

# Overview: changing government-community interface in China



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## Introduction

At a workshop in Kunming in March 2009, practitioners from local governments and community organisations from all over China met for the first time to share their experiences of promoting and implementing participatory approaches in areas such as education, health, rural development and poverty reduction. This was a unique experience, with many of the practitioners presenting their own cases for the first time, and indeed learning about others, showing that there were many champions of participatory approaches working at local levels across the country. It was also an important event because it made individuals and organisations – who often saw themselves working alone as pioneers of innovative approaches – realise that they were part of a wider community of like-minded people trying to address similar challenges and issues within the same system. This workshop took place fifteen years after participatory approaches had first been introduced in China and nine years after they were formally adopted as

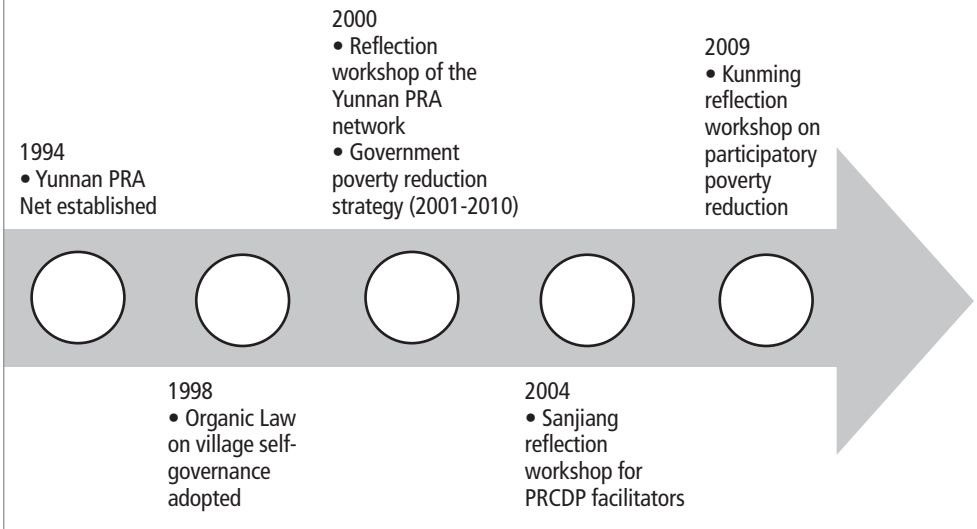
part of the government's poverty reduction strategy (see timeline at Figure 1). The majority of the articles included in this issue are edited case studies of papers prepared for presentation at the Kunming workshop.

## Participation and poverty reduction: what are the links?

This special issue of *Participatory Learning and Action* reflects on the journey towards participatory approaches in poverty reduction in China. The country has been tremendously successful in poverty reduction in the past, but it still has a large number of people living in poverty. The issue discusses why and how participatory approaches have been introduced, and why these approaches are useful for addressing issues of poverty in China. The case studies presented show how development and poverty approaches continue to evolve in the specific Chinese political context and its ongoing governance changes, and in line with China's unique ability to experiment with and pilot new

**Figure 1 – Timeline**

The development of participatory practices for poverty reduction took place over a period of almost 20 years. The timeline shows the main events in this journey that are covered by this issue of *PLA*.



approaches, pragmatically using international experience. The discussion is relevant and important for the global audience that is trying to understand China's unique approach to development and its implication for global poverty reduction, but it is also relevant to understand how and under what conditions participatory approaches become embedded in specific contexts.

It is widely accepted that the poor need and have the right to participate in poverty reduction initiatives, and the beneficial impacts of community-based projects are widely documented. In 2005, Robert Chambers noted that participation had finally been mainstreamed. However, so far there is only limited evidence that broad-based participation in large scale poverty reduction programmes does in fact lead to better targeting of the poor and a more substantial reduction of poverty. Reviews of community-based approaches supported by the World Bank found that projects that rely on community participation have not been particularly effective at targeting the poor. It found some evidence

that Community-Based Development (CBD) and Community-Driven Development (CDD) projects create effective community infrastructure, but no causal relationship between participatory elements and concrete outcomes, including in terms of poverty (Mansuri and Rao, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Less tangible outcomes of participation, such as increased social capital, are often not documented, while negative outcomes, such as elite capture and growing inequality, tend to be more obvious.

By contrast, the Chinese case seems to support the case that substantial poverty reduction can be achieved through a top-down planning approach. The Chinese government remained suspicious about participatory approaches for a long time. More recently however, there is a growing understanding that the benefits from participation outweigh the costs and that participation of the poor will lead to more sustainable poverty reduction. The interest in experiences with participatory approaches in China have thus increased in

<sup>1</sup> <http://ssrn.com/abstract=501663>

the last decade, as increasing inequality, social unrest and the need to improve governance became major concerns for the government. In 2005, the Chinese Communist Party called for a 'harmonious society', a concept that covered an increased commitment to social equity, accountability and public participation. This call was followed by the 'new socialist countryside', a broad government initiative to address inequality and focus efforts on rural development, based on broad public participation, which put agriculture and rural initiatives more prominently on the agenda of China's modernisation drive. The case studies presented in this issue provide important insights into the shift of government thinking that has emerged from an increasing top-level commitment to reduce inequalities and create a 'harmonious society'.

