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A Study on the Motivations for Social Organizations' Participation in Hierarchical Evaluation from the Perspective of Rational Choice Theory: A Case Study of Shanghai's P District

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Abstract: Tiered evaluation of social organizations is a typical institutional form to boost public trust in them. However, in practice, there is often a bit of a challenge where the government is quite eager to participate, but social organizations can sometimes feel a bit apathetic. This study employs rational choice theory and takes Shanghai's P District as a case study to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of the motivational mechanisms driving social organizations' engagement in the evaluation system. The study reveals that the decision-making process of social organizations regarding evaluation participation is based on rational cost-benefit-risk calculations. At the micro level, uncertain expected returns, high participation costs, and a lack of efficacy perception inhibit willingness to participate; at the macro level, the "single-center" evaluation structure suppresses organizational autonomy, while deficiencies in technical rationality and legal foundations raise participation barriers. Together, these factors result in low evaluation coverage and widespread formalism. Therefore, it is essential to transform the evaluation system from "administrative control" to "development governance", optimizing institutional structures at the macro level, innovating technical mechanisms at the meso level, and implementing targeted empowerment at the micro level. This study elucidates the complex mechanisms underlying insufficient motivation for evaluation participation, providing theoretical and practical insights for fostering endogenous development momentum within social organizations.

Keywords: Social organizations; Tiered evaluation; Rational choice theory; Participation dynamics

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1. Introduction

The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China stressed the need to build a “collaborative governance framework with shared construction, shared governance, and shared benefits”, shift the focus of social governance to the grassroots level, make full use of the role of social organizations, and achieve positive interactions among government governance, social self-regulation, and residents’ self-governance. In light of this, social organizations have begun to take on the task of implementing government functions and delivering public services. The standardization and professionalization of social governance have become important reasons for its good operation. To guide and supervise social organizations, the Ministry of Civil Affairs began to carry out the assessment of social organizations in 2007 and issued the “Guiding Opinions on Exploring the Establishment of a Third-Party Evaluation Mechanism for Social Organizations” in 2015, clearly stating that third-party assessment will be the direction of development. The goal is to improve the overall level of development in order to expand the public’s awareness of and trust in it, and create a tiered assessment system that offers different ways to provide government services and functionally transfer state-owned enterprises and other assets, etc. The aim of the third-party audit has not been achieved to a certain extent. According to current research by social organizations, there are considerable differences in motivation and behavior for participation in tiered evaluations. On the one hand, organizations that have obtained a 3A rating or higher are accorded some favor from the government, such as access to public office transfers and procurement contracts [1]. At the same time, there are problems with the appropriateness of the evaluation index, the unreasonable index items, and too much work for the participants. In addition, the applications of the evaluation results are often shallow; thus, people lose interest in participating or engage in “perfunctory participation” [2]. More seriously, because the indicators are not clear, there is a lack of process supervision and self-interest among the evaluators themselves, and some third-party organizations have offered paid consultation services or manipulated scores for financial gain. This will affect the fairness of the assessment and may even result in collusion and adverse selection, as stated by Xu that “bad money drives out good”, thereby diminishing people’s sense that the evaluation is fair and reducing their willingness to participate [3].

Most of the current research on the social organization evaluation aims to improve the indicator system for the evaluation, guarantee the independence of third-party evaluation agencies, and expand the scope of application for the evaluation results. A few studies have shown that the burden of evaluation and the lack of application of results can reduce people’s willingness to participate [2]. However, there is a lack of systematic studies on the motives for participation and reasons for choice in social organizations’ participation based on their own behavior. Rational choice theory holds that people, because of their circumstances in society and their limited resources, will make rational choices that help them achieve the best results. Theoretically, people can use this method to study the division of social organization and make more structural evaluations. It can be used to understand why some enterprises actively engage in the evaluation, others comply passively, and still others avoid it deliberately due to various reasons and interests. Tao and others have also pointed out that good categorical support and management should accurately identify governance-oriented organizations [4]. The identification process itself is based on assessments that reflect a company’s actual governance level and are rationally accepted by the company, so people also need to know how rationally companies view evaluations [5].

Therefore, this paper will introduce the analytical framework of Rational Choice Theory and explore the following main questions: Given the current institutional environment and evaluation system, what are the main motivating factors for social organizations to participate in tiered evaluations? How does a social organization evaluate and judge the costs, benefits, risks, etc., of participation? What is the organization of the organization, and why has this rationality not been achieved? Based on the above questions, this paper hopes to discover the behavioral logic of participation in social organizations, provide theoretical support for optimizing the design of evaluation indicators, strengthen the application of evaluation results, cultivate high-quality third-party evaluators, and motivate social organizations to take the initiative in participation. Finally, this paper hopes to assist in realizing the original aim of the tiered evaluation system, which is "to advance construction, improvement, and development by means of assessment."

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1. Literature review

Over the past decade and a half, tiered evaluations of social organizations have become the main institutional system for the Chinese government to regulate, foster, and motivate the participation of social organizations in social governance. Domestic and foreign research has been conducted on many aspects of the institutional value of evaluation, practical problems, the design of the evaluation system, and organizational participation behavior. Although this can help people better understand the operational logic of evaluation, it also shows that people need to conduct systematic studies from the angles of "organizational agency" and "behavioral rationality."

First, research on the background of social evaluation generally finds that the evaluation of social organizations has three levels of values: for the government, it can refine the regulatory tool for "promoting construction, management and development through evaluation" and provide a basis for government procurement of services and functional transfer. Social organizations can strengthen their own governance and promote the development of all sectors of society by exerting a leading role in the industry. Social governance should be regulated to act as a gate for the "government" and "society", and this will motivate more organizations to take part in philanthropy and social governance innovation. Foreign research has also reached the same conclusion that voluntary accreditation and accountability for non-profit organizations are the same. Gugerty and Prakash believe that these programs are to address the problem of information asymmetry for donors and non-profit organizations at its root. Through the establishment of rules and the supervision of whether these rules are being followed, the participating organizations can "signal virtue" to the outside world that they have good quality and reliability [6]. Thereby attracting more resources and fostering a stronger sense of mission [7]. It fits the logic of China's tiered evaluation system well, and it is a trade-off between "grade symbols" and resources and trust.

