

PART II:

Changing roles and relationships

- the facilitator

Introduction

by JOHANNA PENNARZ

This section explores the experiences on the other side of the equation. As local governments are trying to redefine their roles and relationships with village communities, they discover the potentials of communities taking over responsibilities. Townships are the lowest level of the government hierarchies implementing government policies and programmes. They are the critical interface with rural communities.

Projects implemented by the government facilitation of the participatory approach in the Poor Rural Communities Development Project (PRCDP) mainly depended on government staff. The key challenge for government facilitators was to overcome the legacy of their relationship with communities, often marred by distrust, as well as biases on both sides. This section includes three short pieces that were written by local government staff, soon after they started implementing the participatory process. The main issue reflected upon is how participatory processes can be best facilitated.

Qin Cheng raises some of the key challenges that are linked to a facilitating role. Traditionally, the government tried to avoid the arguments and conflicts that often go along with open discussions. As facilitators they are required to manage expectations, balance diverse interests and manage conflicts within the communities. Qin Cheng's reflection is about how to achieve consensus and strengthen cohesion within the community. A major conclusion is that any project requires the participation of the community as a whole.

PRCDP used two types of facilitators. During the initial phase, township facilitators introduced participatory poverty analysis and planning in a small number of villages. Later, village facilitators were trained to roll out the approach throughout a large number of villages. During the workshop the participants reflected on the different approaches. **Qin Guozheng** argues that village facilitators are well placed to roll out the approach, because they are trusted by the community and accepted as mediators in case of conflicts.

Township government staff can, on the other hand, play more of an independent facilitation role. But Meng Shunhui describes the challenges that township facilitators face, mainly as a result of institutional constraints such as insufficient empowerment and being overburdened with routine management tasks. His case study provides a testimony of the efforts it takes to gain support from higher management levels and other government departments.

NGOs are often seen as honest brokers, more neutral and open to listening to the demands of communities. However, as the case study by Wang Jianping shows, as outsiders they often find it challenging to adapt to the local context. Her case study is an interesting reflection on the limitations (and compromises) that well-meaning NGOs face, and in particular in a challenging ethnic minority setting. The ability to adapt to the cultural and social preferences of the community becomes a key factor for project success.

The case studies in this section reflect on some of the dilemmas of facilitation in China, particularly on how to deal with indigenous structures of power and inequality. Local communities can show a high degree of strength and resilience in dealing with outside intervention. External facilitators are obviously struggling to balance the need for cultural and social sensitivity with their aspiration to help communities develop and change.

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Reflections from the Sanjiang Workshop

by JOHANNA PENNARZ

When Guangxi Province conducted a Participatory Poverty Analysis (PPA) in 2004 in preparation for the Poor Rural Communities Development Project (PRCDP), it was a ground-breaking exercise that deeply affected the government partners working on poverty reduction.¹ Guangxi Province had a population of 48 million people living in poverty, most of them ethnic minorities living in the Karst Mountains. Through the PRCDP, the provincial Poverty Alleviation Office experimented with a bottom-up approach to participation, where local communities were fully mobilised and involved. This new approach to poverty reduction changed roles and relationships, as the excerpt in Box 1 shows.

Guangxi has gone a long way in building capacities for participation within the government system. During the preparation phase, PRCDP organised a series of training and sharing workshops on participatory approaches in Guangxi. The

Box 1: Excerpt from the provincial report

Governmental projects in the past had been planned projects, which were implemented by the relevant government departments and the townships (towns), and the local people were not 'in the know'. Being influenced by such for a long time, they were unenthusiastic and unconfident about the project implementation, and worried about not being able to afford the collection of money from them, especially the larger, technically intensive projects (...)

During the specific implementation of the project, we only put hands on some directional issues, and left the other work arrangements and fund-using to the decision of all the project community groups. According to characteristics of agricultural production, we completely allowed the community villagers to discuss and decide by themselves on how to smoothly implement the project and complete it as scheduled, without affecting the farm work, and autonomously arrange labour time and the number of labours to be contributed by each household. Once they encountered technical or other issues, they could directly report to the responsible persons of the county or township (town) Project Management

continued on next page

¹ The project targeted six counties within the province.

