

DOES PROCEDURAL JUSTICE RESEARCH EXPLAIN CHINA'S CIVIL UNREST?

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ABSTRACT

We investigate current perceptions of Chinese farmers who were displaced by the government's land-use reallocation process. Each year there are more than 50,000 incidents of social unrest in China and a substantial proportion of the unrests are due to perceived injustices in the land-use reallocation process. Survey data is collected from a sample of 250 former farmers who lost their rights to farm the land because of the government's takeover of agricultural land in order to support the needs of the country's industrial economy. We analyze the survey data to assess the procedural justice implications of China's land use policies.

INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of the 1990's, the Chinese government saw the need to move toward a more market responsive economy. This resulted in the implementation of laws reflecting a shift in policy toward the creation of efficient land markets [8]. However, as Lichtenberg and Chengri [6] discuss, the results of such land use policies are a rewarding of land conversion at the expense of traditional farming. China's "Rural Land Contracting Law" of 2003 defined property rights and spelled out policies intended to protect farmers and their investments. In practice, however, land reallocation policies used by village governments often ignore this law.

Land reallocation processes have resulted in economically disadvantaged ex-farmers who are part of the newly created social burden that China's Federal government will need to contend with in the years to come. The negative outcome of land reallocation and the citizen response to it has come from both the displaced farmers and those witnessing the takeover process. Farmers have precipitated thousands of protest gatherings each year [9] and reporting of these protests has been publicly presented by the media. For example, Wang [10] recently headlined a Shanghai newspaper article with "Land giveaways returning to haunt local officials." The article details illegal activities taken by local government officials toward personal short term profits by taking farmers off of the land that would have provided them with lifetime employment.

The social unrest by displaced farmers became coupled with the 2008 Summer Olympics that were recently held in Beijing. Because China had hoped to generate global goodwill by hosting the Olympic Games, the farmer unrest situation was particularly damaging [4]. During the run up to the Olympics, there was deregulation of the international news gathering services and the Chinese government allowed international news agencies access to rural issues such as the abuse of land reallocation. Therefore, failure to address and monitor peasant and farmer issues created not only social unrest, but some loss of goodwill worldwide.

CURRENT RESEARCH FOCUS

In this current research, a survey of Chinese farmers who had lost the use of their land is used to gain insights into why Chinese farmers nationwide are responding negatively to land reallocation. We investigate possible implications for government policy change and improvement within the context of existing “procedural justice” research, which is briefly summarized here.

An overview of procedural justice research is presented by Machura[7] who states that “violations of elementary procedural justice criteria contribute to a breakdown of state authority.” Importantly for this current research and its implications, Krehbiel and Cropanzano [5] found that the emotions of anger and frustration are the highest when an unfavorable outcome occurs because of an unfair procedure. These violations of elementary procedural justice concepts can be seen when an individual’s input into the process itself is limited. Houlden, LaTour, Walker, and Thibaut [3] note that their respondents felt process control was more important than control of the actual outcome. Research by Cohen [1] indicates that input to the decision process does not enhance justice perceptions if personal interest bias by a decision maker is seen to influence distribution of the resource. Hence, self-interested administrators are seen as detrimental to an outcome that might otherwise be seen as acceptable by the recipient.

We feel that the procedural justice research findings of, for example, Greenberg and Colquitt [2] could help Chinese policy makers more fully understand the importance of “justice” in the implementation of its policies. We propose two research hypotheses related to the topic of procedural justice in the context of the farmer unrest problem in China.

Hypothesis 1. Chinese farmers’ opinions of the land reallocation process are positively related to the amount of input farmers have in the process.

Hypothesis 2. Chinese farmers’ opinions of the changes in their standards of living following land reallocation are positively related to the amount of input farmers have in the process.

The City of Hefei, the location of farmers surveyed in this study, has seven regions, each with separate governing bodies and village organizations. Therefore, the method of land allocation used by each region could vary considerably from one region to the next. As such, farmer satisfaction with the land allocation process might vary considerably across regions. Therefore, we propose two additional hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3. Chinese farmers’ opinions of the land reallocation process are higher in regions where farmers have the most input into the process.

Hypothesis 4. Chinese farmers’ opinions of the improvements in their standards of living are higher in regions where farmers have the most input into the process.

These four hypotheses will be tested using data collected from the survey that was administered to farmers living in the City of Hefei, Province of Anhui, who had recently lost their use of the land. The survey was conducted with the assistance of the Bureau of National Land Administration of the City of Hefei. Surveyors either stopped someone on the road or visited the household. All of those surveyed were at least 16 years old. The respondent was the individual in each family who was the most familiar with their land loss situation. There were 250 surveys administered and carried out. Of those carried out, 217 surveys were usable (93.5%).

RESULTS

Full results of the hypothesis investigations will be presented at the conference meeting. In this paper, we only provide some of the more interesting demographic results. It was found that, before losing their land, 43% of the surveyed farmers worked full-time on farms and, in large part, reported no other substantial skill sets besides farm work. Eighty-four percent of respondents were of working age (16 - 59 years old). At the time of the survey, which was after the loss of their land use, 65% responded that they currently had no job or were doing part-time odd jobs and felt little or no job stability. Nine percent were working in local enterprises and 5% had found factory work in outside areas. Seven percent of those who were currently working had been assigned to jobs by the government; the balance found work by some other means independent of the government. All land that had been taken away was being used for some type of new construction such as real estate development (35%), factory construction (15%), infrastructure construction (15%), and other construction (35%).

Next we look at a few of the survey items related to the procedural process. One question asked “Whose opinions were used when making decisions concerning reallocation payments?” Fifty-four percent of respondents responded “nobody” while 10% responded “villagers” (meaning the farmers themselves). Forty-seven percent indicated that the actual monetary value of distribution amounts to farmers for giving up land use rights were not made known. Looking at the actual distribution of compensation, 51% agreed with the statement “the majority went to local government organizations and only a small amount went to farmers.” Regarding the amount of money distributed to farmers in compensation for land loss, the average was reported to be 10,290 yuan (about \$1,500). The survey found that 76% of farmers who received this money used it for living expenses, 81% no longer had a major source of income, 54% had retirement concerns, and 60% had high medical costs. The implication is that the payment and money allocation from the government was not sufficient to meet expenses in the face of lost employment.

DISCUSSION

Our preliminary investigation of the survey responses presents an image of farmers who, overall, had very limited input into the land re-allocation process, saw money destined for them filtered off at the township government level by a system that they did not understand and was never clearly explained to them. Further, the large majority of these farmers reported being worse off economically after they lost their land and their farming employment. These findings are supported by the procedural justice research that was referenced earlier in this paper.

Our initial findings indicate that the application of procedural justice tenets should help the Chinese Federal government more fully accomplish the land reallocation process by emphasizing the need for individual farmer input to the system; for example, use public announcements for distribution information and make sure money is not inappropriately filtered out by village administrators. Such changes could get to the heart of the farmer unrest situation and bring acceptable results to the Federal government in Beijing.

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