

Innovative Practices to Reduce Inequality: The Effectiveness of Nonprofit Organizations

Guosheng Deng ¹

¹ Guosheng Deng, Director of Center for Innovation and Social Responsibility, Tsinghua University. The author would like to thank Ford Foundation for its generous support. Translated by Juliann H. Vikse, Zihui Gong, Jiang Wu, and Bonnie Wong, School of Social Work, Rutgers University.



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I. Inequality as a Root Cause of Social Unrest

Between 1981 and 2012, the Gini coefficient in China rose sharply, from 0.29 to 0.474. The international community considers a Gini coefficient of 0.4 to be a warning level. A coefficient higher than 0.4 indicates stark social inequality, and may signal that a nation's social fabric is potentially at risk. Since China's Reform and Opening Policy in the late 1970s, and its subsequent period of rapid economic growth, the gap between rich and poor has continuously widened. This growing disparity in wealth has not only led to sluggish domestic consumption and demand, which bears serious consequences for the economy, but has also sparked attitudes of social discontent and a fluctuating social order.

In part, the Chinese Gini coefficient is so high because of widespread poverty. Chinese socialism holds that eliminating poverty will make it possible for the Chinese people to achieve common prosperity. According to China's national poverty measure, which draws the line of poverty at yearly income of 2,300 RMB, there were over 128 million Chinese people living in poverty in 2011. Even after thirty years of development work aimed at poverty alleviation, China's poor are predominantly located in remote, underdeveloped areas. The remoteness of these villages, as well as the harsh natural conditions they often experience, magnifies the effects of poverty. Undoubtedly, eradicating poverty and narrowing the gap between rich and poor in the long term are essential tasks at hand. The next great challenge facing China will be rural develop-

ment, which will require improving the incomes and living standards of the rural poor.

In February 2004, a nonprofit organization called the *DaBa Research Association for Ecology and Poverty Reduction* (hereafter DBRA) was founded in Sichuan Province. This organization was established with the commitment to promote development, and support poverty relief efforts, in rural China. Two years later, the World Bank's first "China Development Marketplace" initiative funded a sustainable women's health and development project in Tongjiang County. The project was successful in improving outcomes and quality of life among vulnerable women, through a number of innovative approaches to poverty relief. This paper will first introduce DBRA and its best practices, then will move on to analyze the effectiveness of its creative programs. Finally, it will analyze the conditions and forces that give rise to social innovation, and present recommendations for further progress in this arena.

II. Case Description

1. The Tongjiang County Women's Health and Livelihood Development (WHL) Project

The poverty stricken Tongjiang County in Sichuan Province is a key recipient of state support. Gou Village is located in a remote, northern part of the county, with an elevation of 900 to 1,400 meters. It is located far from the local government seat, separated by over 30 kilometers of mountainous terrain. When the project began in 2006, the village had a population

of 273 that consisted of 65 households.

Due to both historical circumstances and geographical conditions, 84% of households did not have access to water, and the village's sanitation system was poor. For instance, 54.9% of residents resided in the same structures as their livestock. Most residents had very limited education, and approximately 84.9% of the adult population was illiterate. At that time, the per capita yearly income of village residents was 988 RMB (about \$USD 150). As men increasingly left the village in search of migrant work, women began to comprise a larger proportion of the labor force. These women, many of whom lacked formal education, were left to deal with harsh natural conditions, poor sanitation, drinking water shortages, and heavy economic burdens. Ninety percent suffered from chronic diseases, but most lacked basic health knowledge. It became imperative for these vulnerable women to improve their health, income, and quality of life.

In March 2006, the World Bank China Development Marketplace initiative selected DBRA as a funding recipient, 100,000 RMB. It would use these funds to implement its proposed WHLD Project in Tongjiang County. When the project officially launched, its overall objective was to help vulnerable people emerge from poverty and improve their living standards.

In the project's earliest stages, DBRA conducted a needs assessment with Gou Village farmers. Most female residents communicated that their most urgent needs were drinking water, medical treatment, and income. According to

male residents, the most urgent needs were income, followed by drinking water and transportation. During ensuing discussions, the villagers reached a consensus. In light of the project's limited resources, it would primarily focus on economic development, and on promoting access to clean water and health care.

