Issues in HIA in China: lessons from joint ventures in the oil, gas and forestry industries

Issue 1: Access to land and wellbeing
Underpinning a successful, integrated and high quality assessment in China is knowledge of the wider context, especially the land tenure system. As tenure is frequently unclear, especially to the more vulnerable, assessments must acknowledge local land use policy and patterns, power dynamics and distinct challenges that arise in the project’s various stages. Land leasing or inappropriate sales by local officials denies the population access to land causing mental distress, loss of status and food insecurity. Land speculation and price inflation can further compromise food and livelihood security.

Issue 2: Power dynamics and community engagement
Although it is tempting to engage directly with the target population, it is critical to work with complicated local hierarchies and recognize power dynamics. This may be frustrating and appear to delay work; in the long run ignoring these power dynamics will result in an inferior assessment. However, it is also important to sometimes challenge these practices in order to fully engage with vulnerable and excluded target populations. These can be important learning opportunities for all concerned but need to be undertaken with care. Identifying a committed local champion with integrity and local knowledge is key.

Issue 3: Health and the health system
As in other countries, the traditional medical model of health dominates rather than the more holistic bio-psycho-social model of health and wellbeing. This has implications for the acceptance of both health promotion activities and mental health issues. Non-delivery against expectations, ignorance around payment schedules, opposing opinions and segmented communities can create stresses associated with compromised mental health. This situation is further complicated by the lack of supportive legislative framework in terms of rights to good health and wellbeing, and the collapse of the health care system following market reform.

Conclusion: An effective HIA is underpinned by an efficient scoping and planning phase that is not confined to the health sector but takes into account the much broader issues such as land tenure and contracts. An understanding of, and planning for, contextual dynamics will result in a much stronger HIA and a powerful, integrated assessment.

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