



Reflections on conducting evaluations for rural development interventions in China



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ABSTRACT

An appropriate evaluation methodology is critical in collecting valid data in complex development intervention contexts. This paper explores this issue by putting forward an appropriate evaluation methodology for development interventions in rural China. It draws on the experience of an impact evaluation of a sustainable agricultural biodiversity management project conducted in Hainan, China in 2010. The authors propose that evaluation be culturally responsive and the evaluation design be rooted in the particular cultural context where an evaluation is conducted. The appropriate use of the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approach and methods helps generate data that are relevant and meaningful for evaluation purposes in rural China.

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1. Introduction

Evaluators conduct evaluations in many situations and places in the world, often with standard approaches and instruments. Appropriate methods should be used whenever we conduct an evaluation so data generated will be relevant and meaningful to the local context. This is true everywhere, but may be particularly true when we conduct evaluations in challenging contexts, in cultures different from our own. We work in China. It is a country with more than 4000 years of history, and 1.3 billion people with diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. For the last three decades, with the reform and opening-up policy, China has been developing rapidly, in both urban and rural areas. The Chinese government has been making sustained efforts to reduce poverty and preserve the ecological balance of the environment by formulating relevant policies and implementing appropriate development projects, sometimes in partnership with international organizations and bilateral agencies. Effective evaluations of these development interventions help inform whether the projects have indeed benefited intended recipients, and what improvement can be made in the future.

In recent years, with the expansion of urbanization in China, many rural residents have been migrating to cities to seek

employment; those who are left behind in rural areas are mainly the elderly, women and children. Chinese farmers who live in poor rural areas have received little formal education; they take care of the farm work, their children, and grandchildren. In China, one hundred and twenty-two million people still live in poverty (China National Sustainable Development Report, 2012). According to the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, 13.4% of rural Chinese remain in poverty in 2012 (The State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, 2012). The sixth China national census conducted in 2010 revealed that 50 million people remain illiterate (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2011), and most of them live in poor rural areas. The complex context in rural China requires that evaluation of development interventions respond to the culture that shapes the lives and experiences of farmers. In other words, evaluations, specifically, evaluation of development interventions in rural China, should be culturally responsive.

Frierson, Hood, Hughes, and Thomas (2010) defined culture as “a cumulative body of learned and shared behavior, values, customs, and beliefs common to a particular group or society” (p. 75). They pointed out that culturally responsive evaluation adopts evaluation strategies that resonate with the cultural contexts under investigation. Representing a holistic approach in conceptualizing and conducting evaluation, culturally responsive evaluation recognizes specific knowledge and ways of knowing based on traditional values and cultures (Frierson et al., 2010). Culturally responsive evaluation is particularly important when evaluators

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and program participants do not share similar social and economic status, and cultural traditions (Hood, 2004). In reviewing the evolution of evaluation with culturally responsive lenses, Hood noted that some evaluation theorists viewed the cultural context as essential in evaluating programs designed to contribute to the well-being of the poor. He asserted that evaluation approaches “can and should be more culturally responsive if we are to fully understand the effectiveness, benefits, and outcomes of programs designed to serve our less-powerful stakeholders” (Hood, 2004, p. 22). An instrument that disregards the cultural context is improperly prepared; such instruments yield invalid data (Hood, 2004, p. 88).

What approaches and methods should be used in evaluation of international development interventions? At the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group Conference, 2008, *Measuring Development Effectiveness: Progress and Constraints*, Patton stated “the methodological gold standard here is *appropriateness*, not any one particular method” (Patton 2008, cited in Rogers, 2009, p. 218, emphasis in original). Drawing on their experiences from international development, Bamberger, Rao, and Wookcook (2010) proposed mixing qualitative and quantitative methods in monitoring and evaluation of development projects. They argued that the wide range of diverse development projects requires using appropriate, correspondingly different methods (p. 4). Russon (2008), in reflecting on his evaluation management experience in South Asia, raised concerns about “the fit between evaluations that are conducted using ‘Western’ paradigms and the beliefs and assumptions that underlie the cultures in the region” (p. 1). Drawing on the wisdom of ancient Chinese philosophies, Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, Russon proposed an Eastern paradigm of evaluation (Russon, 2004). In 1985 Merryfield conducted a study to address challenges in cross-cultural international development evaluations. She noted that the evaluation experts she interviewed used terms including “responsive evaluation” and “naturalistic methods” to describe their positive evaluation experiences, and these seasoned evaluation professionals suggested that evaluation strategies “have to grow from the culture” (Merryfield, 1985, p. 10).