The contributors to this issue are practitioners, many of them government staff, who present their insights and evidence on how they believe participation became effective and led to better poverty reduction. For example, the China Watershed Management Project (CWMP) case study in Part 4 presents insights into how 'social management' was strengthened as a result of this participatory project and how these changes are aligned with the recent policy agenda.

Several of the case studies in this issue compare the outcomes from community-led approaches with those of the conventional government-led approach. From the evidence presented, we conclude that, in the case of China, more equitable relations are being crafted – slowly – with steps back, but steadily.

- Participatory approaches in China: From PRA to broad-based consultation  
Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) was introduced in China in the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

Since then researchers and development practitioners have practiced participatory methods in a wide range of areas and subjects, mostly funded by international donors and NGOs (see the Prologue to this issue on page 24). Only recently, issues of scale and quality have been directly addressed in initiatives aiming to strengthen participatory approaches to poverty reduction. Various initiatives funded by donors such as the World Bank, the UK Department of International Development (DfID) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), have been implemented over the last few years in an attempt to support institutionalising of participation at local government levels.

The PRCDP pioneered a new approach to building capacities, building on local innovation and participatory learning. It was a major challenge to balance the breadth and depth of participation in the process of roll-out. The project therefore focused on the basic principles for participation, while methods and tools were adapted to suit the local context.<sup>3</sup> This led to very different ways in which participation was implemented across the three provinces in Southwest China participating in the project (Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangxi). The case described by the Guangxi project office, for example, shows how local government employed a 'learning system' approach to ensure that there was ongoing learning and that practices continued to improve (Part VI, Article 28).<sup>4</sup> In the case of Sichuan, the method of participatory village planning was used subsequently in earthquake reconstruction efforts (see Part VI, Article 29).

- The role of pilot projects  
Compared to the large amounts of national funding mobilised for poverty reduction, the amounts of foreign aid to

<sup>2</sup> The visit of Robert Chambers and James Mascarenas provided the impetus for the Yunnan PRA Network, which was established in 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See The PRCDP Participation Manual (available on-line at [www.itad.com/PRCDP](http://www.itad.com/PRCDP)).

<sup>4</sup> See also Article 33 on learning systems.



Photo: Guangxi FCP/MC

**Dong community dance – an opportunity to get together and demonstrate of unity, also used to share news and make announcements (Longsheng County, Guangxi Province).**

China are very small indeed, and the role of the (mostly international) NGOs is confined to small pilots. However, international collaboration has played a very important role in sectors as diverse as environmental management, infrastructure, health reforms, education, and poverty reduction, and indeed in the principles of project management itself (World Bank, 2007). Projects funded by international aid, although small in scale, often had important functions in piloting innovative approaches, building capacities and providing useful case studies and reference points for ongoing policy processes. Participatory approaches were introduced in foreign-funded projects first, and many of the practitioners contributing to this issue have learned from their initial experience with these externally-funded projects.

The transition from small (but generously funded) pilot projects to large-scale

government projects operating under ambitious targets and with limited funding for capacity building remains a key challenge. The attempt of the Poverty Alleviation Office to roll out participatory village development plans as part of its poverty alleviation strategy since 2000 (see Part II) has yielded limited success due to the magnitude of the roll-out, lack of familiarity with participatory methods and weak capacities at local levels. As a result, the roll-out of the planning was stalled and only half of the villages ever prepared such a plan (Park and Wang, 2006).

In this issue, several practitioners describe how they struggled to apply methods that had been successful in small-scale pilots to government projects operating on a large-scale. Deng Weijie provides an interesting case on how participatory training methods had to be adapted to cope with the conditions set by government training programmes (see Part IV).

- Changing roles, attitudes, behaviour and mindsets

Effective reduction of poverty depends on numerous factors, many of them external to the project, many happening over a longer period, and often difficult to capture. Participatory approaches typically imply a change in attitudes, behaviour and relationships; changes that may happen in the short-term, but often require more time to be translated into effective policies. It is therefore important that we understand those changes of attitudes, behaviour and relationships and how they may (or may not) lead to more effective and sustainable poverty reduction. The case studies, written by local practitioners, are testimony to how the approaches, thinking and attitudes of officials and citizens regarding public policies are changing in China.

Due to their marginal locations, many of the impoverished communities in China had few interactions with the government in the past and if they had these were often experienced as being one sided and disempowering. In Part I of this issue, the articles describe the experience of how communities took charge of a project and how this created confidence and trust in the community's ability to take over responsibility. Nati's case study (article 4) provides a rare account from a community perspective, written by a member of the Lahu ethnic minority, one of the most marginalised ethnic groups in China.

