

# Citizen participation with Chinese characteristics

by JOERN GEISSELMANN

## Citizen participation in urban China

China's reform process has entered a crucial period. Three decades of rapid economic development brought about spectacular material progress, but also led to increasing inequalities and a rise in the number of social conflicts. In response to these challenges, the central government under the leadership of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao made "building a harmonious society" one of its top priorities. Apart from efforts to reduce existing income disparities, some degree of citizen participation is increasingly seen as a means to achieve this goal and thus maintain social stability. Public participation in environmental impact assessments, direct elections of village heads and public hearings on selected policy issues are among the better known examples testifying to this trend.<sup>1</sup>

With the current shift from work unit-centred welfare to community welfare, citizen participation in urban community affairs is also becoming both more urgent and more attainable.<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1990s, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has embarked on an ambitious programme of 'community construction' (*shequ jianshe*) that includes strengthening citizen participation and community self-governance among its goals. In his report to the 17th party congress in autumn 2007, President Hu Jintao also declared grassroots self-governance mechanisms (*jiceng qunzhong zizhi zhidu*) to be an integral part of the Chinese political system.

However, until now it has proven difficult to translate these new concepts into practice. As a consequence of decades of 'big government, small society', government officials as well as citizens have been

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Buckley, 2011. <http://pubs.iied.org/G03156.html>

<sup>2</sup> During the pre-reform era (1949-1978) and the first years of the reform era social welfare was directly provided by the work unit that one worked for. Many state-owned enterprises and institutions even ran their own schools and hospitals. In the 1990s work units began to shed many of these responsibilities. At the same time the government set out to strengthen the role of sub-district offices and RCs in the provision of social welfare and community services.

used to top-down approaches to governance and often lack the skills and attitudes needed for participatory community development. Officials tend to underestimate the ability of residents and fear opening what to them appears to be a Pandora's box.<sup>3</sup> Residents often feel powerless to bring about change and rely heavily on government initiative. At the same time, both are unfamiliar with innovative participatory techniques and approaches that have been developed in other parts of the world.<sup>4</sup>

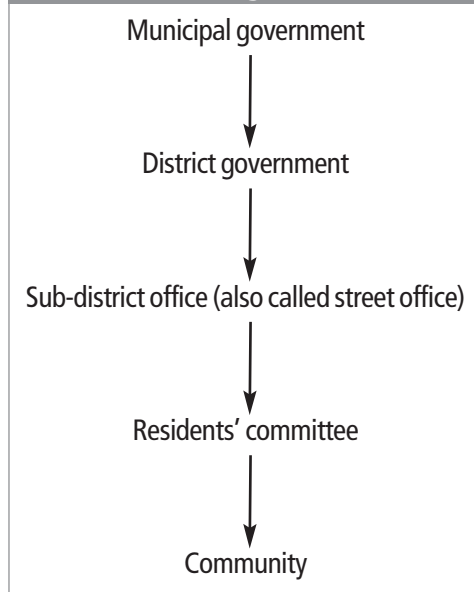
### Introducing participatory community development in a sub-district of Beijing

In June 2007, the Qingyuan sub-district office (SDO: *jiedao banshichu*, also sometimes translated as street office) of Beijing's Daxing district asked Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA), a local NGO promoting participatory urban governance, for advice on how to provide meaningful and sustainable social services.<sup>5</sup>

Daxing is one of 16 districts of Beijing and lies south of the city centre. Qingyuan sub-district currently consists of 23 communities that together have about 110,000 registered permanent residents and 20,000 migrant workers. Each community has a residents' committee (RC) that is responsible for implementing government policies and administering social services for vulnerable community members. These committees are in theory supposed to be grassroots organisations; in reality, however, they can be regarded as extensions of the government administration. The services they offer are usually managed in a very formalistic manner and often do not meet residents' actual needs.

During the initial discussion, the director of SSCA suggested to the head of the Qingyuan SDO that community services should be based on the genuine needs of

**Figure 1: The administrative structure in middle-sized and large Chinese cities**



residents and should actively encourage the participation of residents in its design and implementation. Services offered should not be the same in every community, but rather reflect the particular characteristics of each community. Only services that responded to real demands would elicit residents' support and would be sustainable. Finding this argument convincing and knowing that his office lacked the expertise to adopt such an approach on its own, the SDO head asked SSCA for assistance.