The DaBa Research Association next collaborated with the township government, local hospitals, village leaders, and residents to design, plan, and manage the project. Toward this end, they elected a self-governing project management committee. The DaBa Research Association helped this five-member committee establish an internal division of labor and delegate responsibilities, and develop a sustainable organizational structure and a team for administrative members. Next, DBRA collaborated with an autonomous village committee to assess the needs and to select the WHLD project participants from the community. The village committee and DBRA the first welcomed the villagers to apply for the WHLD project. They then conducted household surveys to determine the needs of the residents. Finally, they produced a list of WHLD participants. Throughout this process, DBRA served only as a facilitator.

The DaBa Research Association and village committee next turned their attention to implementing the project's three major components. Following heated debate, DBRA, village committee, and key female participants of WHLD went to other towns to study rural development programs. After assessing the conditions in Gou Village, it

was determined that economic development would begin with a gazelle-breeding venture, initially led by 10 low-income women. The following year, the project would "gift" new animals to other women in the community, thereby lifting more women out of poverty. With the support of the local government and the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry, the first team of women crafted animal pens and purchased valuable species of gazelle. The DaBa Research Association facilitated trainings on agricultural technology, disease prevention, and business. Afterward, the 10 team members proceeded to organize themselves, establish a formal women's group, select a responsible leader, and occasionally meet to share ideas and provide mutual support.

To promote access to clean water, DBRA coordinated with relevant government departments. The township government sent staff representatives to the county water conservancy office, where they collaboratively developed a water diversion project plan. The DaBa Research Association and village committee held two public seminars on the project, and elected a project manager to procure necessary materials and coordinate the construction of a reservoir and water lines. Meanwhile, project members underwent training in water management, and assisted in planning the construction of the water management system.

With regard to the next branch of the project, those dealing with women's health and sanitation, DBRA collaborated with the county women's clinic to carry out an assessment of gynecological dis-

eases in the locality, and provide treatment to as many women as possible. The DaBa Research Association also designed and implemented a women's health training program for village residents. Soon afterward, a village doctor was sent to the Tongjiang County women's clinic for professional training. At the same time, village residents organized a group, and appointed team leaders, to educate residents on issues of women's health and sanitation. The group was given 200 RMB in funding, and provided women the opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences.

Concurrent to these efforts, DBRA organized farmers, other professionals, and local government officials to participate in evaluations requested by the World Bank China Development Marketplace initiative.

2. An Innovative Approach of the Project

Over the course of its planning and implementation, DBRA looked to other nonprofit initiatives as models—in particular, the Cattle Breeding Project coordinated by Heifer International, a global nonprofit based in the U.S., and the "Water for All" programs financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). In adapting the core features of these programs to the specific needs and circumstances of Gou Village, DBRA was able to effectively carry out its poverty relief objectives. This section will analyze the most innovative facets of the project.

First, innovative approach: In the past, many nonprofit organizations have approached poverty re-

lief by solely focusing on incomes and employment. However, this project received 100,000 RMB from the World Bank China Development Marketplace initiative, and was able to integrate three important facets of development in order to alleviate poverty simultaneously: water and sanitation, women's health, and livelihood development. Although these subprojects began on a relatively small scale, it emphasized on sustainability and can lead to significant community development. For instance, the livelihood development component started with a group of 10 participants. The number of participants gradually increased through gifting new animals to other women every year.

Second, innovative method: The project's modes of decision-making, implementation, and evaluation were also quite innovative in that they relied heavily on the participation and engagement of village residents. The project found innovative ways to communicate with locals: for instance, at the outset, men and women participated in separate needs assessments, and women's perspectives were deeply valued. The DaBa Research Association also visited each site regularly to monitor and evaluate progress.

Third, innovative integration of resource: As a nonprofit that operates in poverty-stricken regions, DBRA was fully aware of the potential challenges and limitations facing its Gou Village project. In anticipation of these impediments, DBRA attached great importance to resource integration, and to mobilizing stakeholders. The DaBa Research Association leveraged its World Bank support to elicit addi-

tional funding from the township government, which invested 340,000 RMB in the project, and from a Sichuan pharmaceutical company, which donated medical supplies. The DaBa Research Association requested technical support from government departments dealing with animal husbandry, water conservancy, and women's health. The DaBa Research Association also mobilized numerous residents and stakeholders to participate in the project, which contributed to a greater sense of shared value and commitment.

