Research on the Sustainability of Chinese Local Government

Performance Evaluation: Based on the Case of "Gansu model"

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Abstract: As a creative tool of government management, the effect of government performance evaluation lies in promoting the improvement of government capacity by its scientificity and sustainability. The former provides protection for the effective use of government performance evaluation results, while the later is the key for continuous improvement of government work. As the improving of government work is not overnight, it requires the assessment of government performance should be sustainable and scientific, so ensuring the continuity of government performance assessment and improving the scientificity of government performance assessment has the equally important position. This paper tries to started with the combing of recent literatures, reflect and discuss how to protect the sustainability of government performance evaluation from the theoretical perspective, combining with the formation of “Gansu Model”—-which is one of the typical patterns of Chinese government performance evaluation. And we also structure a theoretical model on the basis of the key factors—-political support, legal protection, social participation and system design—— which affect government performance evaluation, thus providing worthy reference and suggestions for improving the sustainability of Chinese government performance evaluation.

Key words: local government; performance evaluation; sustainability; Gansu model

1. Introduction

In the late 20th century, in order to meet governments’ endogenous demand for improving administrative efficiency and the pressure from the public’s increasing requirement of improving government performance, governments at home and abroad have adopted the government performance evaluation tool as a response one after another. As a result, performance evaluation as a tool for assessing and then improving governments’ performance has been widely used in each government’s governance. As a tool for government reform, the value of performance evaluation’s emergence and existence requires it must be sustainable, and whether it could keep a sustainable development is directly related to the establishment of the long-acting mechanism for government performance management. Only the local governments’ performance evaluation keep sustainable, can governments’ management level and capacity get continue improvement. However, due to various (egg. institutional, technical, regulatory and other) factors, in the practice of local government performance evaluation, the application of performance evaluation methods is intermittent, administrative leaders’ attitude to performance evaluation can especially have a role in the decision of evaluation’s sustainability. This paper selected the “Gansu mode" which is unique in Chinese local government performance evaluation models for example, analysing the internal and external environmental pressures, institutional constraints, government regulations and organizational and cultural factors that local governments confronted with during the application of government performance evaluation tools, and discussing the intrinsic motivations which lead to the failure of the sustainable development for "third-party assessment of government
performance” project which has held twice in Gansu province. Through conducting a sampling survey and interviews among the main evaluation subjects involved in the first two assessments, and according to survey data combining with relevant theory, we analyzed the key factors that influence sustainable development of government performance evaluation, and then proposed suggestions to protect sustainable development of Chinese government performance evaluation from four perspectives of political support, legal protection, social engagement and system designing.

2. China’s Local Government Performance Evaluation Dilemma: Literature Review

Government performance evaluation can be viewed as a sound governing instrument for the sake of better provision of public goods and service, thus meeting the needs of the public more effectively. In the 1980s, government performance evaluation received great attention and favor, and countries which take the forefront in this study area were undoubtedly the United States and Britain. In China, with the implementation of the government target responsibility system, government performance assessment has begun to attract attentions from scholars and relevant practitioners. Due to the late start, Chinese government performance evaluation which is still in the primary stage, has confronted with many difficulties and problems which are badly in need of resolution during the reference and application of western theories. Those troubles have affected the sustainable development of government performance evaluation, which would affect the establishment of the long-acting mechanism for government performance improvement.

At the moment, scholars at home and abroad are still staying at the stage of studying technical tools and methods for government performance assessment, which of course has promoting significance to some extent for the establishment of the long-acting mechanism for government performance improvement. For example, Ken S. Cavalluzzoa and Christopher D. Ittnerb (2004) [1] tested some factors which would affect the development of government, especially tested the impacts that results-oriented performance management has on governments’ activities, and summer up that organizational factors and technical factors have a major impact on government performance management.