SSCA began by holding a two-day training on community services and project management for the heads of the 23 RCs of Qingyuan sub-district. The RCs were then asked to identify a target group in their community (e.g. elderly people, unemployed residents) and conduct a needs assessment among them. Based on the results of the assessment, each committee prepared a project proposal outlining what community service they wished to

<sup>3</sup> To open a Pandora's box means to create evil that cannot be undone. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandora's\\_box](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandora's_box)

<sup>4</sup> For some reflections on participatory practices in rural China see *Participatory Learning and Action* 62. <http://pubs.iied.org/146051IED.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.scca.org.cn/en/>

Photo: Zhao Xu, SSCA



Initial training on community services and project management in Qingyuan, Daxing/Beijing.

Photo: Wang Ruiqing, SSCA



Talking with domestic workers about their priorities and needs.



Photo: Qingyuan, SDO

Two migrant women conducting children's classes.

establish. After reviewing all proposals, the SDO and SSCA selected the four most promising ones.

Together with the head of Qingyuan's Community Service Centre, we visited the four committees and discussed their proposals with them. The proposed projects included training courses for domestic workers, free health checks and morning exercises for migrant workers – the latter being a widespread habit among urban dwellers in China, food services for elderly residents without nearby relatives, and an association of various cultural activity groups such as painting, calligraphy, and singing groups. In all of these proposals, except the last one, the RC was still the main, in fact only, driver of the projects. Given the fact that this is usually the case with community affairs in China this was not surprising. Also, the primary objective of the training series for domestic workers was to increase employers' satisfaction

rather than to (also) help and empower these workers, who were largely women.

Next, we discussed the proposals with resident representatives. As a result of these discussions, two project designs were revised. The domestic workers' project added the establishment of a meeting room for relaxation, learning and exchanging of information to its objectives and the migrant workers' project shifted its focus to the creation of a children's activity centre and a second-hand clothes and toy store.

In September 2007, we were finally ready to form project teams (or what we called 'boards') and begin the actual project implementation. Team members included not only RC staff but also residents. A brief training session was held to discuss the role and function of each team member.

Four months later, the children's centre and the second hand store opened. The government's support in securing a suitable location and collecting clothes and toys was

Photo: Qingyuan, SDO



Members of a calligraphy group – one of the cultural activities.

and remains crucial. Day-to-day management, however, is conducted by a team of four dedicated migrant women. The children's centre is open three times a week; classes are run by the migrant women and college student volunteers. All four women earn a very modest salary from the proceeds of the store.

The training programme for domestic workers started. A meeting room, which was provided for free by the local property management company, was renovated and was ready for use after the Chinese New Year in February 2008. Costs for the renovation were paid for by the SDO. The interior design and the acquisition of books and magazines were undertaken in consultation with interested domestic workers. One woman offered to look after the meeting room and the reading materials.

The cultural association was established and a much needed additional activity room was, after the intervention by the

sub-district government, provided by the local property management company. Each cultural activity group elected a group leader who is part of the project team. The project team facilitates communication among the different groups and between residents and RC, mediates in the case of conflicts and steers the organisation of public events.

The project to provide daily meals for needy elderly residents did not materialise in the end, despite repeated visits and lengthy discussions. The reasons for this never became entirely clear but an important obstacle was the lack of support for the project by the RC head.

#### Follow-up

SSCA and the Qingyuan SDO continue to support and foster the development of the projects described above. The Ford Foundation agreed to lend financial support to our endeavour. We were, moreover, able to

secure funding from a Chinese foundation for capacity building activities and educational material for the migrant workers' project. Since the plan to provide meals for elderly residents failed, a creativity programme for children is now being considered instead.

In addition, a new round of project proposals was invited from the remaining 19 communities. To this end we already trained RC heads in conducting a needs assessment. A major innovation this time will be that projects will be selected together by resident representatives, RC heads and sub-district officials during a public meeting.