Finally, innovative model of governance: Different from other nonprofit organizations that deal with poverty relief, DBRA entered the Tongjiang community as a facilitator. Its intention was not to impose its decisions, or its styles of implementation and assessment, but rather to develop a new model for community governance. To do so, it empowered the village with control over all decisions, and established the self-governing project management committee. Over the course of the project DBRA's primary roles were to facilitate, and to provide technical support. Apart from this, the livelihood development and women's health subprojects independently organized small women's groups to coordinate occasional trainings and exchange sessions.

3. Effectiveness of the Project

In rural China, homes are typically scattered over large swathes of mountainous terrain. For this reason, local governments face tremendous challenges in mounting efforts to alleviate poverty, support vulnerable groups, and improve res-

idents' quality of life. Despite these difficulties DBRA was able to achieve remarkable success by thoroughly researching various means of poverty relief, and identifying the methods that would be most appropriate for the Tongjiang region.

For livelihood development, DBRA helped residents build sheep pens that covered 285.5 square meters, and procure and breed 124 gazelle. It also provided technical training to 10 women and their families. Within a year, the project participants had bred 136 female animals. Only one household withdrew from the program due to a number of personal reasons, the nine remaining families enjoyed significant benefits. The participants' monthly household income increased by 1,000-5,000 RMB, an outcome that significantly improved their quality of life.

For the clean water component of the project, DBRA began to construct a reservoir by excavating three nearby pools, and building nearly 10,000 meters of pipeline. This provided 29 households and their livestock, a primary school, and a forestry station access to clean drinking water. The local government helped to construct additional infrastructure to serve the remaining 15 households. These efforts particularly reduced the burden on women, who had previously struggled to obtain clean water for their families and livestock.

With respect to women's health sub-project, the project provided 2 times of health checkup for women in Gou Village. More than 100 women received health examinations in the county's hospital, of which 68 women have received

treatments and be given free medicine. In addition, the project trained one rural doctor, compiled a set of training materials for women's health, and carried out four times of health training. It improves health knowledge of local women, as well as their health.

Evaluations indicate that the project was successful, and that villagers were satisfied with its results. Its three subprojects led to improved outcomes in women's health, livelihood development, and access to clean drinking water and sanitation. Importantly, the project also improved the overall status of women in the community. In a broader sense, in serving and improving the living standards of a vulnerable community, this project contributed to narrowing the wealth gap in China.

III. Case Analysis

1. Prime Conditions for Innovation

Prior to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the progress of civil society in Sichuan Province had been lagging. Its nonprofit sector had not yet developed--a situation that was mirrored in Yunnan, Sha'anxi, and Xibei Provinces. Why, then, in the relatively remote, mountainous Sichuan Province, was there a sudden emergence of nonprofit poverty relief programs?

Both in China and abroad, socially innovative projects are often related to social innovators. The persons with spirit of social innovation are the key to socially innovative projects. The DBRA project's success also hinged on the strong leadership of its founder, Haoliang

Zhang. Prior to founding DBRA in 2004, Zhang had worked for the Tongjiang County Poverty Relief Office, and served as Deputy Director of the local World Bank branch, Director of the Qinling Mountain Poverty Relief Project, and Vice Chairman of the county-level Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Zhang established DBRA in 2004 and committed to rural poverty relief, community development, and environmental protection.

As county-level CPPCC Vice Chairman, Zhang could enjoy a relatively high standard of living. However, as a demonstration of his commitment to China's poor he resigned his administrative post and founded DBRA. Zhang consistently exhibited courage and personal responsibility as he pursued ambitious new opportunities.

During the early phases of establishing DBRA, Zhang frequently traveled between rural China and cities such as Chengdu and Beijing. He visited funding agencies, participated in workshops, and met with others working in the field. He faced numerous obstacles along the way, but in working through these challenges he developed greater understanding of relevant technologies and nonprofit management strategies, both in China and abroad. Finally, he designed the innovative WHLD project, and obtained substantial funding from the International Heifer Breeding Project, The Asia Foundation, the World Bank, and other agencies. Through these tremendous efforts, he was able to serve tens of thousands of families in rural China. Zhang's accomplishments demonstrate his perseverance, strong work

ethic, and pioneering spirit. His example teaches us that commitment, sense of mission, courage, persistence, and responsibility are the essential qualities of a social innovator.

