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Searching for participatory approaches: findings of the Yunnan PRA Network

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• Introduction

Participatory approaches were introduced to Yunnan Province, the People's Republic of China in 1993. Since then, a group of practitioners in Yunnan has started to search for ways of implementing participatory approaches within the Chinese context. This paper summarises the major findings of the practitioners' experiences in research, action and extension projects, and presents the current state of the practitioners' theoretical thoughts on participation.

• Challenges in rural development

Demand for participatory approaches in Yunnan Province of China arose during the experiences of the Yunnan Upland Management Project, a Ford Foundation funded project initiated in 1990. The project, whose staff of more than 50 researchers and officials came from 13 institutes, aimed to develop approaches to sustainable development in Yunnan's Upland areas. The project selected four sites that reflect different geographical conditions in which to work. From 1990 to 1993, project staff were trained in and practised interviewing skills, RRA, monitoring and evaluation. Projects in each of four sites went through processes of surveys of households' demands, design of project activities including agricultural and livestock interventions and other income generation schemes. They undertook a technical feasibility appraisal of these activities, plan formulation, and motivation of villagers to join the activities with local officials.

Throughout this process, the project staff and local officials decided what activities to do and when to conduct them. The villagers were only involved in so much as they could present

what they needed to the project staff. In 1993, we found that project staff were happy about the project's outputs, such as increases in grain yields, household incomes and services to the poor. These outputs met some of the villagers' needs as well as the project's set objectives. However, project staff also felt that through this process, the villagers often ended up in a passive position, either waiting, or being motivated by staff, to join in the designated activities.

"Thank you very much for your help, but what do you want us to do next?" said one villager.

At the same time, the project staff discovered the richness of the villagers' knowledge about their farming systems; knowledge which, until that point, had not been fully recognised in the project. Villagers often used their knowledge and skills to solve difficulties during the implementation of certain project activities. The project staff saw that the approach that had been adopted in the project thus far actually served to strengthen villagers' dependence on outsiders and could not lead to sustainable development in the long term.

Around this time, a book came to our attention: *Rural Appraisal: Rapid, Relaxed and Participatory* by Robert Chambers. The theory and methods presented in the book appeared to be very relevant to the issues identified through the project. Therefore, on behalf of the Rural Development Research Center (RDRC), the author wrote a proposal to the Ford Foundation to request support for the introduction of participatory approaches in Yunnan. Dr. Robert Chambers was then invited to hold a training workshop on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in Kunming in December 1993, signifying the formal introduction of participatory approaches in Yunnan Province, China. The Yunnan PRA Network was established after the workshop to learn about and promote

participatory approaches to rural development in China.

The Yunnan PRA Network funded ten pilot projects to help some members apply PRA in their research. Other members started to apply PRA in their own projects. This paper summarises their findings.

• Applications to research projects

Surveys and assessments

PRA provides very useful methods and tools for survey and assessment although it has some weakness. Participatory approaches were applied to surveys on, and assessments of, biodiversity, rural informal financial systems, maternal and child health care, indigenous knowledge of women, community-based natural resource management and conservation and development by the Network members. The studies concluded that the visual, open and flexible methods and tools could help researchers access the required information from villagers, and check it immediately after thorough discussion, a process which generally took three to five days. However, the studies also identified some limitations of the approach. The quality of a survey is highly dependent on the researcher's subject knowledge and level of facilitation skills and on villagers' interests and knowledge (Du, 1997). When applied to health surveys, the researchers found that questionnaire surveys provided information on the needs of human beings, while participatory surveys reflected the desires of villagers (Fang et al, 1997). Therefore, 'needs' seem to be more scientific, while 'wants' are cultivated by villagers' knowledge, community culture and values.