However, few scholars has a full and direct recognition of the dilemmas and challenges that governments encountered during the process of long-term implementation of performance evaluation, so that there are few studies about the dilemmas and challenges that sustainable performance evaluation faced. The majority of scholars only studied on the problems and their influencing factors of performance evaluation process itself. As those problems and their impact factors affect the sustainable development of performance evaluation to some extent, so the above studies still have referential effects for the analysis of the sustainable development of performance evaluation to a considerable degree. Throughout related literatures, among the recent Chinese scholars’ researches on the problems that exist in performance evaluation, Cai Lihui and Zhou Zhiren are those who have made comprehensive and thorough analysis on those problems. Cai Lihui (2007) made a comprehensive and in-depth analysis on the current situation and problems of Chinese government performance evaluation practice, indicating that there are still many problems in the practice of Chinese government performance evaluation: China’s government performance evaluation which is still in a spontaneous or semi-spontaneous state, lacks a national legal protection and systematic theory support as well as the system construction of assessing subjects; assessment content is not comprehensive, make a one-side equation between economic
performance and administrative achievements, or make public satisfaction be equal to the whole government performance evaluation, performance is seriously apart from government function and job responsibilities; the ways of assessing are usually sporty, comparative and unexpected, thus ignoring sustainable assessment; the function of performance which is treated as the method of passive defense, post-supervision and punishment, is inaccurately positioned, thus making the evaluation fall into a passive position. Zhou Zhiren has also pointed out that China’s present government performance evaluation is limited to spontaneous level, the performance evaluation forms of every local government is diverse, lacking a national model and standard for evaluation implementation; and the evaluation which puts more emphasis on internal control and supervision, has a distinct orientation of controlling, that is the inaccurate positioning of evaluation’s function which is indicated by Cai Lihui.

In addition, the researches on Chinese local government performance evaluation encounters of other scholars in China are similar to the above two scholars, whose analyzing dimensions are usually theory support, legal protection, assessing subject, assessing system, assessing tool and patterns, etc.:

Xiongzhe Wen, Zhang Qingqi (2010) pointed out that China's local government performance evaluation is still in the spontaneous state, the lag of evaluation theory lead to blindness of assessment practices; evaluation index system, assessing subjects and objects and evaluation process are lack of relevant legal and institutional norms; and the accountability system for performance evaluation is not established. Liu ping and Dai Xiaoyu (2009) indicated that Chinese government performance evaluation have such problems as government monopoly of assessing subjects, unscientific assessing methods and technique laggard, and the deficiency of relevant institutions for assessment. Fan Tiezhong and Zu Guohua (2007) also analyzed and discussed the problems that exist in China’s government performance evaluation practices from perspectives of assessing subjects, assessing system, institutional and legal protection. Lu gang (2006) analyzed the problems in government performance evaluation from perspectives of theory and knowledge, institution and systems, techniques and methods, pointed out that performance evaluation lacks systematic theory guidance which had not received enough attention and recognition, resulting in insufficient capital investment of assessment which made it difficult to sustain for assessment; evaluations which was lack of protections from laws, regulations and relevant policies were often spontaneous; at the same time, assessments had a tendency of economization, putting an one-side emphasis on economic indicators, and qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis methods did not combine well, which seriously affected the effectiveness of assessment. Zuo Lin (2007) analyzed the dilemma of government performance evaluation from theory support, institutional protection and supervision those there aspects: 1, a lack of systematic theory support and guidance, produced a certain degree of blindness in evaluation practices; 2, the degree of systematism and normalization is not enough; 3, dimension system is not sound, performance assessing was lack of comprehensive and effective supervision which produced a distinct tendency of formal implementation. Zhang Ming-xia and Zhang Yanchen (2007) also analyzed predicament of government performance assessment from the perspectives of institution, supervision and other aspects:1, the non-market-oriented institution structure brought the plight to performance evaluation in the establishment of criteria and indicators for measuring;2, public power lacked supervision and restriction, that was mainly because of insufficient public oversight and immature civil assessing power; 3, the "Government-Based" value
orientation brought barriers of concept. Wuyue Zhen, Li Huiping (2008)\textsuperscript{[10]} pointed out that the plight of Chinese government performance evaluation was mainly reflected in five aspects: 1, the rigid constraints of performance evaluation which was lack of legislative support is not enough, thus making the performance evaluation would be strongly influenced by the change of leaders; 2, the scientificity and rationality of performance evaluation system are enslaved by designer’s expertise and capacity; 3, "strategic behavior" brought information barriers to performance evaluation; 4, public awareness of supervision and the NPC’s supervisory role were remaining to be enhanced; 5, the development of civil assessing strength is not yet mature.