Second, based on the studies, there are still problems in technology and institutions in practical application and local issues. Indicator Disconnection and Performativity: The uniform national indicators do not align with the actual situation of grassroots social organizations. If the focus is too much on "documentation and lack of actual results", it will result in high compliance costs for enterprises, leading them to forge documents or even commit fraud to obtain a good rating. Although the evaluated organizations have performed well in party building and internal governance, there may be a lack of strategic planning at the foundation level, and the social service agencies have weak information disclosure. In addition, due to the different regions, the link between the evaluation results and the actual benefits of government procurement is unclear; thus, people do not want to take part [8]. Failure and self-interest of third-party auditors: According to research, when the indicators are vague and supervision is weak, controlled third-party audit institutions may be motivated by profit to provide paid consulting or change scores in order to collude and thus violate the fairness of the audit [1]. The Monocentric Institutional Structure: Based on Ostrom's theory of polycentric governance and Hayek's theory of the division of knowledge, some scholars believe that the current evaluation system has a "monocentric structure", and power, information, responsibility, and risk are concentrated in the civil affairs department. Therefore, it is an open monopoly that lacks information symmetry and trust in the system. The way to solve this is an open and competitive polycentric evaluation system [9]. Meanwhile, the primary barriers to third-sector participation in evaluations include insufficient financial resources, inadequate technical capacity, and excessive cost perceptions; whereas facilitating factors include external support, an organizational evaluation culture, and intrinsic motivation for stakeholder accountability [10].

Finally, research has put forward some improvements to the evaluation system at the top and the bottom. Technical Level: Set various indicators according to the type of organization and field, reduce the number of formalistic documents, and increase the dimensions for service results and beneficiary satisfaction. Give the granting organization more time to correct the problems and provide professional guidance on site during the audit; then, consider making reductions in the corresponding scores. One of the many multi-dimensional frameworks for measuring the performance of non-profit organizations is the Balanced Scorecard (BSC); therefore, it can be determined how to adjust the weight of different evaluation indicators to align with regulations and realize the mission of the organization. Agency Level: Improve the professionalism of auditors, establish an independent check-and-balance mechanism outside the company, use a "meta-audit" function to control auditors' own interests, etc. [11].

Although some research has been conducted on the reasons for assessment, the construction of indicators, external supervision, institutional arrangements, and other factors, etc., a major lack is still present. Most of the previous studies have focused at the level of macro "institutional structure" or operational "indicators and technology." Social organizations are an area that has received relatively little research; therefore, it is assumed that these entities are motivated by self-interest and have their own goals, but the reasons for their actions under institutional constraints and incentive systems have not been identified. "Rational adaptation" behavior in the Chinese context is driven by the government; although it is nominally voluntary, it has been actively mobilized for various purposes, such as active investment, strategic perfunctoriness, formal compliance, implicit resistance or collusion, and it does not have an empirical foundation or test in the framework of rational choice theory. Rational Choice Theory holds that people will choose the option that can give them the greatest benefit according to the circumstances under which they are making decisions, and thus it can fill the research gap left by institutions and designs. Therefore, people will no longer focus on problems in the evaluation system according to norms. Therefore, due to the current deficiencies of the monocentric evaluation system, there is a risk of third-party assessment and uncertainty in the application of evaluation results; thus, the following problem will be studied in this paper: How do social organizations participate in the tiered evaluation system in practice, and what are their reasons for doing so? What are the main reasons people do or do not participate?

2.2. Analysis framework

Traditional research on the evaluation of social organizations generally takes the problem of "regulation and development" as its dual goal. At the core of evaluation is to standardize the behavior of social organizations and strengthen their credibility and professional capacity through a scientific system of indicators and procedures, thus building a modern system of social organizations that has good government regulation, lively social organizations, and high public trust. The development path of the institution will be implemented by leaders who can provide an environment and the necessary resources to operate normally. It is hoped that a good evaluation system will lead to, regulate, and even "guide" the healthy development of social organizations. However, at the macro level, it may not solve the problem of how to translate the intentions of institutional design into the actual participation behavior of social organizations.

Rational Choice Theory shows us that the final patterns of social phenomena and institutional operation are the result of the concrete behavior and interaction of actors [12]. Given the institutional environment, individuals will rationally adjust their behavior and, thus, change the outcome of the institution. Whether the policy goals of the tiered evaluation system for social organizations can be achieved will not only depend on the technical perfection of the institutional text but also, more importantly, on whether the system can be realized rationally in the behavior of a large number of social organizations. Therefore, in the analysis of the motivational dynamics of participation in social organizations, people need to change from the previous focus on the macro level of "institution-structure" functions and use a micro-analytical logic that focuses on the rational behavior of the main actor: the social organization itself.

According to the micro-analytical way of Rational Choice Theory, an effective evaluation system that can stimulate the endogenous motivation of social organizations should meet the following basic logic for achieving social order:

First of all, the incentive logic in the institutional design should be in line with the structure of rational-choice social-organization behavior. As the primary subjects, the rational systems that direct the behavior of the government and social organizations should be aligned. If the evaluation system is based on "administrative control rationality", but the social organizations' function is in line with "survival-adaptation rationality" or "professional development rationality", then there will be serious goal conflicts and incentive mismatches in the mediation of evaluations. There is a lack of cooperation, and there is a separation between the needs of the institution and those of social organizations; therefore, they are passive in their participation, such as exhibiting "formalistic compliance" or "strategic collusion", and cannot achieve the goal of "promoting construction through evaluation."

