocating for the water environment treatment policy in the LW district of G city. On the one hand, due to the nature and characteristics of these two organizations, there is a vast inherent difference between the alliance members and the resources of the alliance. The government-led alliance has a professional team, formed from within the bureaucracy with public power, which occupies a large number of specialties. In contrast, the alliance led by Le Xing Si Ma Chong is composed of relatively loose, nonprofessional grassroots members and can be maintained only by volunteers and scattered social resources. On the other hand, the belief systems of these two parties also have certain discrepancies. In terms of their core beliefs, although their fundamental policy goals are water ecological management and restoration, they have organizational self-interest considerations in terms of their performance expectations. The party led by Ma Yong advocates for the formation of an open, participative, and monitorable governance structure and the improvement of governance performance monitoring and feedback mechanisms; the government-led water governance alliance seeks to continue the step-by-step and prevarication style of "block" segmentation. Such disparity is at once an important reason for and the fuse that sparks the evolution of advocacy behavior. Why is it feasible for this to promote policy advocacy?

#### 4.4.1. Alliance Scale Expansion and Member Action Enhancement

Since its establishment, the “Le Xing Si Ma Chong” Water Conservation Team has promoted an environmental protection initiative—“paying attention to the rivers around you and taking notes on the rivers”—along the rivers in its jurisdiction. However, as a nonprofit grassroots organization, its ability to act and link resources is very limited. How can it continuously and effectively advocate for water environment treatment policies? Given the increase in its organizational activities and the expansion of its scope, how to maintain this grassroots alliance that lacks people, money, and a firm basis has become an urgent problem. Regarding the Le Xing Si Ma Chong team, its ongoing and long-term symbolic patrols of the river have caused some team members to seek to leave the team. However, its repeated, seemingly ineffective patrolling actions have also attracted more social forces from outside the basin—new alliance members—to join the coalition. Thus, on the one hand, the cycle of patrolling and protecting the rivers has attracted like-minded people who are also plagued by the odors and mosquitoes surrounding the Si Ma Chong River:

“The residents who have lived here for nearly 40 years have the habit of taking pictures to record the changes in the rivers, witnessing the turbidness of Si Ma Chong from clear to filthy and the stench. My heart is not good, and my life is more troublesome. There are many nuisance residents along the river, and I hope they can also be driven to work together for water environment treatment.” (quoted from 20190731CHJZ Rainbow Street Family Comprehensive Discussion Record, described by the team member “Cai Yi”, an active representative of water control advocacy and currently the main force on the water protection team). As early as 2011, “Cai Yi” had complained or even petitioned to the relevant departments regarding the streets and districts in her personal name, but she was rejected. After discovering the influence of the water protection team, she resolutely joined it and became its backbone).

On the other hand, the increasing membership on the water conservation team and the deepening participation in environmental protection activities have attracted the attention and support of professional environmental protection organizations (the focal case involved the technical and resource support of professional environmental protection organizations, such as the “GEP”). Via the cultivation of professional teams, the water conservation team has obtained the operational ability and professional guidance to communicate with the local social worker station (home comprehensive), successfully advocating for the inclusion of river patrol and flood protection into its social workers’ service tasks and performance hours. Local social workers have become team members and jointly organized public welfare activities, injecting vitality into the water conservation team. In addition, through the mechanism of social media vocalization, the influence of the organization has expanded; thus, the organization’s actions and subsequent developments have also received additional support. As a result, a water environment treatment advocacy coalition that is mainly focused on the “Le Xing Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team” and united with professional environmental protection organizations, social work organizations, news media, and other social forces has emerged. Its core belief has also shifted from the original one “concerning records” to an active focus on “water environment treatment supervision and complaints”. This water environment treatment advocacy alliance, led by grassroots organizations, has therefore been fully realized; thus, it has been able to continuously propose actions to government water environment treatment departments.

“In 2013, the government almost did not receive some of our feedback. Then, we voiced them through residents’ complaints and some media. At that time, the number of complaints in Si Ma Chong was up to more than 100, and there were reports on Si Ma Chong almost every day. Such a high frequency is equivalent to exerting much pressure on the government. In 2014, the government took the initiative and directly contacted us to understand the cause of the complaints.” (according to 20190731CHJZ Rainbow Family Symposium Interview Data “MR Uncle” Introduction). Due to the surging number of complaints and their sensational media effect (the 2015 “Red River Incident”), the

government-led water environment treatment coalition was forced to pay attention to its water environment treatment advocacy and to respond with actual action corrections (policy learning) to alleviate social pressure.