3. The pattern of Gansu government performance evaluation, based on the third party evaluation—Gansu Pattern

Gansu province locates in the west of China where is a developing area, it is still behind the east, although it had got obvious development with the deepening of reform and open-up. The proportion of Gansu non-public economy in Gansu GDP is far behind the national average, the lag of non-public economy is the prominent bottleneck to the development of Gansu economy. In 2004, in order to further change government work style, create a standards strict legal environment, a honest and trustworthy credit environment, a high-class and efficient service environment, a relaxed and harmonious working environment for the development of enterprises, Gansu Provincial Government decided to assess government performance as a breakthrough, to effectively promote the development of provincial non-public economic, the specific approach is to allow non-public enterprises to evaluate government performance, thus developing policies for non-public economic development.

In August, 2004, Provincial Government in Gansu authorizes the individual intermediary academic organization, Local Government Performance Evaluation Center in Lanzhou University (GPEC), as an organizer to conduct the government performance evaluation. After that, the GPEC gives assistance to the Provincial Government to draft a document on suggestions of the implement of private-owned enterprises has rights to evaluate the government. The center makes a whole appraisal program under the demonstration of related professors. The appraisal activity was starting during the December 22-28 in 2004. The objects of the appraisal activity include 14 prefectures and 39 provincial departments.

The GPEC publishes 15750 questionnaires and more than 60 indexes. In the middle of January in 2005, the GPEC submits the report on results of private-owned enterprises’ evaluation about government, which makes public known as a form of the public meeting. The appraisal results reflect the efficiency evaluation of 14 ministrations and 39 provincial departments through thousands of questionnaires and symposia. During the implement of evaluation, each area selects around 300 enterprises to finish the questionnaires, which possess 60 percents. The People Government make an assessment to the efficiency of each local government through selected data and information, which possesses 20 percents. And professional members of evaluation group will pose appraisal advice according to above status, practical needs and above analysis and discussion.

The feature of "Gansu model" is that, it created a third-party evaluation model of government performance assessment, and it brought non-public enterprises in addition to governments and experts into assessing subjects’ scope, and combined internal assessment with external assessment, thus overcoming the drawbacks that internal evaluation influenced by leaders’ subject will. At the same time, the team members of the "Gansu model" project made a scientific definition for
internal and external evaluation, and thought that government performance evaluation formed a power structure of organizational right, appraisal right and management right which restricts each other, and the organizational right, whose power scope is the fundamental criteria for defining internal and external assessment, is at the core position. As typical of external evaluation, "Gansu mode" was suitable for evaluating the general functions and overall behavior of government.\footnote{11}

The implementation of "Gansu model" which produced positive results has aroused wide attention, a lot of local governments and departments held special meetings, discussing the issues reflected in evaluation, and formulating corrective measures. For example, by the "plan on the remediation for cadres’ mediocre behaviors" adopted in the Tenth and 13times’ meeting in 2005 of the Lanzhou Municipal Committee clearly states that: the leadership members in the unit which is double ranked as the tail ender in the evaluation of official work-style activities by all citizens should have a collective resign\footnote{12}, and so on. those showed that, the "Gansu mode" embodied the basic functions for using assessment to promote the improvement and construction of government performance evaluation activities to some extent.

The “Gansu mode” is also exposing some defects while it is playing a positive role. For instance, professor Bao Guoxian, who is the director of government performance evaluation centre in Lanzhou University, pointed out that, he found the difficulties that third-party evaluation itself was faced with during the evaluation process: First, the current assessment still primarily depends on awareness and promotion of administrative leaders, the change of whose attitude and position will make evaluation be greatly affected, so it need for a institutional support and protection; Second, information acquisition is difficult, information asymmetry makes the data that evaluation need one-sided or even wrong, which is subject to the introduction of China's Information Disclosure Law; Third, it needs a fairly lengthy process for the party evaluation organization to become sound, healthy and mature, which also needs multiple support and push from government and society, and requires the protection and criterion of relevant laws and regulations.\footnote{12}

Unfortunately, "Gansu mode" has not been able to sustain the implementation until the end of 2006, even the assessment results of the second phase were not released. Since the "Gansu model” has made certain achievements, why did it break off? And why did it even has no courage to release its results? Is this because that some department leaders who have worse assessing results are just going to be promoted but the results are harmful to their promotion? Is the sudden interruption of evaluation on earth because that the insufficient political support of new leaders, or the fading of assessing subjects’ participation enthusiasm, or there is not enough system or mechanism protection thus making “Gansu mode” lack of rigid regulations for its sustainability, or the design of assessment system itself is not so scientific?