Although not every aspect of the WHLD project was entirely original in terms of concept or implementation, Zhang's method and experience can serve as a useful model for developing a community engagement-based approach to governance. The project also modeled the importance of adapting successful components of other projects to the unique circumstances of a rural Chinese population.

This case demonstrates that, in addition to social innovators, social environment and policy are essential to social innovation. First, social organization is the entity of social innovation. If local governments have strict regulations on establishment of social organization, DBRA may not be able to receive legal status. Without legal status, support and funding from external agencies is much more difficult to obtain.

Secondly, government support is a key factor in the implementation of innovative projects. Every aspect of the WHLD Project, including poverty assistance, resource allocation, and project management, relied on government support for its success. For instance, if the local government had not provided funding for poverty relief, local government departments would not have been in the position to offer their technical support. The research team would not have been able to simultaneously develop and implement three subprojects, or promote community development,

with only 100 thousand RMB in World Bank funding. With regard to project management, the county government, township government, and village government provided critical support to the research team. With the government's help, the research team was able to organize village residents, establish a project management committee, and elicit community participation. Especially in light of the village's remote, mountain locale, the local government's implicit acceptance was an important precondition for the implementation of such an innovative project.

Third, maintaining an open society is critical for social innovation. Working in an open society, Zhang had access to numerous domestic and international funding agencies, and was able to engage in valuable exchanges and agency site visits. If he had not been able to contact potential funders or learn from others' experiences, Zhang would have lacked the inspiration and resources to effectively engage in poverty alleviation.

Finally, competition is an important condition for innovation. The concept of intellectual property protection has not yet taken root in China, which has resulted in a lack of motivation to invest in innovative projects. For this reason, social innovation has relied mainly on the personal values and dedication of individuals, who feel compelled to appropriately and responsibly respond to society's needs. This sense of responsibility and personal mission does not always lead to social innovation, however; in the absence of material incentives, social innovators should be guided by external pressures. To a certain extent, such

pressures result from competition over limited resources. This is evident in the competition for World Bank China Development Marketplace funding, which DBRA ultimately secured. The Marketplace initiative accepted applications from numerous nonprofit organizations in China, which were subjected to three rounds of competitive selection. To obtain funding, applicants competed with more than 1 thousand other projects. Innovation not only served as an important distinguishing feature; it was considered a key criterion for selection. This case highlights how a fair competitive environment can encourage social innovation, even in the absence of intellectual property protection.

2. Experiences and Lessons Learned

In assessing the Tongjiang women's health and development project, we can identify a number of key successes. First, the project developed and utilized strong management and organizational systems. The DaBa Research Association helped the Gou Village community develop its own self-governing project management committee, select five committee members, and establish community development and women's health subprojects.

The DaBa Research Association also helped the project management committee develop management processes and regulations, including those pertaining to project management, financial management, resource management, archive management, and monitoring and evaluation. The project car-

ried out purchasing assessments and controlled costs, to improve its efficiency. The committee publicly released its progress and expenditures, and welcomed community feedback and oversight.

Next, the project helped to cultivate a core group of committed participants. Through the women's health and livelihood development project in Tongjiang County, it was ascertained that a cadre of committed members played a critical role in determining the feasibility of new projects. If the right people were selected, the entire community could be engaged. Otherwise, disputes were likely to escalate. The members of the cadre needed to have an interest in public service, and a good reputation in the community. Because nonprofit organizations were considered "outsiders" who knew little about the community, DBRA played a crucial role in carrying out assessments, and working with the villagers through a democratic process. These five members were responsible, fair, and played a critical role in carrying out the project. Another important role of DBRA was to cultivate leadership. After the five members were elected, DBRA not only trained them on management and leadership, but also took them to other areas to learn from other poverty relief projects.

Third, it was necessary to mobilize community resources and involvement. The success and sustainability of the project depended in large part on the villagers' level of participation and cohesion. With regard to this latter aspect, we can learn a great deal from the women's health and livelihood development project. From the needs assessment and project design phases, to the implementation

and evaluation of the project, the participation of all villagers was a point of emphasis. Two key factors encouraged community engagement: the project's reliance on community resources and human capital, and the project's adoption of a participatory approach.

In each project component, DBRA depended on the project management committee, women's group, or cadre to lead community participants. This not only minimized costs, but also emphasized the importance of community autonomy. Finally, DBRA provided a certain amount of funding to enhance the activities headed by the independent women's groups, each group was responsible for management of the funding.