Box 1 continued

Office (PMO). No matter when, no matter where, we would answer to all their requests, and try every means possible to alleviate their sufferings. Therefore, we further earned trust and cooperation from the community villagers, and laid a foundation for the smooth implementation of the project (...)

We allowed the community farmers to clearly understand and participate in all the links, from project determination to money appropriation, money management and future maintenance of the project. In addition, during the course of project implementation, the community management groups took the lead in posting information sheets on the walls of sensitive issues of concern to the people such as how the money was used, consumption and sources of materials. number of labours the people who contributed. and how the project schedule was followed. They made their own decisions and managed by themselves on whether the project needed to collect money from the people. As a result, such a means of management made the community villagers very satisfied.

Source: PRCDP Guangxi Province Report (2005) on participation in PRCDP (not published)



Qin Guozheng (left) at the Sanjiang Workshop.

purpose of these workshops was to support the process of participatory poverty analysis and planning through regular sharing and reflection. The participants, a small number of local government staff, were involved in the entire process. The workshop in Sanjang in early 2005 was an opportunity to take stock of the process so far. The following three articles are reflections on the participatory process presented at this workshop.

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Facilitating communitylevel processes

by QIN CHENG

QIN CHENG is a township official at Xianan Township in Huanjiang County, Guangxi Province. During the PRCDP preparation phase he was a township facilitator during the Participatory Poverty Analysis and Planning process. The following is his reflection on the process.

I believe that before deciding whether to implement a project in a certain community, it is necessary to find out if it is of interest to the local people and if it is what they urgently need. If the answer is yes, I believe we should convene a meeting, and make the heads of each household sign for commitment. Secondly, we should find out if the project implementation would involve any other sub-villages. If yes, we should first let both sides reach written agreements. Finally, the people should feel 'I need this project, and it is not a project that the higher authorities arranged for me'.

Only after the project funding had been settled were the farmers interested in participating in the discussion of fund management. While considering where to deposit the money and how to use it, what the farmers considered first was how to guarantee their right of control over the use of the money. Once their right of control was secured, they could consider how the money could be safely, conveniently and effectively used and managed.

There were often various conflicts during the course of project arrangement. Since the community farmers were eager to shake off poverty, they thought that once the investigation was complete, they would gain access to financial supports immediately. However, the farmers who did not benefit were less keen to participate in the project. Some of them even became factors hindering implementation. Therefore, it became necessary to hold a meeting for all villagers, and ask the representatives to give speeches. The representatives had been elected by the villagers in the natural villages and therefore had the mandate to represent the majority of the people. In a plenary meeting, it would usually be the



Maonan village community in Huanjiang County, proud of having successfully completed their drinking water projects (Guangxi Province).

representative who would speak. If there were people with different opinions, the township facilitators would need to explain to them why their opinions were not adopted. If there were hard to deal with households which were difficult to deal with, it was sometimes necessary to talk to them outside of the public meeting.

Due to the multi-faceted nature of poverty, I believe that when selecting projects and distributing resources, we cannot only focus on the poorest households,. We also need to consider the feelings and thoughts of the majority. If a certain project is only implemented amongst the poor households, it is very likely that it would not receive support or help from the other farmers. Therefore, the best solution is that all community members are allowed to participate in the project but that the very poor and destitute households get preferred access to subsidies, labour contributions and exemptions. In this way, the project is more likely to be accepted by the entire village, which will benefit the implementation. This will not only make the farmers in the community more cohesive, but also play an active role in improving the environmental and economic situation in the entire community, which would better represent the purposes of the project.

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The role of village facilitators

by QIN GUOZHENG

QIN GUOZHENG is a township official at Naweng Township in Luocheng County, Guangxi Province. He has been working on PRCDP since the preparation phase, first in the township workstation, later in the country project management office (see also his article (no 5) inPart I). The following is from the project preparation phase, when he presented his reflections on the role of facilitating participatory approach.