Planning

Participatory planning can involve villagers in the decision-making process and also counter difficulties when stakeholders have differing opinions. A poverty alleviation planning exercise, funded by the Network, was undertaken in Qianmai Township. Local officials were trained in participatory methods and undertook in-depth planning exercises in sample villages as well as extensive

consultations on specific topics to increase the scale of the planning. These measures can fill the gap between information gained from villagers at the local level and the requirements of planning on a larger scale, leading to better quality planning (Shen, 1997). The trial, conducted as part of the Network's learning about participatory approaches, also identified several issues. For example, the need to take account of the perspectives of different stakeholders and their roles during the planning process and issues concerning the integration of participatory plans with existing and conventional ones. Applications to village-level forest resource management found that villagers can put forward very practical plans (Lu, W. B., et al, 1998), but that government bureaux and villagers may have differing objectives. The study suggests it must make the rights of the community very clear prior to undertaking such exercises.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation

One study of county level poverty alleviation programmes concluded that government initiation and implementation of programmes or projects was done in a top-down manner (Zhao, et al, 1997). The local communities generally play a passive role in programme activities and the project staff are responsible to their superiors rather than to the local communities themselves. Planning and implementation are given more attention than monitoring and evaluation, leading to the repetition of mistakes, and conflicts among governmental bodies not being addressed. The study also identified institutional constraints as a barrier to the application of participatory approaches in governmental poverty alleviation projects. Another monitoring and evaluation exercise of government projects at the township level, using villagers' evaluation criteria (Cai, et al, 1998) found that participatory monitoring and evaluation could reveal practical constraints hindering project achievements, many of which would not have been thought of by outsiders. Local officials are willing to accept such results and have appreciated the capabilities and knowledge of villagers.

- **Applications to action projects**

In 1995 practitioners in Yunnan gradually realised that the potential of participatory approaches lay as much in action projects as in surveys and assessments. It was recognised that communities should be seen as key stakeholders in decision-making processes, in operational management and in the sharing of benefits. The following section describes several applications to action projects while some of the key outcomes are summarised in Table 1.

Social forestry projects

Although simple and quick for Forestry Department operations, the conventional approach to reforestation projects excludes villagers from decision making about where to plant what kind of trees and how to manage them. This often leads to low rates of tree survival. With the financial support of the Ford Foundation, the Yunnan Forestry Department has experimented with social forestry approaches in three villages. Beneficiaries are now involved in the whole project cycle, and most important of all, share in the distribution of benefits (Zhou, 1998). One current concern is to develop suitable methods and criteria to evaluate the impact of the new approaches in relation to the conventional ones.

Community-based conservation and development

The Caohai Nature Reserve in Guizhou Province has a dense and poor population. Villagers around the Lake Caohai have to produce grain by converting wetland to farmland. They are regarded as destroyers of the environment because this activity

endangers the habitat of protected birds. Facilitated by outsider PRA practitioners including the reserve staff, the local villagers have developed their own systems and rules for the management of 'community trust funds', thus creating a mechanism for creating opportunities for non-farming income generation. This strategy has brought the benefits of environmental conservation to the villagers, whilst they are also involved in the conservation process themselves (Wang, 1997). The reserve management office has had to adapt its management style from that of controller to that of facilitator, even to the point of accepting being monitored by the villagers. This change in institutional approach has been essential to sustaining the villagers' action (Lu, X., et al. 1998). Similar findings have been shown by the experiences at Zixishan Nature Reserve, Yunnan Province (Long, 1998).

Improvement of shifting cultivation practices

Villagers see shifting cultivation as an important part of their livelihood and farming systems. Bio-diversity specialists regard shifting cultivation as a central practice for maintaining bio-diversity in tropical uplands. Officials believe that shifting cultivation destroys forests and must be replaced by sedentary practices. Shifting cultivation systems can no longer meet the demands being placed on them, so the challenge is to seek improvements or alternatives. Participatory approaches have been applied to this issue in one action research project which involved villagers, local officials and researchers in a joint search for solutions (Xu, 1998). The action research has recommended certain solutions to decrease the negative impact of shifting cultivation, which are acceptable to all stakeholders.

Table 1: Key learnings about participatory approaches from selected action projects in Yunnan

Social Forestry projects	Participatory approaches require: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • changes in attitude and behaviour of foresters • skills in participatory approaches and community organisation • openness and flexibility in project design and management • mechanisms for community-based management BUT also require: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more time investment and human effort in the initial stages
Community-based Conservation and Development projects	Participatory action requires: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respect for villagers' desires and trust in their capabilities • transparency in the process of development • an enabling environment within which villagers can operate • staff capabilities, institutional capacities and management styles being key institutional elements to support participatory action
Improvements to shifting cultivation practices	Key factors for success include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building communication channels between the different stakeholders, transparency of project components and funding arrangements • drawing on indigenous knowledge and practices • strengthened conflict resolution mechanisms • appropriate training • appropriate service delivery systems