Second, in order to achieve the coherence of the rational structure, one should lead social organizations in forming an "evaluation-identification rationality" that is aimed at long-term development and the public interest. Although the evaluation system can somewhat meet the need for "instrumental rationality" by linking to resources, the motivation of participation may still be rooted in the will to "pass the test" and thus be utilitarian short-term coping behavior. Now only the risk of loss requires shifting resources. Therefore, only when a company's rational calculus transitions from passive "instrumental calculation" to "developmental rationality", that is to say, it begins to see the constructive value of evaluation for its own continuous development and the realization of public interests—will active participation be turned into an independent choice. Therefore, it can be concluded that the evaluation system should provide extrinsic motivation and help social organizations establish strong beliefs in their own power and purposes through professional design of the process, construction of positive interactive feedback, and development application of results. This is the solid social foundation on which the good operation of the evaluation system is built.

Based on the above, the three parts of the analysis system in this study are: the macro-level institutional environment, the micro-level reasoning process, and the meso-level behavior strategy.

First, the macro-level institutional environment: Structure of the rational choice. At this level, people will study the basic rules set by the tiered evaluation system of the government, such as the incentive structure, constraint structure, and interaction structure. The above are the structural factors and parameters that constitute the starting conditions for rational choices of social organizations.

Second, micro-level rational calculation: Trade-offs in cost, benefit, and belief of social organizations. As rational agents pursuing "utility", social organizations are regarded as such in this paper, and people investigate the reasons for their participation in, and evaluations by, other social organizations. It mainly consists of the anticipation of gains, the prediction of losses, and beliefs about one's own ability to act. The three reasons above are directly related to how willing an organization is to participate.

Finally, the meso-level behavior strategies: A typology of rational adaptation. According to the results of the net expected utility calculation, social organizations will choose different types of rational behavior, which are divided into two categories: active and passive. The above are: active and constructive participation; compliant and formalistic participation; strategic collusion; passive avoidance. The spread and development of the above strategies have achieved some practical results in the evaluation system.

The above framework aims to show that the reasons for the participation of social organizations in evaluation are not merely "requests and responses." It is actually a change in behavior that has been made after careful consideration based on the rules of the institution. Only after learning about the microstructure of behavior and making changes to the institutional design will people be able to address the current problems in the evaluation system, such as "government enthusiasm but social organization apathy", "pervasive formalism", and "incentive failure", and thus establish an endogenous "developmental mechanism" rather than an external "management tool" for the evaluation system.

3. Methodology

Based on the theory of rational choice, this paper will systematically study the reasons why social organizations participate in the tiered evaluation system led by the government. To understand more thoroughly the rational calculation process, behavior, and reasons for a particular decision to value it, a qualitative study will be conducted. In addition, based on initial talks and direct observation of the actual operations of the dynamic institution, some support and explanations for the research results have been obtained.

3.1. Research subjects and site selection

The subjects of the main research in this paper are the various social organizations that engage in the tiered evaluation system of District P, Shanghai, and their related personnel. District P was chosen as the case study site based on the following three reasons:

First of all, types and frontiers. District P was one of the first to start social organization assessment in 2007, and its assessment system has been improved and expanded over the following ten years. The system is relatively advanced and comprehensive, and its evaluation concept and actual experience are at the forefront of the country. The concentration of achievements, contradictions and typical problems in the development of China's social organization tiered evaluation system makes District P a very good object of study.

Secondly, generalization comprehensively. District P has built a three-tier mobilization and evaluation network, which consists of the District Bureau of Social Organizations, the District Social Organization

Service Center, and sub-district/town service centers. The entire system includes all types of activities in the area of policy-making and third-party review, as well as organizational participation; it is a typical institution for observing various actors, such as the government, non-governmental organizations, and the public.

Third, Research Feasibility and Depth. The researcher has been undertaking the six-month internship period at the District P Social Organization Service Center so far and has taken part in all links of the evaluation process, including mobilization, indicator interpretation, on-site guidance, and initial result review. In this way, the researcher could be closer to the actual situation and gather a large number of internal documents, unofficial communications, etc., from an "insider's perspective"; thus, there would be some depth to this study.

3.2. Data collection methods

To grasp the varied ways in which society is structured for participation in evaluations from all sides, this paper used two main ways of data collection.

First, carry out some semi-structured interviews. Interviews were carried out to directly collect the perceptions, attitudes, reasons for behavior, etc. of the different subjects in the evaluation. According to the four main problems of the "perception and evaluation of the evaluation system": perceived benefits, costs, and risks of participation; behavior decision-making process; suggestions for improvement of the evaluation system, etc., a semi-structured interview guide was created, and ten key informants were interviewed during the internship (**Table 1** shows the list of interviewees).

Table 1. Overview of interviewees

Code	Gender	Interview Location	Interviewee Type
A1	Female	Service Center	Evaluation Expert
A2	Female	Service Center	Evaluation Staff
A3	Male	Service Center	Evaluation Staff
A4	Female	Public Welfare Park	Head of Evaluated Organization
A5	Female	Public Welfare Park	Employee of Evaluated Organization
A6	Male	Association	Employee of Evaluated Organization
A7	Female	Service Center	Staff of Community Affairs Office
A8	Female	Promotion Association	Evaluation Expert
A9	Male	Public Welfare Park	Employee of Evaluated Organization
A10	Female	Service Center	Evaluation Expert

As shown in **Table 1**, a total of 10 interviewees were selected for this study, representing three key stakeholder groups in the social organization evaluation process. The list included: (1) Government regulators: Staff from the District Bureau of Social Organizations were present to learn about the aims and general management logic of the policy; (2) Evaluation implementers: Directors, staff and external evaluation experts from the third-party evaluation agency (the District P Social Organization Service Center) took part to learn how the evaluation was conducted and what observations were made regarding the behavior of social organizations; and (3) Evaluation subjects: Directors and front-line staff of the participating social organizations joined in to observe motivation calculations, coping strategies, etc., from the perspective of the evaluatees.

Through the creation of an open-ended conversation environment, the interview content will contain data; at the same time, researchers can learn how people give reasons for their choices and why they feel this way.