At the stage of conducting participatory work in the pilot villages, since everybody was quite new to the participatory approach, the County Project Management Office (PMO) transferred all the competent project facilitators to the county and township levels to tackle some initial problems encountered in the pilot villages. A working structure came into being, with county and township project facilitators as the main drivers and village facilitators as the supplementary drivers.

At the roll-out stage, the number of experienced project facilitators was limited and there were quite a number of project villages where participatory assessment was needed. One problem was the lack of sufficient human resources from the county and township level. In

order to solve this issue, our county fully relied on trained village-level project facilitators to play their roles. The County PMO and township working stations were responsible for quality control.

We decided to hand over greater responsibilities to the village-level facilitators. We trained a group of village-level facilitators and improved the participatory capacity of the communities. The village-level facilitators played great roles, mainly in the following aspects.

- They were part of the local community and shared common development needs. The villagers were willing to listen to and trust the village-level facilitators and their feeling of ownership over the project doubled.
- They also had relatively a strong organisational capacity. They had experience built



Participatory planning process in Luocheng.

over a long period of time working in the rural areas, something which the county and township facilitators did not have.

• They were extremely familiar with the

situations of their villages, which was very favourable for conducting the work.

• Their authority was respected in the mediation of all sorts of conflicts.

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The role of the township facilitator

by MENG SHUNHUI

MENG SHUNHUI is a township official from Huishui Township in Longsheng County, Guangxi Province. He has been working on PRCDP as a facilitator since the preparation phase, first in the township and later in the Country Project Management Office (PMO). In this article he presents his lessons as facilitator during the preparation phase.

During the course of piloting village-level participatory project planning and participatory extension, our county adhered to the local mechanisms. Here, I share some of my reflections on the facilitation process.

Remove control and let the township facilitators do the practice

The township facilitators worked hard to introduce the participatory approach to the project villages. After the initial training, the township facilitators organised the villagers and conducted participatory pilot work in the pioneer villages. They mobilised the villagers and convened villagers' congresses, so as to understand poverty and its causes and seek solutions in the area. After almost one month of work, they assembled a participatory poverty relief project planning report.

Provide township facilitators with opportunities for training, and lobby the leaders of the townships

As the township project facilitators were not full-time they also had their own jobs to do too. Therefore, they were very busy. In order to help them handle the relationship between full-time and part-time jobs properly, we actively communicated with their township leaders, trying to get support and understanding from them. The township leaders said they would give their full support to the PRCDP project as long as it was needed. Therefore, no matter what kind of meeting the PRCDP project convened, the facilitators could put all their energies into the project duties. The County PMO always tried to ensure they could attend the meetings, and ensure workloads were relatively stable and



Scoring as part of the participatory planning in Huanjiang County (Guangxi Province).

continuous. The results show that that we were fairly successful in our approach.

Work hard to create a favourable participatory environment for the township project facilitators, and enhance their feelings of ownership

The County PMO tried hard to stress to facilitators the importance of attending all meetings at the county level, so that they could be kept informed of the project progress. In addition, in all the meetings attended by the county leaders and township leaders, the responsible persons of the County PMO often praised the facilitators, giving positive feedback on their working achievements and attitudes. The meeting also showed the leader and colleagues that participating in learning tours could be fun. This helped them to understand that the PRCDP project work was steadfast and that it was worth their time and

energy. In addition, everybody unanimously agreed that the initial work of the PRCDP project moved ahead smoothly, which was attributable to the support of the township leaders and tireless work of the facilitators.

In order to further enhance their feeling of ownership of the project, each time the PRCDP project experts came to Longsheng, we promptly directed them to attend informal meetings, so that they could listen to the opinions of the experts and give feedback to them.¹ Their opinions were valued because they were from the grassroots level and so understood the local context better. We also asked them to remember the opinions of the experts as a reference.

The PRCDP project staff organised the training courses on participatory villagelevel planning held in our county. They adopted a cooperative approach, which

¹ The author is referring to the visits of the World Bank/DfID missions and consultants.



Meng Shunhui presents his feedback at the Sanjiang Workshop (Guangxi Province).

included dividing the tasks and each staff member teaching a different topic. The training sessions were very successful. With such an atmosphere and trust from the county, working initiatives were greatly improved.