### **Achievements to date**

The extent to which urban community development in China is administered in a top-down fashion is probably difficult to imagine for outsiders. The government strives to control the community building process. RCs mostly implement instructions received by the SDO while residents are seen as passive beneficiaries. Higher level instructions do not take local realities and the diversity of communities sufficiently into account. They usually require all RCs to implement the same regulations or policies. In one city, for example, all RCs had to open a community library, despite perhaps more pressing needs or priorities that individual communities had. When government officials speak of participation in this context, they usually refer to the participation of residents in one-off events designed and organised by the RCs.

The SSCA project introduced a very different approach. Our starting point was the needs and capabilities of the communities, not the perceptions of the SDO or the RC. We always asked RCs to consider the particular context of the community they were serving, so as to understand the needs of citizens and to involve them in the project cycle as early as possible. We encouraged the holding of meetings where

residents could articulate their concerns. Thus the 23 communities proposed a wide range of activities and the four projects eventually funded by the SDO were all distinct from each other.

Moreover, residents are part of the project management teams, playing an active role in the actual implementation. While the degree of their involvement varies from project to project, this is clearly a departure from the government's conventional approach. Involvement is so far greatest in the case of the cultural association where resident members collaborate with the RC head on an equal footing. In the case of the training programme for domestic workers, on the other hand, the RC is still the driving force that makes all major decisions. Nevertheless, the meetings of the project team provide a channel for domestic workers to articulate their preferences and suggestions in a manner that was not possible before. Migrant workers involved in the second-hand store and the children's centre are also still in a relatively weak position vis-à-vis the RC. This is not surprising given their generally low status in urban China. Since these volunteers are, however, actually in charge of the day-to-day affairs of these two establishments they do exert some influence on the direction these take and they do so with increasing confidence and assertiveness.

Two aspects of this approach deserve further highlighting.<sup>6</sup> Firstly, it redefines the roles of the main actors involved in urban community development in China. The SDO takes on the role of funding service projects by RCs and residents and monitoring their implementation rather than to provide these services itself or to demand RCs to do so. As a consequence, RCs become enabled to play a proactive role in developing community services instead of only following the instructions of the SDO, and residents increasingly turn from passive receivers into providers of services.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to my colleague Christine Warner for pointing this out.

Secondly, by adopting projects as vehicle for providing social services (and providing training in project management) community workers and residents are encouraged to become more systematic, professional and process-oriented in the design and delivery of services instead of simply organising one-off activities at the request of the SDO. We have found, for example, that most lack the experience to develop an initial idea into a full-fledged proposal with goals, concrete steps to be taken, a sufficient risk analysis, and a realistic budget.

The capacity of involved sub-district leaders and RC staff to foster citizen participation has markedly increased during this process. The confidence of residents, especially migrant workers, in their own ability to improve their lot has also increased. For example, the head of the Community Service Centre has wholeheartedly embraced the concepts put forward by us. The idea to hold a public meeting to select the projects of the second round was conceived of by her (after attending our introductory course on concepts and methods of community participation). She, moreover, proposed that during 2008 we should systematically train all 23 RC heads in participatory community development. According to her and the SDO head, the four RC heads involved in the project have begun to apply what they have learnt in their regular work. A most impressive example is the initiative of one RC head to organise a meeting of more than 100 community representatives using the Open Space technique to confer about work priorities for 2008.

To sum up, the project introduced the following innovations:

- 1) a bottom-up – not a top-down, ‘one size fits all’ – approach to community development with the corresponding changes in the roles of the SDO, RCs and citizens;
- 2) a project-based approach to service delivery;
- 3) an emphasis on assessing community characteristics and residents’ needs; and

4) residents’ participation in decision-making processes through participation in public consultation meetings and membership in project teams.

While these might seem modest by international comparison, they are substantial given China’s cultural environment.