Second, Non-concealed Participant Observation. The researcher, who is in fact an intern, was fully involved in the operation of the tiered evaluation of the District P social organization. Participant observation is a good way to get to know the working conditions of non-profit organizations better [13]. Multiple times during this study, several kinds of observation were conducted: First, direct observation was carried out to be present at the evaluation mobilization meetings and indicator training, and to watch how social organizations performed, how active their involvement was, and what kind of responses they showed. Second, during off-site evaluations guided by experts, I was with the experts to collect details of the interactions among experts and social organizations, documents for review, feedback given, and the organizations' immediate responses. Third, all kinds of text materials and circumstances over the years were gathered; among them, District P's evaluation policies at different times, work records, and evaluation reports were regularly collected and analyzed together with other less formal business contacts to find inconsistencies between the written regulations and the reality of actual application.

3.3. Data analysis and application of the theoretical framework

The main data sources for this study were the transcripts of the interviews and observation notes, etc. The data were analyzed by means of thematic analysis, and at the same time, the analytical framework of Rational Choice Theory was applied in this way.

First, open coding: Read the raw data multiple times, add some initial labels, and then extract the first few concepts, such as "material rewards", "policy preference", "reputation", "labor costs", "time pressure", "perception of evaluation unfairness", "perfunctory compliance", and "value of expert guidance."

Second, axial coding: Some concepts were grouped and organized into a more general category. The above categories were then matched to the main variables in Rational Choice Theory. For example, descriptions of bonuses and project priority were coded under "expected benefits", complaints about the burden of document compilation and the long process duration were coded under "expected costs", skepticism about the fairness of evaluation and policy implementation was coded under "risk perception and self-efficacy", and behaviors such as "fabricating documents" and "attending but not engaging seriously" were coded under "behavioral strategies."

Thirdly, selective coding and theoretical integration: The central theme of the story will be set as "behavioral choices driven by rational calculation", and then all kinds of strategic choices that different social organizations made in response to various types of "institutional constraints"—such as "active and constructive participation", "formalistic compliance", and "passive avoidance"—can be organized logically. At the same time, this paper has also studied how large-scale institutional arrangements impact the factors involved in the rational decision-making of local governments, and as a result, a collective action problem at the district level with the characteristics of "many re-evaluations and few first-time judgments" and "limited participation" has been created.

3.4. Research ethics

To improve the quality of the research, the following measures were taken: (1) Triangulation: To guarantee both the accuracy of facts and the appropriateness of interpretations in the study, data obtained through interviews and observation were combined. (2) Member checking: Early in the analysis process, some of the initial results were shared with the interviewed evaluation experts and center staff for verification to ensure that the interpretation was correct. (3) Researcher reflexivity: I have always been conscious that I have a dual position as both an "intern" and a "researcher", so I employed an "insider's perspective" for a more profound understanding; at the same time, I am aware of possible positional bias and have tried to remain neutral when presenting various opinions in the written analysis.

The ethical regulations of the university are to be followed. For all the interviews, the purpose of the research was informed in advance, and oral consent was obtained. All interview excerpts in the text have been anonymized; that is, names and organizational information have been replaced with codes. The internal documents that were used for the evaluation are only for the purpose of the study, and no information that can identify specific organizations or private individuals has been disclosed.

4. Findings

4.1. Analysis of the current state of social organization participation in tiered Evaluation: A descriptive analysis based on District P data

Since the initiation of the tiered evaluation system for social organizations in 2007, the District P Bureau of Civil Affairs and the District Social Organization Service Center have continuously refined evaluation policies, optimized mobilization strategies, and conducted multiple rounds of evaluation training and on-site guidance. From an empirical standpoint, while the absolute number of social organizations participating in evaluations in District P has increased in recent years and the coverage of participation has gradually expanded, the actual participation rate remains low relative to the total number of registered organizations eligible to participate. The willingness of social organizations to participate thus still requires further enhancement. Drawing on internal archives from the District P Social Organization Evaluation Center and publicly available information, this section presents a descriptive analysis of participation data from key periods, including 2015–2019 and 2023–2024, in order to reveal basic characteristics and trends.

4.1.1. Fluctuating but incremental growth in the number of participating organizations; overall evaluation coverage remains low

While reviewing the internal working archives of the District P social organization's tiered evaluation, the researcher noted a set of key data points: between 2015 and 2019, the number of organizations actually participating in the evaluation was 52, 74, 108, 87, and 89, respectively. When the researcher sought confirmation and interpretation of this fluctuating trend—an initial rise followed by stabilization—from a senior staff member at the District Social Organization Service Center, the following analysis was offered based on his firsthand experience:

"The 2017 peak was no accident. Those years saw top-down promotion of evaluations, a three-tier mobilization network, and policy training reaching nearly all eligible organizations. Crucially, clear cash rewards—10,000 RMB for 3A and 50,000 RMB for 4A—strongly attracted small and medium-sized organizations. Meanwhile, as the third-party evaluator, our center continuously refined the process to make documentation and on-site assessment clearer and more predictable. Thus, the 2015–2017 growth reflects the combined effect of strong mobilization, material incentives, and process optimization." (A2)

The above interview record shows the explanatory power of Rational Choice Theory at the micro level. The company's decision to take part in the audit will be based on a comprehensive assessment of "administrative reasons, economic benefits, process costs, and future gains", and District P has had good results in this regard in the past. The stagnation above is a serious problem, and if the evaluation system does not continuously put forward new and improved "utility options" for the rational use of social organizations, its own development will be hampered.

However, when comparing the number of participating organizations with the total number of registered organizations in the district that are eligible to participate (i.e., those established for at least two fiscal years), it can be seen that the coverage of evaluations has been persistently low. A staff member of the Evaluation Center said:

"Even at the 2017 peak of 108 participants, the participation rate was below 18%, given that over 600 organizations were eligible at the time. In most other years, participation rates have fluctuated between 8% and 15%. As of early 2024, among District P's approximately 2,300 registered social organizations, only 602 hold a current valid rating—an overall coverage rate of roughly 26%." (A2)

4.1.2. Institutionalized participation structure: The coexistence of "re-evaluation dominance" and "high-grade concentration"

The limitations of participation in the evaluation are not only in the quantity but also in its structure; there are two main reasons for this.