Fourth, it was necessary to properly coordinate communication and relationships among the government, the nonprofit organization, the project management committee, and the village cadre. Throughout all phases of the project, DBRA received government support. Given that Zhang had served as the County Vice Chairman, and had access to a wide range of government resources, DBRA was able to closely cooperate with all levels of government.

The five committee members were villager and democratically elected by the community. They were not cadre members, and were able to gain others' trust and support by behaving ethically. However, this situation did give rise to conflicts between the regulatory commission and the village council. The DaBa Research Association dealt with this challenge by showing respect for villagers' decisions and actively communicating with the village council. At the same time, it involved the regulatory committee in the project, and welcomed its input about communicating and coordinating with the village council.

Fifth, strengthen accountability and evaluation. The women's health and livelihood development project achieved positive results because of its effective management, which focused on accountability and evaluation. In all considerations, including funding, target populations, and purchasing, it was important to work within regulatory frameworks, and maintain integrity and transparency.

At the same time, DBRA prioritized community capacity building, and moni-

toring and evaluation. They provided job training, and later, supervision and evaluation. They also guided and reminded stakeholders to maintain the project's core values and adhere to regulations. As Zhang said: "Give the sincere heart to villagers, give faith to peasant, give guarantee to investors and partners, give trust to the public." To ensure that problems were corrected effectively as they arose, the team allowed the village residents to handle conflicts and supervise program activities.

Certainly, throughout the implementation of the program, there were some problems that should be evaluated and discussed.

First, the program had limited funding, and drew most of its support from local governments. The project was divided into three sub-programs, which led to the involvement of many different departments and bureaus. This complicated efforts to coordinate communication. Furthermore, the DBRA was limited in its capacity. Its office was located far from the village, and road conditions were very poor. For instance, during a particular cold period of winter, a women's health exam could not be conducted on time. The drinking water project was thwarted by damaged facilities, and inconsistent maintenance. The gazelle breeding project met with similar obstacles. While most of the aforementioned problems are circumstantial, they speak to a major problem with risk management. This project was innovative, and without clear precedents to follow there would certainly be some unforeseen risks. In general, however, project managers should have been more careful about planning for, and managing, those risks.

Second, the program had a relatively short timeline, and the community has not yet created mechanisms to sustain its developments. Although women's health outcomes and standards of living in Tongjiang markedly improved over a short period, in the long term the residents must achieve sustainable development. Sustainability will face many challenges, however: the economic benefits have been comparatively small, income growth has been inconsistent, women's health has made only slight improvements, and the drinking water system will require long-term maintenance. That being said, the program

has only existed for one year, and every aspect, of development is in its earliest stage. The project has not yet become self-sustaining, and need to raise awareness in the broader community to attract further interest and funding. The DaBa Research Association made tremendous strides; they helped establish a self-governing project management committee, cultivated investment among stakeholders, and organized leadership structures. However, after the project comes to a close, DBRA withdraws, and external funding ceases, the village will likely face difficulties. A successful solution, Community Revolving Fund, supported by international nonprofit organizations, may be used as a model. Once the village has their own fund, the fund could be used to expand the reach and impact of the project management committee, and make the project sustainable. Such developments would also strengthen the involvement and cohesiveness of the village community.

Third, the administrative skills of the project management committee needed strengthening. The committee and its leaders played critical roles in this program. However, the program leaders had no work experience in this field, and faced tremendous challenges because of the varied program components. These five members responsibly handled their own work, but lacked experience with management and fostering relationships. Particularly in rural China, leadership training requires extensive time commitment. After the program ended, locals continued to rely on the support of nonprofit organizations. The DaBa Research Association and the committee needed to consider ways to support the committee and become self-sustainable.

One last challenge is how to publicize and promote the innovative components of the project. The project's poverty relief efforts were successful in some respects, and those experiences are worth sharing, and perhaps replicating, in other areas. However, local nonprofit organizations tend to apply their experiences to their own endeavors, rather than disseminate them to other people. Innovative methods of administration do occur in China, but without dissemination, they cannot take

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華民研究中心
Huamin Research Center

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
School of Social Work
390 George Street, Room 503
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
848-932-5383, ext. 25383
socialwork.rutgers.edu/huamin



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