### Challenges

Promoting citizen participation in urban China is, of course, not without challenges. During the first round many RCs did not, in fact, undertake the required needs assessment. Instead, the opinions of residents were often only sought after the RC had already prepared a draft proposal. This was in part our mistake. While we had emphasised the importance of assessing residents’ needs, we had not explained in any detail how to do this. Thus before the second round we conducted a half-day training on conducting needs assessments. We even considered accompanying RCs during their needs assessments, but due to the large number of communities this was not feasible. An obstacle that remains is the fear of many RC staff that they will be overwhelmed by the needs and problems that residents might raise during a needs assessment.

Another challenge is the small number and the lack of representation of participating residents. During our meetings the number of residents was usually below ten. Resident representatives were selected and invited by the RCs. Some of them were so-called building leaders (*louzhang*) whose role is to represent the residents living in one building; others, however, were present because they are party members or receive welfare benefits from the RC and thus have to maintain good relations with the RC staff. In any case, the small number of participants limited their representation of a diverse community of 2,000–2,500 households (though the actual target group of each project was significantly smaller since each project targeted a specific group

and RCs primarily serve the more vulnerable community members, such as the elderly and the unemployed).

Related to this is the lack of transparency. Residents that are not invited are often unaware of the project meetings or sometimes even the project itself. While the majority of residents are busy with their own lives and neither need nor want the interference by the RC (as repeatedly discovered in various surveys), there are probably some residents who would be interested in their activities but are not aware of them. During the recent training on needs assessments we therefore encouraged public announcements of meetings, but it is not clear yet whether the SDO and RCs will be willing to implement this suggestion.

The underlying reason for the above challenges is the central role that the RCs are still playing in the communities and that in fact the Ministry of Civil Affairs wants them to play it. While we encourage the RCs to empower residents and to support and facilitate their initiatives, the government generally expects the RCs to guide and control the community building process. The RCs themselves also commonly fear that one day resident organisations could be stronger than the RCs and residents might then not 'obey' the RCs anymore.

Essentially this is a matter of power and control. The Machiavellian aspects aside, it is also a question of how to understand stability and progress.<sup>7</sup> Both the Chinese government and people abhor chaos and wish for stability and peace. At the same time China has embarked on an ambitious reform programme to build a prosperous and progressive society. How does one balance the requirements of stability and progress? What role do unity and diversity play? The answers to these questions will have to be determined, again and again, by the Chinese government and citizens. Our work seeks to provide positive examples of

alternative conceptions of power distribution, progress and stability that can serve as a reference during this search process.

A fundamental challenge is also how to sustain the individual projects as well as the innovations in the approach to governance as a whole. Since the role of the government is still so decisive, projects might falter should the government withdraw its support (should, for example, the SDO head retire or change his mind). The migrant workers might be able to use some of their sales proceeds to pay for the shop rent but at least in this early stage they would have great difficulty in acquiring enough clothes and toy donations on their own. And in the case of the domestic workers, it is highly unlikely that the property management company would continue to give a meeting room to them free of charge. Even if the domestic workers (mainly women) would be able to pay rent, which is unlikely, the management company could be unwilling to continue the lease for fear of upsetting their main clients, the house owners and employers of the domestic workers (Chinese employers generally do not want their domestic workers to interact with other maids in order to prevent them from becoming informed about or starting to compare themselves with how others are treated as well as others' salaries).

But not only the community projects would be put in jeopardy should the Qingyuan government lose interest. The new, generally more participatory approach, could be replaced again by the customary top-down approach. Should this happen, the only consolation would be that the power of the new approach, once in the world, would continue to exist and inform our project and advocacy work. After all, our objective is not primarily to change individual sub-districts but to introduce and advocate a new governance approach for all of China's urban communities.

<sup>7</sup> The name of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), an Italian diplomat and political philosopher, is commonly associated with an extreme political pragmatism and a focus on how to acquire and maintain power.



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### FURTHER READING

- Pennarz, J., Haokun, S., Weijie, D., and Jianping, W. (eds), 2011. Wagging the dragon's tail: emerging practices in participatory poverty reduction in China, *Participatory Learning and Action* 62, IIED, London.
- Buckley L., 2011 EIAs go public: creating new spaces for participation. In *Participatory Learning and Action* 62, IIED, London.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://pubs.iied.org/G03226.html>