First, the proportion of organizations in the participant group is relatively high, and the number of first-time participants is still low; that is to say, "the same organizations come and go" in the evaluation pool. Each year's list of participants has had a relatively large proportion of organizations in the re-evaluation stage (those hoping to improve their rating), and the number of new organizations has been relatively small. Therefore, the expansion of the evaluation area has been slow, and its ability to cover new organizations is weak. Many new or young enterprises find that the assessment is too costly and complex, the procedures are unclear, and thus are unwilling to undergo an initial evaluation.

"The same organizations come and go in the evaluation—it is essentially the same group participating year after year. First-time participants are relatively few. Although quite a few new social organizations have been established in recent years, their organizational capacity remains relatively weak, and they are unfamiliar with the evaluation policies. This undermines their confidence in participating." (A1)

Second, the distribution of awarded grades is in a pyramid shape, and most of the resources and prestige are at the top. Taking the data from early 2026 of District P as an example, among the 606 organizations with valid ratings, 42 were rated 5A, 92 were rated 4A, 222 were rated 3A, and about 250 were rated 1A or 2A. High-grade organizations (4A and 5A) were 134 in number and accounted for only 22% of all rated organizations [14]. Due to their good grades, some organizations have been given some special privileges in accessing government services for the procurement of goods and services, philanthropic venture capital, tax-exempt certifications, etc., and thus a cycle of "high grade > abundant resources > greater stability" has been formed. On the other hand, for the large number of organizations with grades from 1A to 3A, the tangible benefits resulting from the evaluation may be relatively small. It may be that they have lost the will to participate or hope for a higher grade, and it will also reduce the attraction of the evaluation for medium- and small-sized enterprises.

In short, after over a decade of implementation, the tiered evaluation system in District P has passed the initial stage of rapid expansion and entered a plateau period, and now "stock re-evaluation" and a reduction in scale are the main characteristics. At present, there is a problem of low coverage, and the incentive-providing effect of the institutionalized participation structure has been weakened. At present, there is a phenomenon of a "government's interest but little social organization"; that is to say, the fundamental institutional constraints in the current evaluation system reduce the internal motivation of social organizations to participate.

4.2. Rational choice analysis of constraints on social organizations' willingness to participate

According to the old rational-choice theory, it is assumed in this paper that participation in the tiered evaluations of social organizations is a choice by rational actors to maximize their own interests under the institutional system and in the context of resource scarcity. Based on empirical observations in District P, many social organizations have shown behavior such as a "lukewarm response", "passive participation", and even "strategic avoidance." In this section, these organizations will be introduced, and the reasons for their lack of willingness to participate will be systematically presented from two levels: at the micro-level of individual rational calculation and at the macro-level of institutional constraints, in order to uncover the inner logic of the structural dilemma of "government enthusiasm but social organization apathy."

4.2.1. Micro-level drivers: Diminished expected utility and weakened behavioral incentives in rational calculation

Social organizations are free associations of individuals with various interests; they decide whether or not to take part after a cost-benefit analysis. As shown in the District P case, the current evaluation system cannot motivate most social organizations in the three areas of expected gains, operating costs, and the sense of achievement after achieving results; therefore, there is a systematic decline in net expected utility.

First, there is ambiguity, delay, and a high risk of the expected benefits. According to the rational action theory, the start and continuation of behavior are motivated by people's beliefs about receiving rewards. According to the assessment system in District P, there will be more financial incentives, preferential treatment for government procurement, etc., as well as strengthened internal governance and professional capabilities [15]. However, based on practice, none of the three types of benefits have been fully realized and thus fail to motivate the staff effectively.

Instrumental benefits: although the policy documents have stated that resources will be distributed according to grades, specific implementation rules for this have not been released, and there is a considerable amount of "diminished marginal returns." District P gives cash bonuses to the first group of rated enterprises but does not have this privilege for the second group of re-evaluated enterprises, which accounts for most of the participants. In the field, a representative of a reorganized organization mentioned to us after learning that there would be no bonus, "Without the reward, we will not participate." This shows that when the primary incentive for behavior is no longer reliable or fair, instrumental motivation is easily lost. The above short-term and selective designs of incentives will not promote the construction of stable institutions that can motivate people to keep participating.

Developmental benefits: long-term discounting and perception problems. The main justification of the evaluation, that is, "promoting construction by evaluation", has very long and uncertain benefits. Many resource-limited social organizations at the beginning of their development do not have the extensive documents required for the many evaluation indicators and are therefore only about meeting compliance. An evaluation expert pointed out:

"According to our 1,000-point indicator system, organizations are supposed to extract the corresponding archival files. But in reality, everyone just prints things out and creates new documents from scratch." (A2)

When the reason for the assessment is no longer to evaluate risk and guide development, but only to meet the formal demands of regulations or record-keeping, people will lose faith in the "developmental benefits" promised by social organizations and thus give them a very small present value in their own rational judgments.

Second, there are many high costs of participation and loss of opportunity. Any rational choice should consider both the direct and indirect costs of action [12]. The structure of costs faced by social organizations in the evaluation practice of District P is relatively high and complex; thus, there is a considerable participation barrier.

