

Sustainability in Complex Agriculture Projects: A Study of Agile Agricultural Co-operative Institutions

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Abstract

Agriculture projects directly affect the welfare of over half the world's population and are a crucial component of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The realisation of such projects and hence sustainability are often delivered through alternative institutions like Agricultural Co-operative Institutions (ACIs). Agriculture projects are highly susceptible to environmental, social, and economic pressures such as climate change, cyclical pandemics, market disruptions, and diminishing arable land. These issues are becoming increasingly vital in light of the fact that population growth is placing increasing pressure on resources and sustainable priorities. However, recent reviews indicate a significant paucity in the extant literature on agriculture projects. The dispersion and disparity nature of agriculture projects and their stakeholder and the unique organisational form of ACIs highlight a pressing need for academic research to examine agriculture project management practices and their sustainability from an institutional perspective. Therefore, this research aims to respond to this gap in the literature by drawing on Institutional Theory through multiple case studies of contemporary ACIs in China, which are often viewed as valuable solutions to deliver agriculture projects benefiting communities, especially those in emerging markets. Initial findings from two rounds of fieldwork and a systematic literature review suggest that ACIs as value-based organisations embedded within institutional contexts help stimulate elements of agility in project management processes. This results in the successful delivery of sustainable outcomes for both ACIs and external stakeholders. ACI managers can also stimulate innovative outcomes across broader sustainable agriculture projects, especially with enhanced agility against disruptions. This paper generates a novel and interdisciplinary contribution to project management discourse and knowledge, and provides practice-based management and policy development for future application.

Keywords: Agile, Agility, Agriculture, Case Study, China, Co-operative, Institutional Theory, Project Management, Sustainability.

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Introduction

Sustainability and responsible management for complex projects are becoming increasingly crucial for future project practitioners (Dacre, Senyo & Reynolds, 2019; Gkogkidis & Dacre, 2020; Tite, Pontin & Dacre, 2021). Based on a recent scientometric review of bibliographic records across combined databases, the current academic focus on project management and sustainability in a wide selection of sectors including agriculture and rural development (De Toledo et al., 2019). In this context, according to Smith (1984, p.1), '*a project is a unique operation to modify the means of production...from an individual farmer constructing a large new dairy unit, to a government department executing large scale, conservation works, or even to a project in which the major items are administrative rather than physical, such as the reorganisation of part of the state's agricultural services*'.

Agriculture projects directly affect the welfare of over half of the world's population, especially those inhabited in rural areas. Set as a significant part of the *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, agricultural projects are of great significance for achieving societal sustainability, often achieved through alternative institutions (e.g. co-operatives) (United Nations, 2015; Ridley-Duff & Wren, 2018; World Bank, 2019). However, there is a noticeable under-representation of academic research through a project management perspective. Through a comprehensive review of specialist project management journals¹, Themistocleousa & Wearne (2000) concludes that the extant academic studies in project management processes failed to reflect the agriculture sector's relative importance and real-world impacts. This raises a pressing need for researchers to explore further its related contributions to GDP and its critical role in reaching global sustainability and socio-economic equality.

This study seeks to address this gap in the extant project management literature by adopting an interdisciplinary research approach to investigate agriculture projects. Through the lens of institutional theory, this paper is positioned to explore the paradigm of project management with agility in the agriculture sector, and how sustainability is achieved through agricultural co-operatives in contrast to traditional organisations. The authors aim to understand the project practices and underpinning institutional arrangements of the co-operatives, which as value-based organisations are considered successful in delivering both commodity products/services and associated unique characteristics of '*social, environmental, and long-term economic sustainability*' as their project deliverables (Pullman & Dillard, 2010, p.744; see also Ostrom, 1990; Ridley-Duff & Wren, 2018; ICA, 2018). This research is especially demanded at a point where the Covid-19 pandemic has caused global disruptions and social and economic challenges (Wang et al., 2020). The research would also contribute to the call (e.g. Shepherd et al., 2018) to better facilitate agriculture-related sustainability and innovation and further investigation incorporating agile project management and organisational models.

Therefore, this research attempts to rigorously examine the underrepresented agriculture project management practices across Agricultural Co-operative Institutions (ACIs),

¹ Themistocleousa & Wearne (2000) examined publications in the *International Journal of Project Management* and the *Project Management Journal* over a period of 15 years.

identifying their common and possibly distinctive agile project management approaches and other organisational processes through multiple case studies. The leading research question for this study is summarised as: *How can agricultural co-operative institutions manage agriculture projects with agility processes in order to refine sustainable outcomes?* The authors aim to generate a novel and interdisciplinary contribution to project management knowledge and provide practice-based management and policy development for future application.