During the entire preliminary project period, the County PMO mainly took on the role of organising and coordinating services and acting as a go-between, whilst the township facilitators were the specific implementers and operators. Therefore, we also devised our strategy for future work. The higher authorities and PRCDP

contributed so much in the way of human resources, materials and finance on training the township level project facilitators. The projects were mostly implemented at the grassroots level. So we must make full advantage of these resources and train more facilitators. Through this approach we will be able to rely on them taking initiative; we provide more support to their work and learning, and let them truly participate in the entire process of project implementation, so that the PRCDP projects will be more smoothly implemented in the future.

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Adapting to the local context: lessons learnt from external facilitation

by WANG JIANPING

WANG JIANPING is Associate Professor in Yunnan University and a member of the Yunnan Participatory Research Association (formerly Yunnan PRA Net). She has extensive experience of working with local NGOs, international institutions, the private sector and local government. Her research is on the sustainable management of natural resources and poverty alleviation. This article presents the findings from a study to evaluate the outcomes of a participatory process facilitated by ICRAF.

Introduction

In rural China, the large numbers of government-initiated development projects have visibly changed the traditional resource use patterns and the rural landscape. However, in most cases, the top-down decision-making structures and government-led management of these projects neglected to consult local people. At the same time, some NGOs, civil society organisations and donor agencies have become involved in enhancing local capacity and promoting community engagement. In Pingzhang village in Yunnan Province, the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) played

a significant complementary role to that of the government in facilitating and empowering local communities for social learning, and enhancing the public consultation and monitoring processes.¹

Compared to spontaneous social learning processes, NGO-facilitated capacity building processes are often quicker in terms of introducing new ideologies and notions. Sometimes, when NGO objectives and missions intersect with local interests, local people and groups are more willing to participate in external interventions because they view them as an opportunity to gain greater financial and human resources. However,

¹ The International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) is an autonomous, non-profit organisation established in 1977. See: www.worldagroforestry.org



High mountains and deep valleys provide the setting for diverse livelihoods in Baoshan (Yunnan Province).

because both government and NGOdriven projects are based on external facilitation, they have some inherent pitfalls. They do not represent a spontaneous social change process that is based on selfselection and self-identity and there is a risk that they may not necessarily lead to fundamental attitude change. Facilitation of change processes presents a huge challenge and there have been many cases where the local people's behaviour has simply returned to the previous situation, after the programme's interventions have been withdrawn. Some of lessons and challenges are presented below, taken from the example of Pinzhang village.²

Profile of Pingzhang village

Pingzhang village is inhabited by the Yi ethnic group. It includes three natural villages with a population of around 2000. It is located in a mountainous area, 25 kilometres away from Baoshan City. The village rests on the side of a mountain at an eleva-

tion between 1000 and 1800 metres. The community lives in chronic poverty as a result of the restricted amount of arable land, low productivity due to the high altitude and the cold climate, and a high population density.

The total area of agricultural land is 3300 mu. Because 43% of the area is on steeply sloping land the land is mostly dry and there is only limited paddy land. As a result, only a limited variety of crops can be grown in Pingzhang, with only a single crop of rice being planted in the paddy fields per year, and corn and wheat planted in most of crop plantations fields as winter crops.

The land scarcity issue has become more critical in Pingzhang during the last ten years because of pressure from the Government to fulfil quotas for reforestation. This has meant that large areas of sloping land have been converted into forests within a short period of time and planted with a small number of species

¹ This case study is based on interviews in Pingzhang village, October 2006.

during the Sloping Land Conservation Programme (SLCP) period.³

Although many development projects had previously tried to assist this community, the outcomes of these projects were poor. Local villagers still reported only modest changes in their livelihoods. They also reported a lack of meaningful participation in wider-scale management activities. As one villager described it, 'all types of projects have come and gone but none of them has brought us genuine benefits'.