Explicit costs: intensive labor and time investment. The evaluation period is about nine months long, and for the past three years, the social organization has had to allocate a significant amount of full-time or part-time labor to conduct a systematic review, organization, and documentation of their activities. Small and medium-sized enterprises usually have fewer full-time staff and higher staff turnover; thus, it is not suitable for them. One interviewee said:

"Is spending so much time and effort on the evaluation really worth it?" (A6)

Implicit Costs: Compliance Distortion and Mission Drift. The basic reason is that the standardization of evaluation indicators does not match the diversity of social organizations. In order to meet the requirements for uniformity, many grassroots and flexible organizations are forced to conduct "formalistic transformation of organizational behavior" and may thus lose their original, efficient informal operating models. Such adaptation to "meet the standards" is a way of using organizational resources, and it may also lead to "goal displacement", that is, in the pursuit of high evaluation scores, the original purpose of providing services is forgotten; this is a serious implicit institutional cost.

Lastly, there is a general lack of participation self-efficacy and a loss of the will to fight. Sense of efficacy is the way people think that they can achieve goals by taking actions [16]. It shows how much social organizations believe that their own efforts can influence the process of evaluation and thus achieve the expected results in the evaluation context. Many factors in the evaluation practice of District P are responsible for low self-efficacy.

Procedural Justice Concerns and Low Perceived Outcome Controllability. Third-party evaluation agencies are supposed to be independent and professional. However, there is a risk of "organizational self-interest" due to the "administrative principal-agent" relationship with government departments, and thus they are not reliable. Social organizations have had reservations about the fairness and openness of the assessment. An evaluation expert pointed out:

"When repeated or long-term participation experiences fail to validate initial value expectations, social organizations readily fall into 'learned helplessness', believing their actions cannot change their situation. Consequently, they adopt strategies of passive compliance, perfunctory engagement, or outright avoidance in subsequent evaluations, leading to the complete erosion of intrinsic motivation to participate." (A8)

4.2.2. Macro-level drivers: Systemic misrepresentation of the rational choice environment by institutional structural deficiencies

Micro-level rational calculation does not occur in a vacuum but unfolds within the "rules of the game" set by the macro-institutional structure. Deep-seated deficiencies in the current social organization evaluation system—concerning power structure, technical design, and legal foundation—systematically shape and worsen the rational choice environment for social organizations.

First, the "monocentric" authoritarian evaluation structure and its institutional effect on agency. Drawing on Coleman's theory of authority relations, the "fully government-participatory" evaluation model practiced in District P constitutes a vertical authority structure with administrative power as its sole core [17]. This structure fundamentally defines the roles and relationships of all actors, leading to a breakdown in incentive transmission.

Objectification and limitation of social organization agency. Within this setup, departments hold the main authority to establish rules, oversee processes, and make final decisions, creating a clear sense of structure and control. Social organizations are placed in the object position of being evaluated and inspected; their participation is essentially a response to and compliance with administrative authority. The detail that "evaluation timing is subject to the availability of leaders and experts" is not mere politeness but a true reflection of unequal power relations. Social organizations cede part of their evaluative authority and autonomy over their own activities yet struggle to receive reciprocal respect, substantive feedback, or developmental support in return. Consequently, participation readily degenerates into performative "compliance rituals" aimed at fulfilling administrative tasks, with their internal developmental needs being marginalized.

The constrained third party and the structural risk to evaluation credibility. As an extension of administrative power, third-party evaluation agencies depend heavily on government project commissions for their survival and development. This "non-competitive resource dependence" relationship severely constrains their independence and impartiality. Under weak regulatory mechanisms, third-party agencies themselves may, based on their own "organizational survival rationality", develop strategic behaviors such as offering paid consulting or flexible scoring [18]. This not only directly increases the economic costs and rent-seeking risks for social organizations but also systematically erodes the lifeblood of the evaluation system—its credibility. Formal, written institutional incentives may thus be undermined by informal "relationship-based" practices, creating an adverse selection environment where "bad money drives out good."

Second, the dual deficiencies of the evaluation system in technical standards and legal foundation. The scientific validity and legitimacy of institutional design are prerequisites for providing actors with stable expectations, clear signals, and a level playing field. The current evaluation system exhibits notable shortcomings on both dimensions. The technical rationality dilemma of the indicator system: the tension between standardization and diversity. Although the existing evaluation indicator system strives for comprehensiveness, its design logic is heavily influenced by "technocratic governance" thinking, favoring standardization, quantification, and comparability. It fails to adequately accommodate the substantial heterogeneity among social organizations in terms of service domains, developmental stages, and organizational forms. An evaluation staff member noted:

"Using a single set of indicators cannot perfectly measure them all. This 'one-size-fits-all' indicator design not only forces all organizations to bear high 'standardized compliance costs' but also constitutes de facto institutional exclusion for many uniquely operating social organizations (e.g., community mutual aid groups, elderly cultural associations), as their core, non-quantifiable social value cannot be adequately represented or fairly evaluated within the existing indicator system." (A3)

Second, insufficient legal provisions and a lack of stable institutional expectations. The current evaluation work primarily relies on departmental regulations such as the "Measures for the Management of Social Organization Evaluation", which occupy a low position in the legal hierarchy and lack sufficient authority [19]. Most of these regulations are principle-based in terms of the specific procedures, the rights and obligations of third-party agencies, the legal effects of evaluation results and remedies, etc. Institutional "vagueness" and "reticence" give too much power to the implementers; the evaluation is arbitrary, and it raises doubts among organizations about fairness. At the same time, it also implies that the various preferences and priorities promised according to the evaluation results are not strictly bound by law and can be regarded as mere "policy promises." There is a high degree of "policy uncertainty", which significantly increases the long-term risk of participation for social organizations and hinders the formation of stable, rational expectations about the evaluation.

In short, the problem of a lack of willingness by District P's people to participate in social organizations can be viewed as the collective behavior choice made by many rational actors after all costs and benefits, risks, etc., have been thoroughly analyzed in a macro-institutional environment with structural complications. At the micro level, there is ambiguity, delay, and high-risk benefits in a certain type of subsidy, and many high costs and a general lack of self-efficacy reduce the "net expected utility" for social organizations. At the macro level, the "monocentric" authoritarian evaluation system systematically suppresses the agency of social organizations and distorts the transmission of incentive signals; in addition, there are dual technical and legal deficiencies in the institutional design that create an unfair competitive environment by raising participation thresholds and risk premiums. Micro-level rational calculation and macro-level structural constraints are not independent but are related to and influenced by each other, which is why there is a problem of a low mobilization response rate.

