

Toward a More Holistic Evaluation Approach for Rural Development

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Abstract

The discussion on and development of a holistic evaluation approach for rural development will be indispensable to improving and enriching the lives of rural people. This approach can be developed by considering the conceptualization of community policy structure in rural areas, the localization of policy structure in the rural community, and the promotion of participatory evaluation for rural community people. The development and use of such an evaluation approach will contribute much to rural development and bringing about positive societal change.

Keywords

holistic evaluation approach, community policy structure, rural development, localization, participatory evaluation

Rural disparity and deterioration of rural areas are crucial issues in both industrial and developing countries. A holistic evaluation approach is becoming indispensable in order to promote the development of rural communities including villages, town and municipalities, or smaller settlements. A holistic evaluation approach means that people in rural areas pursue evaluation for their own development based on the circumstances and perspectives in their own community. Such an approach, however, has not yet been adequately realized. To develop such an approach, we must consider three issues: the creation of a concept of community policy structure in rural areas; localization of policy structure in the rural community; and promotion of participatory evaluation for rural community people.

Why Do We Need a Concept of Community Policy Structure?

A holistic perspective on evaluation takes into account the multiple dimensions of the lived experiences of rural people. Such a perspective is not focused solely on the effects of specific, individual activities or interventions but is grounded in an understanding of the lives of rural people and their own aspirations for development.

One requirement for developing a holistic approach to evaluation for rural development is to focus on community policy structure as a subject of evaluation. With an understanding of this structure, evaluation can be better attuned to development from the perspective of the rural people.

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Community is a social aggregation constructed by individuals, groups, or organizations bound by a specific area, which is generally defined by administrative boundaries, and where these individuals, groups, or organizations recognize themselves as being members of the community. Community members also include administrative organizations, nonprofit organizations, and private enterprises.

In general, people's daily lives and organizational activities have reasonable ends, and people and organizations make efforts, using various means, to achieve those ends. When applied to rural communities, linked relationships between the community ends envisioned by community members and the means of achieving them, explicitly or implicitly, must be considered to achieve shared visions, values, or norms. Connections between multiple ends and means form the community policy structure that provides an appropriate subject of a holistic evaluation approach for rural development. A holistic evaluation would focus on changes in the rural community and the lives of people in that community by examining the mix of means and associated ends of the community policy structure.

Why Is the Localization of Policy Structure Important for Holistic Evaluation on Rural Development?

It is important to strike a balance between national policy and rural policy in rural development. One crucial problem is that national policy is more sector oriented and specific, while rural people included under such national policies view their lives in a more holistic way. This situation is also highly related to the imbalance between national and rural perspectives on evaluation approaches.

Localization of policy structure is a concept that should be considered in cases where the performance of a policy formulated at the national level must be aggregated across multiple local levels. A policy formulated at the national level can be implemented only after the relevant policy structure established at the national level is localized to a policy structure at the local level.

The subject of evaluation can be precisely defined at the local level and therefore can be evaluated. Naturally, a policy of a country is formulated with the aim of achieving the ends contemplated by the country, but it must be reviewed in consideration of ends contemplated at local levels where the policy actually unfolds. This is because ends at local levels may not be achieved without changing the means at local levels even if their policy structures remain fundamentally the same as the national policy structure.

Each national policy structure covers the wider target population of the national level and must focus on a specific range of aspects under the discretion of the sector and specific field-oriented national administrative organization. Meanwhile, the community policy structure includes multiple aspects of lives in a community and rather should be prepared by integrating multiple national policy structures through a process of localization to take account of the total lives of a limited number of target population at the local level for rural development.

Why Is Participatory Evaluation for Community People Effective for Rural Development?

Rural people's participation in evaluation is indispensable for promoting a holistic evaluation approach. In order to promote their well-being in the context of rural development, rural people need to recognize themselves, their lives, and their aspirations and evaluate their existing community policy structure through participation in the evaluation. Attending to the community policy structure is one means to facilitate this participation.

Traditional evaluation emphasizes criteria induced from the external evaluator and often neglects rural community perspectives. The context of the rural community must be reflected in evaluation criteria, and the people of rural community must be an initiator of the evaluation and interpret the evaluation results by themselves in this context. Beneficiaries are the one who need the real outcome in the context of rural development and it is important to motivate participants both in the present and in the future.

The community policy structure in a participatory evaluation provides the opportunity for community people to rethink their experiences of rural development. Affirmative questions, narrative description of good experiences in community policy structure and listening to each other's stories motivates community people to participate and helps them recognize the effect their own activities have in terms of changes of the community members and the community itself. The sharing of good community experiences develops the confidence of community people in their lives and informs reorganization of future community policy structure for promoting their lives and rural development.

Author Biography

Koichi Miyoshi is a professor in the Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. He graduated from the School of Political Science and Economics at Waseda University in 1971, and received his Doctor of Human Sciences from Osaka University (2005). Prior to his current position, Dr. Miyoshi worked for the Japan International Cooperation Agency for more than 25 years. His research fields cover community capacity and rural development, policy and program evaluation and international cooperation policy. He has written numerous articles and books and organized various training programs in these fields. Dr. Miyoshi is also a vice president of the Japan Evaluation Society, and president of the Institute for Community Design, a community capacity development organization.