Having realised that insufficient attention has been given to the role and capabilities of local institutions by previous projects, ICRAF then facilitated the Community-based Sustainable Development Project (FCBSD) in Pingzhang village. This project aimed to improve the lives of the poor communities and promote the conservation of mountain ecosystems by introducing a participatory approach and innovative models for agriculture and forestry extension. ICRAF decided to start with the capacity building of local organisations.

Institutional building in Pingzhang

At the start of the project, the Pingzhang Village Administrative Committee was given sole responsibility to guide and implement FCBSD project. However, in order to ensure the funds went directly to households and to avoid unnecessary financial leakage, five independent, natural village-based Executive Village Development Committees (VDCs) were set up after six months of the pilot scheme between 2005 and 2006.

The members and the chairmen of these committees were elected by villagers during village meetings. The responsibilities of these five committees included participatory planning and resource allocation, such as breeding, sampling, fertilizers and small loans, forest management and conflict management. Although the ICRAF programme had no particular requirements regarding the range of candidates, three of the chairmen among the five VDCs were also members of the Village Administrative Committees at that time.

After two years of piloting, it was reported that the three VDCs which had members drawn from the Village Administrative Committees were working very well. Regulations and rules had been strictly implemented and were monitored by the villagers themselves. The other two committees, however, were facing difficulties. With poor linkages and interactions with both the Township Government and their Village Administrative Committees, these two committees had failed to receive the necessary assistance and support from the current administrative system. The members lost their enthusiasm after one year of voluntarybased work. They admitted that they lacked both the leadership and management experience to carry on the project. At the same time, after several unsuccessful attempts at trying different candidates, villagers had also lost confidence in the abilities of both the Chairman and the members of the executive committee.

Lessons learnt

The project experiences in Pinzhang show that social and cultural acceptance is a key factor for successful capacity building.

Integrate project-based institutional building into social activities

As a small village with only 35 householders, the Lujiadi villagers have a tradition

³ In 1999 the Chinese Government initiated the 'Grain for Green' programme (or SLCP: Sloping Land Conservation Programme). Its aim was to transform steep farmlands into forests or grasslands, and thus reduce erosion in the upper or middle streams of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers. The Government was to give 1500 kilograms of grain and three hundred Yuan per hectare to farmers who transformed their farmland into forests or grasslands. The government also aimed to provide free seedlings or grass seeds to farmers.

Personal interview with villagers in Pingzhang village, October 2006





Paddy fields, dry land and wood land are part of livelihoods in Baoshan (Yunnan Province).

whereby they organise a dinner party and worship on the second day of every Chinese New Year. During the dinner, all the villagers sit together and discuss the village development plan and other public affairs. Such gatherings also function as a way to mediate conflicts and initiate collective actions, but in a casual and friendly atmosphere, sometimes making it easier to reach consensus.

The village Head and members of the Village Development Committee reported that they were willing to engage in these sorts of activity, since the activities gave them an opportunity to gain a good reputation by complying with group norms of collective responsibility, and by encouraging and mobilising villagers to attend meetings or collective activities. Because village cadres and committee members attended these social activities as common members. the voices of ordinary villagers could be heard by village officers but in a more casual way, a method much preferred by many villagers as a way to reflect their real needs, without causing offence to the local

authorities. These activities were more socially and culturally embedded. So the public monitoring and moral standards favoured by these traditional norms gave the village officials more of an incentive to be accountable and righteous. VDC members in the Pingzhang case stated that it was easier to convince and elicit community members to comply with committee's missions during the process of collective action or social activities.

Use culturally acceptable ways to strengthen transparency

The Pingzhang case studies showed how important it is to be aware of cultural factors when introducing new financial management methods into the local communities. It was critical in establishing a more locally-adapted financial system. For instance, combining routine reporting systems and efficient auditing systems was introduced to Pingzhang by ICRAF experts. This skill would build the member's trust in their own financial systems. One chairman reported that in

order to make the financial budget more transparent, the Village Development Committee he belonged to had displayed the financial records on the village notice board. However, people were not in the habit of checking the authenticity of this data, nor did they have the knowledge to do so. He said 'People just instinctively assume our hands are not clean, even without any substantial evidence.'

