

SPRINGER BRIEFS IN PUBLIC HEALTH

Neus Evans
Michelle Lasen
Komla Tsey

A Systematic Review of Rural Development Research

Characteristics,
Design Quality and
Engagement with
Sustainability

SpringerBriefs in Public Health

SpringerBriefs in Public Health present concise summaries of cutting-edge research and practical applications from across the entire field of public health, with contributions from medicine, bioethics, health economics, public policy, biostatistics, and sociology.

The focus of the series is to highlight current topics in public health of interest to a global audience, including health care policy; social determinants of health; health issues in developing countries; new research methods; chronic and infectious disease epidemics; and innovative health interventions.

Featuring compact volumes of 50 to 125 pages, the series covers a range of content from professional to academic. Possible volumes in the series may consist of timely reports of state-of-the art analytical techniques, reports from the field, snapshots of hot and/or emerging topics, elaborated theses, literature reviews, and in-depth case studies. Both solicited and unsolicited manuscripts are considered for publication in this series.

Briefs are published as part of Springer's eBook collection, with millions of users worldwide. In addition, Briefs are available for individual print and electronic purchase.

Briefs are characterized by fast, global electronic dissemination, standard publishing contracts, easy-to-use manuscript preparation and formatting guidelines, and expedited production schedules. We aim for publication 8–12 weeks after acceptance.

More information about this series at
<http://www.springer.com/series/10138>

Neus Evans • Michelle Lasen • Komla Tsey

A Systematic Review of Rural Development Research

Characteristics, Design Quality and
Engagement with Sustainability

 Springer

Neus Evans
James Cook University
Cairns
Queensland
Australia

Michelle Lasen
James Cook University
Cairns
Queensland
Australia

Komla Tsey
James Cook University
Cairns
Queensland
Australia

ISSN 2192-3698
SpringerBriefs in Public Health
ISBN 978-3-319-17283-5
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-17284-2

ISSN 2192-3701 (electronic)
ISBN 978-3-319-17284-2 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015937389

Springer Cham Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

© The Author(s) 2015

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Printed on acid-free paper

Springer International Publishing AG Switzerland is part of Springer Science+Business Media (www.springer.com)

Preface

This book examines the nature and quality of publication output across the field of rural development globally over time. The aim is to determine the extent to which rural development, as an academic and practice discipline, is developing in such a way as to potentially facilitate evidence-based decision-making regarding local, national, and global challenges of our times. The book is an expanded version of the 2013 Sustainability Collection International Award for Excellence in New Research and Thinking winning paper (see Evans et al. 2013 in *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability: Annual Review 2013*). We acknowledge that relevant sections of that paper are reproduced in this book.

Achieving healthy and viable rural communities in the face of rapidly changing social, ecological, and economic conditions is a stated global priority (United Nations 2010; World Bank 2010). Rapid urbanisation, inequalities in income and service levels within and between communities, and population and economic decline are challenging the viability of rural communities worldwide (ARUP 2008; Australia Futures Task Force 2007; Daley and Lancy 2011; Thomas 2008). Persistent global scale (re)occurrence of these and related issues has led governments to prioritise policies aimed at enhancing the livelihoods of people living in rural regions (Daley and Lancy 2011; Giarchi 2006; Shortall and Warner 2010).

Approaches to reviewing the literature on rural development have focused on a wide range of issues relating to, for example, education, gender, health and nutrition, and economic development, especially agriculture, through a number of explicit and transparent qualitative and quantitative methods (see Department for International Development 2011). However, none of the approaches have provided an analysis of overall trends of the quantity, characteristics, and quality of research output over time, which is useful for gaining a broad view of the field. Examining whether the types of publications on rural development have shifted from measurement research to descriptive research to intervention research over time can indicate whether research efforts have progressed beyond describing rural development issues to providing data on how to facilitate positive change (Sanson-Fisher

et al. 2006). Although the systematic literature review approach has been widely adopted in the health sciences (Berrang-Ford et al. 2011), it has not yet previously been applied to the rural development field.