#### 4.4.2. Alliance Resource Integration and Advocacy Improvement

Compared with the abundant resources owned by the government-led water environment treatment alliance, the available operational resources that the Le Xing Si Ma Chong Water Conservation Team controls are limited, not only in numbers but also in channels. However, the expanding size of the alliance and the improving action capacity of its members have injected new vitality into the water conservation team, providing greater resource support to the water environment treatment advocacy actions of its grassroots organizations.

The first of these is better resource support from social experts and water quality testing technology. With the help of the professional environmental protection organization GEP, the water conservation team is now linked to many professional resources in the field of environmental protection, providing a certain degree of specialized technical support for the operation of the water conservation team. This focus on resource integration, service docking and self-learning. According to the 20190731CHJZ Rainbow Family Comprehensive Symposium, the focal interview data of the group members show that their resources have been, on the one hand, self-study, and on the other hand, some training. Some of their learning resources are New Life's links, river patrol activities, water quality testing technology, river protection research, visits to water sources, etc., but most of them have to rely on self-study. On the other hand, there is also an organization called the "Association of Old Engineers", indicating that the organization's model for enhancing its action capacity has made the "Le Xing Si Ma Chong" water conservation team one of the most prominent grassroots organizations in the water management of G City:

"New Life (GEP) introduced us to its knowledge of water and invited a retired senior engineer from the Water Affairs Bureau to come over and explain the situation of the water body of Si Ma Chong to us—the source, flow area, structure, etc.—deepening our understanding of the river next to our residences. The water intake comparison and laboratory tests were taught to us by the people from New Life (GEP)." (according to 20190731CHJZ Rainbow Family Symposium Interview Data "MR Uncle" Introduction, regarding an organization called the "Association of Old Engineers", which is composed of some rather enthusiastic elderly engineers). One of the elderly engineers in urban construction, who we call "Feng Gong", came to us on his own initiative. He was very familiar with the urban construction of G City and was enthusiastic about public welfare. Thus, we followed him to learn and asked questions when we did not understand something. This represents the process of self-learning and ability improvement.

The second improvement is a stronger link to public welfare support from social work organizations:

"Although the social worker station (Chongqing Street Jiazhuang in the previous case) has been split up, our connection with the social worker station has never been broken. In fact, our team also survived with their help. In addition, our accident insurance was needed because almost all of our patrols are outdoor and waterside; most of the patrol are retirees, so there is little risk. For example, some approved clothing, publicity materials, and some team building activities are all supported by their families" (cited from 20190731CHJZ Symposium MR Uncle's Statement).

With the help of their link to GEP's resources, the "team has always been at zero cost, including water quality testing equipment and consumables, which are also supported by GEP". In fact, this kind of resource link has also connected the patrol and protection of the rivers to the number of hours of social work.

“Some of our team members are also volunteers at the social worker station. We recommend that they count their patrol hours as service hours in their time bank. This time bank can convert my current volunteer service time to the social worker station, free of charge, in the future. Service time . . . ” (quoted from a conversation between SMC researchers and backbone team member “Cai Yi” while participating in the river patrol activities of Le Xing Si Ma Chong in 20190731).

Third, the information dissemination ability of the media has promoted the maximization of the benefits of the focal advocacy actions. As mentioned above, in the case of Si Ma Chong, a key figure, “Aunt Cai”, continuously reported her problems through the media as early as 2011–2012. According to an in-depth interview with “Aunt Cai” at the 20190731CHJZ forum: “I have been on the Pearl River Channel, TVS4, and Guangdong News Channel. However, the relevant departments did not give a response; there was no response. So, I was very angry, and I felt that I must join the patrol team and find an organizational group to speak out.” Such uses of the voice of the organization and exposures by the media have influenced the policy subsystem, attracting the attention of government departments. Through its use of media platforms, the organization has rapidly expanded its influence. The “Red River Incident” truly detonated the conflict and game of beliefs, quickly communicating the beliefs of the organization through the power of the media, attracting the attention of the public, and thus expanding the alliance to the extent that the government-led water environment treatment alliance had no choice but to address it. Policy amendments were made, and leaders of various functional departments and other river chiefs were convened to summarize the specific problems in this operation process of the River Chief System and formulate detailed rules. In addition, after linking resources and expanding its alliance and influence, the water conservation team obtained many opportunities to serve the community in depth, participate in public welfare lectures on environmental protection in elementary and middle schools, and contact various groups, e.g., other social organizations, schools, and researchers on environmental issues. Relevant groups’ and individuals’ practical investigation activities have continuously enhanced their influence in the community, consolidating their sense of presence and centripetal force, greatly enhancing social trust, and improving the efficacy and publicity of social mobilization and advocacy.