4.3. Strategies to boost the motivation of social organizations to participate in tiered evaluation

Based on the above results, the lack of a desire to participate is due to unreasonable calculations at the micro level and structural problems at the macro level. Therefore, the improvement strategy should no longer be about making many small technical repairs but rather needs to help shift the paradigm of the evaluation system from administrative control to endogenous development. To create a better rational-choice environment for social organizations, incentives need to be organized to change the institutional rules of society. Strategies have been devised for the four areas of evaluation standards and processes, professional evaluation capacity, effectiveness of evaluation results, and innovation of the mobilization model; together, they will reform the system in an orderly manner.

4.3.1. Optimization of assessment norms and procedures

The original indicators and fixed processes are the direct reasons why the participants think there are too many "compliance costs." Optimization should aim to improve the relevance, efficiency, and constructive nature of evaluation.

First, create a new, improved category and tier based on the above results. The indicator system is to set the direction of change for the organization. The current "one-size-fits-all" and form-heavy system is too cumbersome for the employees, and it does not truly reflect the worth of the company. The two rules for optimization are as follows: (1) Category- and tier-based Design: The redrawing of indicators should not be uniform but should differ according to different formats; "category-based" refers to the construction of a series of indicator modules for various types of organizations based on their main tasks and results, and “tier-based” is to set staggered requirements according to the scale and development stage of the organization so as not to be overly stringent for small or new enterprises. (2) Strengthen the focus on outcome and social impact indicators: Reduce the excessive focus on internal management processes and archival forms; instead, attention should be paid to the sense of satisfaction of service recipients and beneficiaries, real problems that have been solved, and the credibility and influence of the organization in the sector or community. Introduction of all kinds of evidence collection methods is to be introduced, such as independent third-party surveys, interviews with beneficiaries and public opinion analysis; therefore, the focus of evaluation should be shifted from “document review” to “outcome assessment.” (3) Set up open-ended development indicators and add “developmental bonus items” to reflect organizational innovation, learning and sustainable development capabilities to help identify and motivate organizations with high potential or unique characteristics.

Second, improve the evaluation process and strengthen the constructiveness of process interaction and feedback; otherwise, it may be viewed negatively by the organization. At present, there is a contradiction between efficiency and quality.

Based on the pre-assessment diagnosis, carry out various kinds of on-site tests. Before the official on-site assessment, there will be a brief online pre-assessment to collect basic information and identify any issues through submission by the company. For a well-known and reliable company, only a “spot inspection” or a short verification will be carried out off-site. Increase the number of off-site inspections and consulting services for young or weak enterprises to reduce the pressure on the evaluation resources of enterprises. Enhance the Diagnosis and Feedback Functions of Assessments. Extend the time for on-site evaluation to carry out extended interviews and discussions with evaluation experts, leaders of the organization, staff, beneficiaries, etc. Evaluation reports should not only list scores but also provide reasons for the scores and specific, practical improvement suggestions. The feedback meeting should switch from a “presentation of results after the event” to a “developmental guidance meeting”, and a follow-up support and improvement mechanism based on the evaluation results needs to be established. When releasing the evaluation results publicly, one can consider disclosing any major common problems and the direction for rectification (in accordance with the legitimate rights and interests of the organization) to add social supervision. More importantly, create a closed-loop of “evaluation-improvement-reassessment.” The government or a third party can provide follow-up consultation, training, small grants, etc., to help the organization make improvements and achieve the goal of “promoting construction through evaluation” and boosting the organization’s sense of gained value and self-efficacy.

4.3.2. Building professional evaluation capacity: Establishing an independent, diversified and reliable evaluation supply system

Credibility and professionalism need to be provided for the value. The current problems of a single type of evaluator and uneven capacity need to be resolved through the construction of a competitive professional market.

First, establish and operate a good external inspection institution. The Civil Affairs Department will be responsible for issuing the qualification standards of the third-party inspection institution and publishing them. In the government’s procurement of evaluation services, an open-tender and competitive-consultation mode should be employed to have many qualified institutions compete fairly. This will enhance the quality of services, reduce operating costs, give agencies more reasons to maintain good reputations and provide good services for themselves through the "voting with feet" mechanism, and strengthen the empowerment, regulation and meta-evaluation of agencies. The government will set up a special fund to strengthen the ability of agencies in the form of research on methodology and technology, etc. At the same time, strengthen the construction of a system to address conflicts of interest, fully document the whole process, set up a complaint path, etc. Crucially, the government or an independent institution should periodically carry out a "meta-evaluation" of the quality of agency work, assess the reliability, validity, and fairness of the previous evaluations, publish these results publicly, and use them to make subsequent selections.

Second, build an excellent group of evaluation experts systematically. The composition of the evaluation expert group should be diverse, encompassing practitioners, scholars, accountants, lawyers, experienced philanthropic professionals, etc. Systematic pre-service training for experts should be organized to cover the theory and methods of evaluation, indicators, on-site work techniques, professional ethics, etc., and then assessed and certified. Build a continuous education system to update knowledge, promote the development of the discipline of evaluation and professional training, and encourage universities with relevant programs (public administration, sociology, non-profit management) to offer courses or research focuses on social organization evaluation to address the long-term shortage of evaluation professionals. Promote the cooperation of academia and industry to address problems encountered in actual operation, use theoretical innovation for improvement of practice, etc.

4.3.3. Enhancing the effectiveness of evaluation results: Stabilizing expected benefits through strong application and enhanced authority

If the evaluation results are not effective, then there will be no reason for people to participate in the evaluation system, and social organizations will inevitably lose interest. Strive to build a good legal environment and promote the realization of this.