Traditionally, government staff have had little confidence in the abilities of the poor to contribute to their development other than by providing a free source of labour. Several of the case studies written by local government staff describe the shift away from conventional thinking on poverty (see Introduction to Part I; also Wang Baojun's case study (Part IV, Article 19). The case study from the workshop documentation

facilitated by Deng Weijie (Part VI, Article 29) provides a vivid account of the professional biases common within the government system and how they were challenged through the event. The experience indicates the enormous learning processes in which government staff engaged, and their realisation that projects often work better if communities take charge. Both the PRCDP and the CWMP case studies describe how attitudes and mindsets changed within the government as a result of the participatory approach.

The China Poverty Alleviation Offices embraced participation early on.<sup>5</sup> For example, village planning provided an important tool, particularly for the cross-sectoral nature of their work. It was a particular challenge to introduce participatory approaches to sector departments, whose work is much more dominated by technical standards and targets. The case studies set in the context of reforms in education are therefore particularly interesting, as they indicate a fundamental change in mindset regarding the role of education and importance for citizenship within the rapid transformations in China (see Part V, Article 24). The country's health sector is also undergoing dramatic changes, and the case study here shows how participatory approaches have the potential to make the newly emerging services more people-oriented and equitable (Part V, Article 23).

- Why it is important to document and share experiences

As mentioned, the majority of the articles in this issue were prepared for presentation at the Kunming workshop. They provide a first-hand account of how practitioners are struggling to adapt participatory practices and institutionalise principles of participation in today's China. The workshop

<sup>5</sup> China has dedicated Poverty Alleviation and Development Offices (PADOs) at all government levels which coordinate all poverty reduction programmes under *The 10 Years' Poverty Reduction Plan*. However, funds are disbursed through various departments and technical bureaus.

included participants from all walks of life who had practiced and promoted participatory approaches wherever they were. This included representatives from local communities, some of them members of ethnic minority groups – such as Nati – who had never addressed a national audience before and were excited to share their experience of empowerment. There were also participants from national Ministries who shared their insights into the usefulness of community participation, as part of the wider policy changes. And there were the professionals working in various government departments who immersed themselves in the details of making participation work within the realities of an overwhelming bureaucracy and often under less enabling conditions.

In addition to the workshop material we have included a few case studies from NGO projects to provide a more rounded overview of the range of participatory approaches in China at this point of time (articles by Andreas Wilkes, Wang Jianping and Lila Buckley).

We included Andreas Wilkes' article as a prologue to this issue. The article presents a first reflection on participation in the early 2000s. The reflection took place at a time when a first wave of participatory approaches had been introduced and practitioners saw a need to conduct a critical reflection on the impacts, based on evidence from the field. The aim was to convince government leaders that participation was useful.

In the early 2000s, participation was very much the domain of researchers. In his contribution to *PLA Notes 37*, Lu Xing noted that many researchers regarded participatory approaches as a method of great use in conducting surveys or assessments (Xing, 2000). The strong focus on using participatory tools in the context of research meant that the work of participation practitioners, mostly with an academic background, was often delinked from the approaches used by government staff in

national poverty reduction projects. The focus on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) left a legacy of emphasis on methods, enhancing insights, and soaking up indigenous knowledge, with less emphasis on capacity building, particularly in terms of analytical problem solving and negotiating skills amongst practitioners.

Building capacities for participation within the government was seen as a major challenge by development practitioners, far more than what could be achieved by isolated projects. As Lu Xing noted earlier in the same article, 'The adoption and application of participatory development challenges current development thought in China; its policies, institutional arrangements and working procedures'.

It took another 10 years to address the challenge of integrating the principles of participatory development into the government – gradually – and the remainder of this issue provides insights into how this has been done.

### **Why an issue of *Participatory Learning and Action*?**

We believe that the current publication is important for three reasons.

- First, we are very excited about the way this publication and the preceding workshop enabled practitioners who have been pioneering innovative approaches in their field to share their experiences. We saw with our own eyes how much interest there was to learn from others, how quickly practitioners gained confidence in presenting their experience, and – we believe – can become the champions of participatory approaches.

- Secondly, we hope that this publication will help to create a better understanding amongst practitioners of participation across the world of the experiences that are being developed within China. Its context is unique, but so are all contexts, and we firmly believe that there is much to learn from – and with – China, including in its own newly emerging foreign cooperation programmes.

- Finally, we also believe that these case studies on participation provide a new glimpse into the reasons for China's development success – in which it is responsible for two-thirds of global progress on Millenium Development Goal (MDG) 1 – and its ongoing challenges. While its institutional structure is unique, enormous changes are taken place at various levels of governance, radically reshaping the social contract between the state and its citizens. The articles in this issue provide a unique set of views from the ground of these dramatic changes.

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