Sources: Zhou 1998, Wang, et al. 1997, Lu, X. et al. 1998, Xu 1998

• **Application to other projects**

Through the Network activities of training, learning by doing, and exchanging experiences, Yunnan PRA practitioners now provide services to projects initiated and funded by the donor community, or advocate and provide support to projects initiated by the government. Thus, extension of participatory approaches within the region through the work of the Network has begun. Practitioners introduce participatory approaches through training and providing technical assistance at different stages of the project. Such projects have included those of a wide range of donors and international NGOs¹. Several provincial government agencies such as the Forestry Department, the Education Commission, the Scientific & Technology Commission, the Health Department, the Yunnan Office for Poverty Alleviation, the Environment Department etc., started to use participatory

¹ For example the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the European Union (EU), The German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the Dutch Government, as well as Oxfam Hong Kong, Save the Children, the Salvation Army, World Vision, World Wildlife Fund, etc.

approaches in their projects. Our main learnings are that it is not enough for practitioners to have knowledge, skills and experience of participatory approaches. They must also be equipped with training capabilities, co-ordination and facilitation skills, advocacy tactics, organisational management, project development and consultancy skills (Lu, Xing., et al.,1998). Many Yunnan PRA practitioners now recognise the change of their roles; to be trainers, facilitators, project managers or advocates. However, few practitioners have reflected on the effectiveness and efficiency of these measures for extending participatory approaches in the past.

• **Thoughts on participatory approaches**

Theory and philosophy

Perspectives on participatory approaches differ slightly among Yunnan PRA practitioners. Some regard participatory approaches as a method which is of great use in conducting surveys or assessments. But an increasing number see participatory approaches as a philosophy, and an important part of development theory.

Table 2: Summary of changes needed to support the practice of participatory development

Government changes required	Community changes required	Development worker changes required
Decentralise decision making processes and focus on macro measures; Make policies, procedures and management styles more open and flexible; create space for bottom-up approaches.	Develop their own organisations, institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution; Enhance their abilities and skills to tackle problems and opportunities.	Change their attitudes and behaviour; Enhance their capabilities in advocacy, training, co-ordination, facilitation and management as well as participatory practice.

The theory of participatory approaches is based on assumptions which imply that, given the opportunity, one would participate in discussions or actions that affect one's interests (Zhou, 1997). Being concerned with one's own interests, one also participates in collective initiatives and hopes to achieve gains during the process. This theory further implies that as the subject (not object) of development, development project beneficiaries (not others) should make decisions about their own destinies. But many PRA practitioners in Yunnan also point out that for effective and sustainable participation, it is necessary for government officials and scientists, not just communities, to co-operate in planning, decision making and implementation (Tian, 1998).

Enabling environment

The adoption and application of participatory development challenges current development thought in China; its policies, institutional arrangements and working procedures. Moreover, a person's role is largely determined by institutional policies (Wilkes, 1998). Thus, although essential, changes in personal behaviour and attitude are not enough. Participatory development requires an enabling environment, which differs from country to country due to differences in culture and political system. In debating the required changes, Yunnan PRA practitioners often focus on the respective roles of government, communities and development workers (see Table 2).

• Future directions

Through two meetings in 1998, Yunnan PRA practitioners reformulated the direction of the Yunnan PRA Network. They positioned the Network as a learning network. Its purpose is to promote participatory development and its objective is to enhance the Network members' training, facilitation, advocacy, management

and consultation capabilities. In order to achieve its objectives, the Network has designed four programmes:

- a training programme;
- an action-fund programme to help members to learn action skills in addition to research skills;
- an information exchange programme focusing on meetings; and,
- a publication and co-operation programme to promote members in the development field.

The Network encourages its members, representing both themselves and their institutes, to be involved in development projects. A systematic review of practitioners' experiences with applying and promoting participatory approaches is now underway with the support of the Institute of Development Studies, UK. Through these various activities, practitioners in Yunnan will be better equipped to develop procedures for promoting participatory approaches in ways suited to the Chinese context. The Network also plans to undertake an evaluation of its work in late 2000.

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