First, promote the legalization and standardization of evaluation management; encourage qualified areas to formulate local regulations or government rules in accordance with the national "Measures for the Management of Social Organization Evaluation" to make good practices a law. The regulations should provide the basic evaluation rules, define the rights and obligations of all parties, establish key procedures, stipulate how to resolve disputes, etc., to provide a stable basis for action and avoid arbitrariness.

Second, it is necessary to establish and optimize technical standards and operating rules for the evaluation; at the national or provincial level, an expert group can be organized to develop suggested national or local standards for various types of social organizations. The above standards should provide scientific and uniform specifications for the framework of the indicator system, data collection methods, scoring criteria, report forms, etc., to offer high-quality technical support for nationwide evaluation practice and promote the standardization of the evaluation process and comparability of results.

5. Summary and discussion

5.1. Research summary: Rational choice under institutional structural constraints and its behavioral consequences

This paper is based on the specific case of social organization evaluation as a form of China's social governance innovation, and using the analytical framework of rational choice theory, it will systematically explore the motivation mechanisms and underlying reasons for the participation of social organizations in government-led hierarchical evaluations in Shanghai's P District. Research shows that the involvement of social organizations in the assessment is not a direct consequence of policy requirements; rather, based on some institutional system and after considering various other factors such as "cost-benefit-risk-perceived effectiveness", it will be considered a strategic choice. As a result of the above rational choice, there is a practical problem of "strong government enthusiasm but lukewarm organizational response", and the root cause is that the current design of the evaluation system does not align incentives with the internal development logic of social organizations.

A review of the decade-long development of the evaluation system shows that, in its early days, it was mainly administered from the top down and used to offer material rewards; as a result, many people joined the system. The external motivation model in this paper has reached the stage of end effects of incentive construction. In short, the present evaluation system is centrally controlled, and the same general rules and procedures are applied to all sectors of technological design. The structure and technology defects will not help the social organization achieve its goals; in fact, it will be more expensive to run and fail to achieve these aims. Therefore, future reforms should not only be about modifying the content or raising the rewards of evaluations, but also take the opportunity to strengthen the whole construction of an organizational-capacity-enhancing governance system, inspire the vitality of society, promote the development of government-society cooperation, etc., to turn evaluation into a practical force for all-round development.

5.2. Theoretical dialogue: Local practices extend rational choice theory and reinterpret the "government-society" relationship

The results of this study can help address the problems in the current evaluation work and offer some references for the theoretical construction and development of such studies in China.

According to the theory of "government-society" relations, in the West, the state and society are often viewed as two distinct groups with clear borders and sometimes conflict. However, the practice of evaluating the organizational hierarchy of social organizations in China is more complicated and constructive. The government does not simply "control" or "withdraw"; rather, it tries to "cultivate" and "guide" the direction of development for social organizations through the design of evaluation rules, the construction of third-party institutions, and the provision of incentive resources. Social organizations are also not completely passive; according to their own reasons for survival and development, they will choose one of several types of behavior, such as participation, adaptation, avoidance, or even strategic collusion. This study shows that the main reason for the current lack of evaluation motivation is that the interactive mechanism of "guidance" and "response" has not been fully improved, and there is a disconnect between the institutional goals set by the state and the utility functions of social organizations themselves. Therefore, in order to understand the connections among China's politics and society better, people should avoid a simple dichotomy of "dominant governance role", and instead explore how various institutions and the different reasons for which various groups act create complex relations, as well as their unintended results.

Based on the theory of "institution-behavior", this paper will examine the link between the macro-level institutional system and the micro-level behavior of individuals. In the past, most studies of social organizations have been conducted at the macro level, such as policy documents and institutional changes, or have focused on the micro level of organizational cases and project experiences, but little attention has been paid to the meso level of "transmission mechanisms" and "binding constraints" connecting institutional design with behavior. The rational choice theory is used in this paper at the middle level. It makes us consider how the specific institutional rules set by the government constrain people's choices, what the costs and benefits are, and why different people will behave differently in the same environment due to different circumstances. Based on the above questions, this paper hopes to construct a more flexible and suggestive analysis system that can expose the various reasons for how institutions actually work, instead of employing a general way to study "states" or "social organizations."

5.3. Practical reflections and future prospects: Advancing towards modernized development-oriented evaluation and governance capabilities

The actual experience of Party building guiding social governance shows that all kinds of institutional reform need to be in line with the entire system of governance. In the same way, if the goal of the social organization evaluation system is to truly promote development through evaluation, it must break free from the traditional roles of regulating and distributing resources and become a new form of "development-oriented evaluation."

Therefore, in the future reform of the evaluation system, the three main changes should be realized: First, at the level of values, people need to move away from "compliance control" and advance toward "capacity development" and "mission fulfillment." Second, in terms of stakeholder relations, the current one-way assessment model under the government and passive participation by society should be replaced by a cooperative improvement mode involving all sectors of society and joint governance. Finally, at the level of technical process, the cumbersome administrative procedures that put a heavy burden on people need to be reduced, and scientific and precise governance tools to improve efficiency should be employed. Specific provisions should be added to the laws and regulations to give legal effect to the evaluation results; long-term goals of social organizations must be clearly stated. A system of categories, tiers, and result-oriented indicators needs to be established to accurately represent the different levels of these organizations; an independent and professional third-party assessment organization should be appointed to provide reliable and high-quality evaluation services. In addition, evaluation should be closely linked with follow-up capacity construction, resource allocation, and credit-based incentives to form a virtuous cycle of "evaluation-diagnosis—support—improvement."

There are some deficiencies in this study as well. It is based on cases in only one administrative area, and the generalizability of its conclusions needs to be verified in areas with different levels of development; more in-depth research is needed on the "black-box" aspects, such as the behavioral logic of third-party evaluation agencies and the connections among different government departments. In the future, more research can be conducted on cross-regional comparisons, digital innovation in evaluation technology, causal relationships between evaluations and the long-term performance of social organizations, etc., to deepen our understanding of the special development path and principles of social governance for China's social organizations, provide academic support for promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity, and so on.

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