#### 4.4.3. Belief System: Mutual Absorption and Embedding

As mentioned above, due to the natural differences between grassroots organization alliances and government-led alliances in terms of their organizational nature, function, cognition, information, and values, there are natural differences among any alliance’s belief systems. However, the relevant causes and consequences in our focal case are clear in the related research and interviews. It is obvious that the two groups are not in sharp contrast in terms of the alliance’s most fundamental core beliefs concerning water environment treatment policies.

##### (1) Mutual absorption of core policy beliefs

On the one hand, in terms of policy goals (since 2014, G City has established a pilot river length system at all levels; thus, it set the goal of water environment management earlier), both the grassroots organization-led coalition and the government-led coalition hope that the water quality of the Si Ma Chong can be improved. Based on this common goal, policy learning between the two can occur, policy advocacy can become effective, and the core belief can be realized. The key factor is reorganization. However, on the other hand, in terms of the organization’s performance expectation, the two sides have not violated the organization’s self-interest principle. That is, the relationship between environmental protection and social and economic development, people’s livelihood and even stability maintenance should be a balanced one:

“We have tried to use the suspension of transactions on the three subplatforms to force village cadres and village collectives to fulfill industrial pollution interception and management reform, and we have achieved some results, but we cannot always do this. This leads to dissatisfaction”. According to the interview record of 20180907L WQHZB, leader Z suggested, “This year’s task is to pick 7103 rivers in our region, with 53 black and smelly rivers that we have to govern one by one. I think the river length system has a long way to go.” Thus, the task of water control is a systematic project, which requires a little bit of time. Therefore, there is a certain performance difference between the two parties in terms of their organizational functions and interests. Through a comparison of their core beliefs, it is clear why the early reports and complaints of the grassroots combination in this case were ineffective: insufficient force distribution. In fact, via the continuous advocacy and practices of Le Xing Si Ma Chong, the government-led water environment treatment alliance gradually opened its water environment treatment feedback channel and then continually explained its policy objectives and action plans to grassroots organizations during their interactions; hence, these grassroots organizations also deepened their knowledge through policy learning. Understanding the other issues implicated in the field of water governance policy and their mutual absorption of goals and values have prevented these two groups’ core beliefs from developing irreconcilable differences.

## (2) Balancing and embedding secondary beliefs

Our description of the case has revealed that divergence in the alliance’s secondary beliefs was both the cause and fuse of the detonation of the alliance’s internal conflict. First, in terms of power proposition, the grassroots alliance required more information on water environment treatment for effective dialog and advocated for the necessity of diversified participation and multidimensional supervision. However, the salient official had the final say. Second, in terms of supervision and reporting, the grassroots organization alliance was looking for a more convenient and efficient feedback method. However, this was counterproductive. Any “synergy under the River Chief System” was still constrained by this “block” relationship. Third, in terms of behavior, the grassroots organizations advocating for better water governance for many years hoped to observe acceptance behavior that was proactive, with a beginning and end. However, in reality, such behaviors were passive; they were even admonished with “should not make phone calls”. The long-term divergence in minor beliefs thus rendered the “Red River Incident” a fuse, leading the grassroots organizations to adopt a more radical advocacy model.

The policy advocacy action of “media exposure” was the method chosen due to the divergence in the beliefs of the grassroots coalition and the government-led water environment treatment coalition. As a “no fight but no acquaintance” group, the water environment treatment alliance led by the “Le Xing Si Ma Chong” water conservation grassroots organization thus successfully persuaded the government-led coalition to perform policy learning (belief revision) through its progressive advocacy strategy and bold resistance. Due to external social events, the government’s water management departments became aware of the coordination barriers within the relevant subsystems, the salient allocation of powers and responsibilities, and the obvious power of public participation. This is not only a policy-oriented learning concept in the framework of advocacy alliances but also a “policy restructuring” due to the “common understanding” of both parties. “The “Red River Incident” therefore played a critical role in opening the originally closed black box of water environment treatment policy. The relevant grassroots agents, who were later absorbed by the system and named “civil river chiefs”, effectively intervened in the water environment treatment policy agenda through their faith and advocacy, and the concessions of the official alliance further promoted the formation of “common understanding”, creating a benign situation. Hence, both a “policy–community” inter-embedded model and an effective policy advocacy system were established.