The systematic literature review method also contributes to ongoing debates on research quality. Scientific research is often criticised in academic, professional, and public policy circles for being uneven and lacking credibility (Centre for Knowledge Translation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research 2005; Gersten et al. 2000; Shavelson and Towne 2002). Research about the same issue can vary considerably in its assumptions, methods, and findings (Gough et al. 2013). A lack of overall agreement on a specific set of standards for assessing research quality can add to the confusion, making it more difficult for research users to trust research. A number of groups have been working to bridge this gap through the development of research appraisal tools. For example, the Effective Public Health Practice Project (2009) has established a standardised quality appraisal tool for quantitative studies. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2013) has also established a number of tools for the evaluation of various research designs, including qualitative studies. Our research draws from this work to appraise the quality of research in rural development.

In this brief, we propose that the systematic literature review method offers promise in informing evidence-based rural development policy and practice. Specifically, we apply the approach used by Sanson-Fisher et al. (2006) and Bailey et al. (2009) in order to undertake a systematic literature review of rural development publications in the English language, investigate changes in the field across three time periods (1988–1989, 1998–1999, and 2008–2009), and classify research publications by type, region, and engagement with sustainability. We then apply the Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) (2009) Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2013) Qualitative Research Checklist to appraise the research approaches, characteristics, and quality of intervention studies within the rural development field. We seek to evaluate the general nature, quality, and reliability of growth in knowledge regarding rural development and, more specifically, whether the field is growing in a manner that reflects research and policy priorities, wider social trends, and interests related to sustainability in a robust and reliable manner.

Findings reveal that descriptive research has dominated the rural development field since the 1980s. Research output has shifted from developing to developed regions. The proportion of publications linked to sustainability increased significantly over the time period under review, and the majority of sustainability interventions employed processes of engaging the community and wider stakeholders. The authors consider implications for learning that can be derived from the systematic literature review process by highlighting four points relevant to researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funding bodies in the field. Findings from the appraisal of research approaches and characteristics and quality of intervention studies reveal that rural development researchers have a predisposition for qualitative research approaches. Most intervention studies were found to be of a descriptive type, with only a small percentage comprising evaluation research. The quality

of intervention studies in rural development research was found to be predominantly poor, thereby limiting their usefulness for evidence-based decision-making.

We recommend two practical steps that individuals and teams can take to improve both the quality and the potential utilisation of their research at minimal extra cost. One step is to utilise standardised research quality assessment tools and reporting guidelines to routinely review peers' research grant applications and journal manuscripts prior to submission. The second step is to be explicit, when developing research proposals, as to how and by whom the research results will be utilised in order to inform decision-making.

Finally, this book promotes quality and utilisation of research in order to inform evidence-based decision-making within the rural development field. However, the quality improvement and utilisation strategies and understandings promoted in this book are transferable and, hence, we encourage researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from other fields to critically consider the work and adapt it for their own contexts.

Cairns, Australia

Neus Evans
Michelle Lasen
Komla Tsey

Contents

1	Introduction and Background	1
1.1	Rural Development	1
1.2	Sustainability	2
1.3	Evidence-Based Policy	4
1.4	Research Quality	5
2	Research Method	7
2.1	Research Output: Type, Region and Engagement with Sustainability	7
2.1.1	Data Sources	8
2.1.2	Classification of Publications	8
2.1.3	Research Type	10
2.1.4	Continental Region	10
2.1.5	Engagement with Sustainability	10
2.2	Research Approaches, Characteristics and Quality	12
2.2.1	Data Sources	12
2.2.2	Classification and Appraisal of Publications	14
2.2.3	Research Characteristics	14
2.2.4	Research Quality	15
3	Results	19
3.1	Research Output: Type, Region and Engagement with Sustainability	19
3.1.1	Number and Type of Publications	19
3.1.2	Continental Region	21
3.1.3	Engagement with Sustainability	21
3.2	Research Characteristics	22
3.2.1	Intervention Location and Target Group	22
3.2.2	Intervention Focus and Strategies	29

3.2.3	Study Approach, Design, Data Collection Methods and Outcomes	29
3.3	Research Quality	30
4	Discussion and Conclusion	35
4.1	Trends Relating to Quantity, Region and Engagement with Sustainability	35
4.2	Trends Relating to Research Approaches, Characteristics and Quality	38
4.3	Learnings from the Systematic Literature Review Process	39
4.4	Conclusion	42
Appendix A: Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies		45
Appendix B: Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Research Checklist		51
References		57