The authors had held some discussions about the “Gansu mode” issue with some members in the project’s assessing team of Lanzhou University, who thought that “Gansu mode” was not able to sustain due to various factors. For example, the evaluation environment keeps deteriorating. In consideration of promotion of some senior government officials, the second evaluation report and conclusions were not released. the provincial government concerned that assessing conclusions make some cadres to be promoted encounter with test; questionings that whether enterprise assessing government performance scientific are emerging continuously, etc. However, after careful analysis and systematic review, the authors find that, team members of "Gansu model” project reached an agreement that the primary reason is a matter of legislation, since the "Gansu model” started in 2004, Gansu Province has not issued any specialized rules and regulations for
performance evaluation, which is the main reason that make “Gansu mode” halfway.

4. Construction of theoretical model: a systematic analysis of Gansu pattern

The paper holds that Gansu Pattern is deprived of sustainability due to existing several problems in following four aspects: political support, legal protection, social engagement, and the design of evaluation system, which according to references and information that from above talking. Scholars abroad and home focus their study of performance evaluation on factors of external influences, such as Institutional factors, supervising forces, theoretical supporting, however, they pays less attention to internal factors of evaluation system, including the evaluation subjects and political environment within organizations. The paper applies the present fruits of study on government performance evaluation and the features of “Gansu mode” to construct a theoretical analysis model according to four aspects: legal protection, political supports, social engagement and system designing, to explore the sustainability of “Gansu mode” and even local government performance evaluation in China, which can provide suggestions for overcoming evaluation difficulties and strengthening the sustainability of efficiency evaluation.

According to the theoretical analysis mode of image 1, the government performance evaluation which is in the centre is affected together by politics, law, social engagement and system designing, meanwhile, law provides a systematic supporting for social engagement, political support and system designing. The primary reason why “Gansu mode” and even other local governments’ performance evaluation ended without a sickness is the matter of legislation, that is, there is not a specific legal norm which rules each related links in government performance evaluation (including social assessing, assessing system and political support ), thus offering a solid foundation for effective implementing the government performance evaluation. The sustainability of performance evaluation is lack of legal protection, which hasn’t been confirmed in legal form, so that the stability of performance evaluation is severely affected by the change of government leaders. Secondly, under the environment of legal protection, government efficiency evaluation is also affected by the political supports of leaders in local government. If government leaders are in an opposite attitudes that don’t acquire the meaning of performance evaluation, that will influence the effective implement of performance evaluation on aspects of the manpower, the financial resources, and the material resources, then influences the validity of the result and blocks the realization of performance evaluation purpose—“promoting improvement and construction by evaluation”. Thirdly, under the protection of the legal regulations and political supports, government performance evaluation also needs wide participation of various subjects, even needs the public, enterprises and the media to be subjects of it, except for the government, experts and independent agencies, thus ensuring the high credibility for government performance evaluation results. Finally, under the external supports of legal protection, political support and social participation, performance evaluation must possess its own scientific evaluation system, which not only has scientific indexes, but also provides different percentages for different indexes according to evaluation subjects. Moreover, the choice of evaluation objects should follow the principle of pluralism which can ensure the credibility and validity of effective results, thus providing the solid foundation for following use of evaluation results. In the meantime, the following text is going to make an specific analysis on the difficulties of “Gansu mode” and even performance evaluation in local governments of China from four aspects in the model.
4.1 Be deficient in steady political supports