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

It can be known from the research on the traditional water environment treatment policy system that this is indeed a “variable combination from external events” that cannot be ignored (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 2011). First, the grassroots organizations believe that although they are essentially consistent in their water environment treatment policy views, their actual expected governance goals are different: the government views water environment treatment as a long-term project, but the residents by the river cannot. There is an urgent hope for change after enduring the river’s foul odor and mosquito nuisance over time. Second, regarding the advocacy action of the grassroots organizations, the escalation of the disagreement has increased the conflicts over their beliefs. On the other hand, although the government-led coalition can quell any further escalation of this incident, the “prevarication” and “reprimand” attitudes among environmental protection personnel in this case ultimately stimulated the escalation of the situation. Here, the changes in public perceptions promoted by media events and the explosive “political–community” dialog intensified the role of external events. When an alliance element enters the game, this will greatly alter the arrangement of the pros and cons of the elements in policy advocacy. Through this kind of policy game and learning, a policy alliance is driven to continue to evolve and mature.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that in this policy field with relatively prominent publicity, even when it is expressed by the most fiercely protesting advocate, the nature of an action goal is to obviously engender “publicity” rather than simply gain “publicity”. These are self-interested motives. Continual follow-up and research have revealed that even if there are natural differences in an organizational belief system, amid public events, maintaining the same belief in an ultimate goal is a powerful way to resolve differences in an alliance. However, during policy implementation, information asymmetry among different alliances and a lack of mutual trust across roles are notable and important causes of the deepening divergence of beliefs. Therefore, an inferior advocacy coalition is bound to shift its action strategy, seeking support from a wider range of coalition members. Once policy learning occurs across alliance members, mutual trust, communication and cooperation will no longer be difficult.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that in the field of public policy on water environment governance, some grassroots organizations (composed of voluntary citizens) that are not officially registered are increasingly enthusiastic about participating in policy advocacy. Their gaming skills and mobility are also constantly improving. In the past, the ACF framework was mostly used to focus on the application of large-scale social organization policy advocacy. However, this study finds that participation in public policy advocacy no longer requires a large pool of resources. We only need to use some key elements such as membership, belief, trust, etc., and the ability to integrate different actors’ alliances and their resources. The grassroots organizations mentioned here were spontaneously formed by volunteers or residents along the river, and are not employed by any organization or individual. At the grassroots level in China, some professional social organizations or public welfare groups are engaged in some organization incubation activities, helping some voluntary groups to establish, maintain and provide necessary skills training for free. Even a small grassroots group like the one shown in this study can promote policy learning and change, and this small but refined policy advocacy model enables public governance crisis events to be transformed into a beneficial booster for policy reform. Therefore, this research can supplement this with different research objects and application scenarios, and this kind of spontaneous and intelligent policy advocacy game story is exactly what this research hopes to present.

This research has also revealed that the ACF effectively emphasizes the impact of external variables on policy amendments. By combining the core connotations of the ACF, we are able to identify the focal social alliance focusing on water environment governance led by local grassroots organizations as Alliance A of policy advocacy and the various sectoral alliances of the focal internal system of the government leading its water environment

governance policies as Alliance G. These include some professional social organizations, social media platforms, coastal residents and social events, i.e., potential alliance forces in the game. Thus, we develop the ACF's relationship structure as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** ACF for crisis-driven water environment governance.

The essence of policy advocacy is an interactive game of different alliance forces—a platform and mechanism for the mutual persuasion of beliefs and mutual game of resources. In this study, policy advocacy comprising local grassroots organizations (Alliance A) and a government-led water control alliance (Alliance G) was a mutual learning process guided by water environment governance policies. In the process, the potential Alliance B, as a swing force in the policy game and learning process, was also affected by the “beliefs” of different alliances and became the object of the expansion and absorption (cooperation) of other alliances to strengthen an alliance, spawn a new advocacy alliance, or drive involvement in the policy agenda. In fact, based on long-term observation, we have found that since the policy subsystem (Alliance G) in the field of water environment governance involves multiple relatively independent government departments, its closed-loop sectoral and policy barriers provide it with a certain degree of alliance proximity; thus, it is difficult to accept intervention by external forces into the system. Following the introduction of the policy innovations of the “River Chief System” and other open-door water control policies, administrative pressures forced all departments to shift their attention to the unified core belief of water control. This “policy stream” has thus also provided the opportunity for grassroots organizations to advocate for environmental protection and water control. However, potential Alliance B has strong strength and social element attributes among its members; thus, it is often easier for them to form a relationship of mutual trust and cooperation with grassroots organizations (Alliance A) via policy interaction. Therefore, in terms of relationship structure, Alliance A and the potential Alliance B are more frequently and closely related (solid line), while Alliance G and Alliance B are only selectively connected (dotted line).

In general, grassroots organizations in this study have changed from simple struggles to strategically choosing negotiations and games in crisis events. This policy advocacy model is exactly how the ACF framework of Sabatier et al. can inspire us, and it has been spread in G city. Small organizations can make a big difference, and the ACF, as a policy advocacy handbook, can continue to explore and apply in the future. In future follow-up research, the team will continue to observe and explore the possibility and practice of moving from an advocacy alliance to a policy community.

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