Twenty-eight years after Merryfield’s study, while conducting literature review on challenges in international development interventions, an author of this paper sent an “Ineffective evaluation inquiry” to XCeval, a mailing list for international evaluation professionals. The inquiry asked for ineffective evaluations that these professionals had experienced. Between January 4 and 13, 2013, fourteen people responded to the inquiry, and candid discussions ensued. According to the responses received, causes for ineffective evaluations include “wrongly designed evaluation”, “ineffective...data collection systems and tools”, “No engagement/inclusion of key stakeholders...in the evaluation process”, and “Treat evaluation only as an accountability function”. Seven comments referred to poorly designed Terms of Reference (TOR). One comment suggested that full involvement of all stakeholders in defining the evaluation TOR helps to ensure effective evaluation (personal communication).

This paper explores appropriate approaches and methods in evaluating development interventions in rural China. It draws on an evaluation experience of an agricultural biodiversity management project conducted in Hainan, an island off the southern coast in China. Agricultural biodiversity plays a key role in adapting to a changing climate, and contributing to food security and livelihood maintenance. Implemented by the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture and an European country’s development agency from 2004 through 2010, the project aim was to enhance farmers’ knowledge and practice of agricultural biodiversity, and improve management skills of project staff and relevant government officials. Components of the project included Farmer Field Schools (FFS), study

tours for government officials, project staff and village leaders, and other activities. Farmers were encouraged to create habitats to grow local species, which not only taste better, but also resist harsh conditions. The FFS conducted trainings that encompassed under-cropping, e.g., planting traditional southern medicinal herbs under betel nut (Areca nut) trees, and appropriate use of fertilizers and pesticides. Seed fairs were organized for farmers in surrounding townships to exchange local seeds. Local county governments provided subsidies for farmers who participated in the project. One county government also provided matching funds to support improving village infrastructure, e.g., paving the village road with cement and building a water supply system.

An evaluation of the agricultural biodiversity management project was undertaken in September 2010. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the project impact at recipient and institutional levels. The evaluation team consisted of three Chinese national consultants and an international consultant who spoke basic Chinese and led the team. Both authors of this paper are faculty members at the China Agriculture University and served as national consultants in the evaluation. Different methods were used in the evaluation, including document review, interviews, survey questionnaire, and the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Some methods worked well, but some did not. For example, farmers showed little interest when questionnaires were administered to them; but their attitudes changed when the PRA approach was adopted—they became actively engaged in the discussions. This paper discusses why some methods worked and some did not in the evaluation of the agricultural biodiversity management project in Hainan, China.

2. Discussions of evaluation methods used

2.1. Overview of the evaluation design

Prior to the field mission in Hainan, the evaluation team organized a number of meetings with relevant stakeholders in Beijing. The purpose of these meetings was to better understand the project background and the concerns of different parties. The Beijing meetings included the director and staff from the national project office, and officials from the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture. A questionnaire was designed to seek, from farmers, specific, detailed quantitative data as requested by the evaluation TOR. In the design phase, a national consultant, who has over 30 years of experience in rural research and evaluation in China, reminded the evaluation team that Chinese farmers usually did not respond well to questionnaires, and that data collected from questionnaire was often questionable. Despite this, the team decided to proceed with the questionnaire to collect data from farmers, because a questionnaire seems to be a reasonable way to generate numbers, conduct statistical analysis, find comparisons to demonstrate the project impact, and therefore meet the requirements of the evaluation TOR. We learned a valuable lesson from this decision, which will be discussed below.

During the field mission, the evaluation team held meetings with relevant Chinese government officials at the provincial, municipal and county levels. These discussions included officials from the Division of the International Cooperation at the Hainan Provincial Bureau of Agriculture, Sanya Municipal Bureau of Agriculture, and Bureaus of Agriculture in Wuzhishan County and Baoting County. Sanya Municipality, Wuzhishan County and Baoting County are sub-areas of Hainan Province. The evaluation team also visited three pilot project villages, administered questionnaires to individual farmers, and held group discussions with farmers using the PRA methods. An Associate Director of the Division of the International Cooperation from the Hainan Provincial Bureau

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