Co-operatives and Agriculture Projects

The International Co-operative Alliance's (ICA, 2018) *Co-operative Identity Statement* defines a co-operative as '*an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise*'. ACIs are farmer-owned and democratically controlled enterprises, which value '*social and cultural needs*' (Ridley-Duff, 2018). They play a vital role in sustainable agriculture produce and rural development in both developed and developing countries like China (Dong, 2019; Luo et al., 2020), by offering technological and institutional innovations and help to sustain fair economic achievements throughout the membership with concerns for the community (Bijman, 2018; Bailey et al., 2021).

ACIs have been witnessed to contribute to the improvement in profitability, quality, and efficiency of agriculture (Liang & Hendrikse, 2013) and promote innovation in the industry resulting in rural development and poverty alleviation (Bernard & Spielman, 2009; Oelofse, 2010; Dong, 2019). In the E.U., ACIs own a 40% market share of agricultural production on average (Bijman, Hanisch & van der Slangen, 2014). Often named as *Specialised Farmers Co-operatives*, numerous ACIs have emerged in contemporary China. Responding to the recent supportive legislations and policy, a remarkable period of growth occurred - from around 150,000 ACIs representing 24 million rural households in Mainland China 2004 (MAPRC, 2007) to beyond 2.2 million registered ACIs covering half of the country's rural population just 15 years later (MAPRC, 2019a; MAPRC, 2019b).

To achieve sustainable development facing the ever-changing conditions including socio-economic crises, ACIs' governance processes are witnessed adapting to changing environments and pressing priorities (Lizarralde, 2010; Chaddad & Iliopoulos, 2013; Bijman, Hanisch & van der Slangen, 2014). For instance, a recent case study on a significant ACI in UK organic agriculture suggests that they must sustain outputs facing post-Brexit challenges (Bailey et al., 2021), which requires agility capabilities against uncertainty with limited resources. However, extensive literature reviews on ACIs (Dong, 2019; Luo et al., 2020) indicate that few attempts have been made from a project management perspective, with even fewer devoted to their agility across sudden complex challenges following disruptions.

Themistocleousa & Wearne (2000) summarises reasons why project management is significantly under-studied in agriculture contexts. The main element, as pointed out, is in the nature of dispersion and disparity of agriculture projects' stakeholders. This paper's approach can overcome the difficulty, as governments and academics recognise the importance of achieving sustainable development through ACIs as they offer an

alternative form to temporarily organise individual rural business and projects (Deng et al., 2010; Yan & Chen, 2013; Dong, 2019).

The other concerns to be addressed are: lack of scholarly attention devoted to project management in highly agriculture active countries and regions, and that non-construction projects in the agriculture sector are often neglected (Themistocleousa & Wearne, 2000), which can be addressed by the interdisciplinary nature of the research team and examination processes through the lens of institutional theory.

Institutional Theory Approach

Drouin & Besner (2012) highlights the importance of understanding project management from the perspective of host institutions². Equally, there has been an increasing academic focus on exploring sustainable and innovative project processes through institutional lenses, in that projects are embedded in their institution fields and interact with the institutions (Winch & Maytorena-Sanchez, 2020). It has been pointed out that multiple tensions of projects and institutions '*arise as the shadow of the past (legacies of previous projects) and create tensions for continuity*' (Uriarte et al., 2019, P.321). The conventional approach in the extant literature of recognising project as an individual and unique concept is hence criticised, arguing that projects should not be defined by complexity or time-boundedness but should be considered as complex norms which constitutes a continuous and repeating improvement of institutions (Biesenthal et al., 2018; Harvey & Aubry, 2018).

Organisational support and synchronised individual behaviours are required to achieve successful projects to receive optimised performance and investments (Eve, 2007). The improved alignment of knowledge and requirements to better cope with the diversity and complexity associated with project management (Bresnen, 2016). Institutional perspectives explain both individual and organisational actions as powerful sources of change (Dacin, Goodstein & Scott, 2002) as organisations are considered under the influence of conflicting pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Teo, Wei & Benbasat, 2003; Corbett, Webster & Jenkin, 2018). There is also a need for further theoretical development and empirical examination of agile project management through an institutional perspective (Conforto & Amaral, 2016; Hobbs & Petit, 2017; Lechler & Yang, 2017; Mergel, Ganapati & Whitford, 2020).