In contrast, more culturally acceptable methods had been applied by another Village Development Committee in Pingzhang. The accountant and cashier of this committee said that he explained the details of the financial records item by item at the annual New Year gathering. Villagers were then able to raise their doubts in a casual atmosphere, which was less likely to upset the group's leader.

The challenge of elite capture

In Chinese rural communities in general, elite domination has been a common phenomenon. Within the local communities, certain groups benefited from the existing institutions more than others. The village elites, including village cadres, rich families and families with extensive political networks or social capital, have generally been able to exert enough power to claim their interests over others. They have more authority in terms of conflict management, resource allocation and local decision-making.

In Pingzhang, the weight of different members' voices varied with their wealth, social status and local authority. The poor continued to be unable to contest with the village elites. In other words, inclusive group membership provided the basis for wide participation, but did not necessarily lead to equitable resource allocations or resource claims. For example, it was reported by Pingzhang villagers that the village cadres and relatives of the village cadres were much more active in village meetings and decision-making than the common members ⁵

The local concept of 'fairness' does not mean 'egalitarian'

Sometimes, fairness and equality are two different objectives, which cannot both achieve maximum outcomes at the same time. For example, according to a member of the Pingzhang Village Development Committee:

At the beginning of the project, ICRAF provided us with some new species of corn seeds, but nobody wanted to take the risk to test them in their own land, therefore, many seeds were wasted at the first year. Only I and another two or three members of [the] Village Development Committee grew it in small plots. At the end of first year this new species appeared quite adapted to local ecologic conditions and gained [a] high yield. Then, in the second year, all households rush[ed] to us and asked us to share the seeds. The whole amount of seeds provided by ICRAF is far less than the large demands. I suggested choosing several families whose land is close to each other to grow the new species corn for one more year, so we can harvest more seeds. However, nobody wanted to give up this opportunity. As a result, seeds were allocated equally and each household gained a very small amount [of] seeds. As you know, a small growing area is not good for corn's pollination and keeping the genetic purification.

Motivation to participate does not always create sustainable processes

It often happens that some government or donor sponsored development projects are embraced in the first place by local people as a potential source of important financial

⁵ Another example is the International Heifer Foundation. It had promoted a new confinement cattle feeding programme in Pingzhang village after 2004. Several families who had become involved in this programme were either the families of village cadres, or rich families who could afford the initial investment required.



Transport on narrow mountain roads still depends on animals (Baoshan, Yunnan Province).

resources. One of the Pingzhang villagers said:

No matter what type of projects they are, we will welcome them, [in so] far as they can bring us some financial source or tangible benefit.

The main motive of local people to involve themselves in these initiatives and groups had been the financial resources they might receive from participating. But they lacked the aspiration to maintain the project on a sustainable basis. It was quite a common occurrence that once these groups had been set up, there was little or no incentive for the local people to actively maintain the project in accordance with its objectives. Some of the villagers' inputs were nominal or superficial, particularly when they were paid to attend meetings.

Reflection: building on customary institutions

The experience of the ICRAF project in Pingzhang village showed that external facilitation was critical in some poor communities. This was especially true when local people displayed a low level of motivation with respect to collective resource management, due to the real or perceived low level of benefits, capacity gaps and weak social capital. Actually, in the Pingzhang case, local development relied heavily on financial and technical assistance from the Government, NGOs. research institutions or other donors. However, it is questionable as to whether these initiatives would be able to sustain themselves after the external assistance has been withdrawn. Was it possible to implement similar initiatives on a larger scale? Without substantial capacity and institutional building, some communities market situations were likely to get worse once external facilitation had ceased.

Evidence from this case study demonstrated that the success of external interventions depended on one key factor: whether or not the local community had a sufficiently strong and enabling institutional structures or whether external proj-

ects had the capacity to re-establish locallyadopted managing mechanisms drawn from customary institutions. Especially for local communities with strong social differentiation, (different income generating activities, different access to natural resources, as well as diverse interests) it is critical to link capacity building with the customary institutions and to provide incentives and penalties in line with the culturally and socially accepted norms and rules.

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