As above mentioned, the efficiency evaluation’s results in the second phase of “Gansu mode” which have adverse effect on some government leaders who are to be promoted haven’t been published. Later on, “Gansu mode” ended up with nothing definite. From here we see that government leaders’ attitudes play an important role in government performance evaluation. Firstly, the life (sustainability) of performance evaluation in Chinese local governments depends on leaders’ acknowledgement and attitudes to a large extent. If the present leader and other successions can regard promoting government effectiveness as self-mission, have a full realization that performance evaluation plays a positive role in improving government effectiveness and give strong support, then government performance evaluation will exist for a long period. However, if other successions of leaders possess various attitudes towards the performance evaluation, (some back it and some are in an opposite attitude), the performance evaluation activity of the government will hardly exist for a long period. All of above phenomena can see that the sustainability of the government efficiency evaluation mostly depends on the change of government leaders. Besides, government leaders’ political supports have an effect on implementing the performance evaluation. For example, if present leaders possess positive attitudes, and they will place the performance evaluation on the important agenda and provide full support on aspects of manpower and capacity, which will strengthen confidence and morale of the whole organization for implementing performance evaluation, thus promoting the effective implementing of various links and applying evaluation results to promote the construction of government efficiency and ultimately achieve the purpose of government performance evaluation. On the contrary, the performance evaluation just will become a mere formality, let along the use of evaluation results and improvement of government efficiency.

4.2 The system protection remains to be improved

Legal system protection, including laws and regulations, is a prerequisite to the implementing of performance evaluation. While present local governments have same features in performance evaluation—spontaneity, semi-spontaneity, and there is no specific legislation on government performance evaluation at national level, local governments in each level doesn’t have related policies and legal rules about government performance evaluation, either. The status of government performance hasn’t been confirmed in legal form makes it lack of rigid restrictions, so
that various successions of leaders can apply the efficiency evaluation flexibly without specific restrictions. When government leader is changed, the work emphasis will be shifted to some extent, and the position of performance evaluation will be changed along with the change of the work emphasis. Although the Gansu provincial government has published related documents about the implementing of “Gansu mode”, there is still not related legal rules on government performance evaluation, which leads to the failure of “Gansu mode” resulting from the results bring negative influences in promotion of some leaders. It is very clear that the sustainability of performance evaluation depends on the change of leaders without restrictions of inflexibility of legal rules, etc.

4.3 Be lack of the public participation

Although “Gansu mode” spares no efforts to mobilize social participation, bring enterprises into the scope of assessing subject and also entrusts high weighting for them, while the forms of present local government performance evaluation are mainly made up of two parts: internal evaluation and independent third-party evaluation, while the civic participation, the mass media, and the enterprise are less. There may be three reasons accounting for it. Firstly, social subjects, especially the mass and the enterprises pay less attention to the government efficiency evaluation and they don’t realize the links between the promotion of government evaluation and the public benefits; secondly, social bodies grasp the insufficient information because the advertising and education of the government isn’t so widely that they don’t have a clear realization of what and how is the government efficiency evaluation, which makes the public be indifferent to government performance evaluation. In addition, the mass’s initiative to participate is so low because of their vulnerable supervising minds. Finally, government performance evaluation is lack of the protection of related legal rules, which have explicit rules on the participation channels of the public.

4.4 The design of the evaluation should be improved

The rational design of performance evaluation has a close relationship with the implementing and effectiveness of results. Nowadays, the design of the government efficiency evaluation is very flexible, and it doesn’t pose a scientific and rational index in the premise of rational design. And also the content of evaluation is not comprehensive. They place the emphasis on the economic achievements and ignore other factors of the economic achievements, such as the satisfaction of the public. While, the choices of the subject of evaluation are not so rational, for example, most of evaluations mainly regard the government, professors and the individual intermediary organizations as the subjects of the evaluation, however, the mass, enterprises, the media are in low percentage of the efficiency evaluation, which must influence the effectiveness, the objective of the efficiency evaluation, even produce the erroneous influence in the following promotion of government efficiency. Although the design of “Gansu mode” has been nearly perfect, it also has a flaw, such as the government doesn’t bring the mass and the media into subjects of the evaluation so that results of the evaluation have effects on reputation, which also can be a potential reason for its failure.

5. Suggestions and countermeasures on promoting the sustainability of the performance

5.1 Providing institutional protection for evaluation through establishing related legal system.

Above paper points that perfective legal protection is the prerequisite of the implement of
government performance evaluation, which can keep the performance evaluation from the effect of changes of government leaders and provide an inflexibility restriction for the sustainability of performance evaluation. Therefore, all levels of government should establish specific law for government performance evaluation according to two aspects, one is that they should decree a national legal system in order to establish unification standard and model for government performance evaluation in macroscopic level; the other is that various levels of the government internal establish a rational system to protect the implement of performance evaluation for a long time according to their own features and practical facts in the premise of obeying the national rules, which can adopt conducting tests at selected points, and then spread from grass-roots units to high level units, and establish a practical and legal rules to secure the effective implement of performance evaluation to achieve the purpose—“Promoting construction and improvement by evaluation.”