As stated previously, ACIs are an essential solution for organising individuals embedding in given normative, cognitive, and regulative institutional environments (Dong, 2019), and deliver social, environmental, and economic sustainability (Pullman & Dillard, 2010). Picciotto (2020) urges for a new project management approach with a more flexible assessment methodology covering complex agriculture projects and organisations undertaken by ACIs. Recent attempts were made to explore ACIs through the lens of institutional theory, but the majority are limited to those in the US (Pullman & Dillard, 2010; Grashuis & Cook, 2018; Dong 2019), and are mainly theorised through transaction-cost economics (Bijman, 2018) rather than sustainable project management. The embeddedness of ACIs into institutional logics is critical for their sustainability because it

² A series of research papers were spurred on this topic and constituted a designated special issue in the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*.

is the enabler to recognise and utilise the environments' specific complexity to deliver improved performance (Jack & Anderson, 2002).

This research adopts and develops a cross-level institutional environment model (Figure 1) to examine the case ACIs' project management under conflicting pressures.

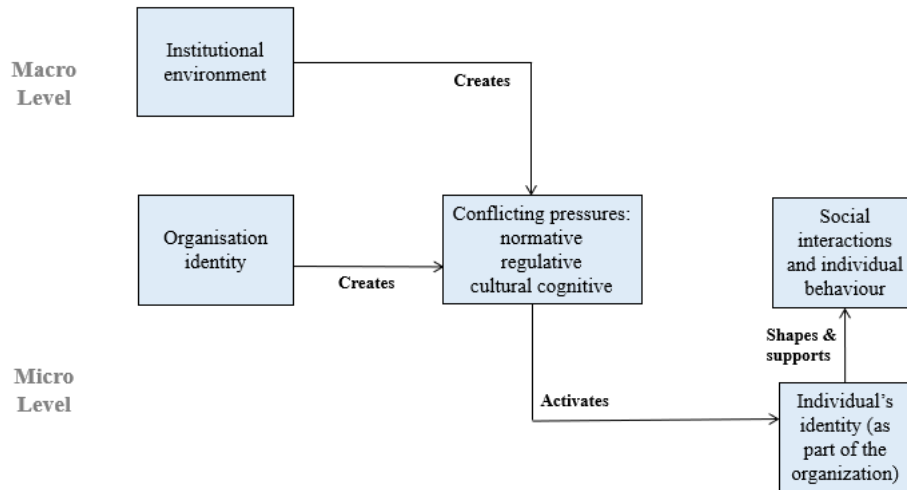


Figure 1. Cross-level model of institutional logic (adapted from Corbett, Webster & Jenkin, 2018)

Conclusion & Future Research

This research has hitherto applied a multiple-case study approach to conduct an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in real-life contexts with robust evidence from compound sources (Yin, 2009) with no explicit boundaries between the complex phenomenon and their contexts of interaction (Sayer, 1992; Easton, 2009), such as those found in ACIs. They are deeply embedded in the local institutional environment and other community contexts (Po, 2008; Zhao & Gijssels, 2011). The applied case comparison approach is especially suitable for such complicated socio-economic phenomena where the investigator has no control over the events related to the case organisations (Feagin, Anthony, & Sjöberg, 1991; Yin, 2009).

Following a systematic literature review of 125 (number of full text reviewed) academic publications on Chinese ACIs, a sampling framework was developed consolidating primary classification in existing co-operative literature (i.e. initiator and functions). Exemplar cases were then selected through purposive theoretical criteria (Karmel & Jain, 1987; Yin, 2003). Specifically, three ACIs were selected from different regions in Mainland China with relevant project experience and sustainability achievement against disruptive conditions, which underpin the empirical focus for this multiple-case study.

The primary data collection has adopted prior established project management empirical approaches through semi-structured interviews with various participants (Reynolds & Dacre, 2019; Dacre, Kockum, & Senyo, 2020), including individual members, project and general managers at different hierarchy levels, customers, local governors, and associated stakeholders. Internal documents and interviewer observations are used as supplementary data. The research utilises qualitative interviews to gain access to interviewees' knowledge and expert insights through purposive personal conversations to generate rich data and

uncover the reflections and experiences that are often ignored or misrepresented through other approaches (Silverman, 2006).

Two of the three phases of data collection have already been undertaken, with a total of 25 interviews, each lasting between 45-90 minutes. Consuming transcription and translation of the interview data so far, a third field visit is planned to capture additional data, which has become especially relevant due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. The additional interviews will employ a combination of face-to-face or digital/virtual communication, where appropriate. Informal interviews, accompanied observations, and field notes will be used as an additional supplement source of information to reach triangulation, enhancing the qualitative case study's fidelity and reliability (Decrop, 1999; Yin, 2009).

The total collected data will be coded in three rounds using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), blending empirical and theoretical codes (from institutional theory and angles relevant to agile project management). This approach enables themes to be first developed through an iterative process of coding. Then sub-themes can be applied according to categories derived from a literature review, and third, the codes will be grouped under overarching theoretical categories. Illustrative quotations for each code will be placed in relevant corresponding analyses to enhance the validity of this paper (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

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