5.2 Providing the political supports for sustainability of government performance evaluation through turning off the sense

Nowadays, local government leaders are all in a concept of hiding disadvantages and they always worries about the performance evaluation can expose various problems to hinder their own political prospects. Consequently, some government leaders employ trickeries during the performance evaluation so that it has a favorable result to make performance evaluation activity become a mere formality. And even some leaders cancel the performance evaluation activity to avoid some troubles. But in fact, the purpose of the scientific and effective performance evaluation not merely discovers some problems, and it can promote and solve problems to make problems less and less, government’s efficiency is higher and higher. The focus of the efficiency evaluation is not whether have problems, while its focus is how to promote and solve problems. We can discover and solve problems through performance evaluation, Which it not only can improve the efficiency of government, but also can help leaders’ promotion as their own outstanding achievements. Therefore, government leaders must shift their modes of thinking and take the long view of the performance evaluation to realize the important meaning of performance evaluation on construction of government performance and their own political prospects.

5.3 Strengthening the education training to improve the social engagement and capacity of the general public.

Currently, the general public doesn’t have full realization on government performance evaluation and their concepts of engagement are also indifferent. Various levels of government should strengthen the propaganda and the education to make the general public know the related knowledge of performance evaluation, what is the performance evaluation, how participates in performance evaluation and what is the function. While, the social can get more related information of performance evaluation easily and government’s propaganda emphasizes the importance of the social appraisal so as to improve the ordinary citizens consciousness of engagement of performance evaluation. In addition to, the government should provide diversified channels and corresponding system protection for the public to engage, which can make people take part in performance evaluation activity truly and effectively.

5.4 Improving and perfecting the evaluation system and strengthening the importance of the social appraisal.

Scientific and comprehensive evaluation system has a direct relationship with the effectiveness and correct use of results. On one hand, scientific evaluation system means the diversity and
comprehensive of evaluation subjects, while the government efficiency directly affects the public benefits of the mass and enterprises whether can apply and achieve effectively. Therefore, enterprises and the media should be brought into the scope of evaluation subjects except the government, professors and the intermediary organization; meanwhile, the government should adjust weights of various subjects according to features of evaluation projects, especially some evaluation activities that involving the social satisfaction should be in a high weight for social appraisal. On the other hand, scientific evaluation system also means rational and comprehensive evaluation indexes. The result of the government performance evaluation depends on several factors, so we should consider the comprehensive indexes rather than only emphasis on a single index, such as economic index, and other indexes also play the important role in evaluation, such as a social satisfaction index, etc.

6 Conclusions

The government performance evaluation as a important tool in government administration, which has a direct impact on the continuous promotion of the government efficiency, and also indirectly influences the achievements of the public benefits in a certain degree so as to influence the mass’s satisfaction and trust towards the government. While from an analysis of the above paper, the government performance evaluation in china has faced many obvious problems in political supports, legal protection and the social engagement and its sustainability of development also faces various difficulties. Since Chinese governments are devoting themselves to constructing a service government and they will accept the role of the service in subjective understanding and fully understand the true meaning of the service. Undoubtedly, the public, as recipients of government services, evaluation of government services is merited. While the result of each local government performance evaluation demonstrates that governments are not willing to accept assessments of the mass, and some even resist it. Therefore, all levels of government should shift concepts and realize the government performance evaluation can promote various services, which brings the government performance evaluation into the environment of the service government and focuses on the concept that “ promote construction and improvement by evaluation ”in order to conduct a government performance evaluation activity in the concept of constructing the service government better, which may arouse the initiative of performance evaluation from government leaders and the mass. In a meanwhile, government should prevent the performance evaluation activity from influence of the change of leaders through strengthening the legal protection and providing restrictions. And also it can offer a guidance and protection for related links. Finally, we should draw a lesson from the former practice and promote the evaluation system continuously to form a multivariate evaluation subjects and scientific evaluation indexes. In this way can we expect that the government performance evaluation can exist healthily and continuously to promote and improve the government efficiency.

References