2 Prologue: reflections on participation in Southwest China in the early 2000s

by ANDREAS WILKES

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Practitioners of participatory approaches are wont to proselytise for the benefits of participatory approaches, mostly drawing on their own experiences and often paying less attention to drawbacks and limitations. In contexts where other approaches have also been demonstrated to be effective in bringing about change – such as rapidly transforming rural China – experience and persuasion are often insufficient to communicate what participatory approaches are, what they can do, and in particular what the benefits of participatory as opposed to other approaches are. Reflection on experiences to identify lessons – about both benefits and limitations – can help muster evidence to persuade others, and can also transform practitioners' own understanding of issues affecting participatory approaches and their promotion.

In the early 2000s, some 5-8 years after the introduction of participatory approaches to Southwest China, a number of practitioners were involved in a reflection process which aimed to identify what participatory approaches can actually do. This paper reports the main findings of the reflection process and the changes in understanding the process brought about.

Introduction

The Yunnan Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Network was established in 1994, after around fifty people took part in a PRA training workshop facilitated by Robert Chambers (IDS) in Kunming. Most participants were from research institutes and government departments involved in the Yunnan Upland Management Programme, a poverty alleviation programme funded by the Ford Foundation. In the years that followed, most applications and promotion of participatory approaches in Yunnan had some relation with the members of the PRA Network, either through their own research and action projects, their employment with international NGOs, participation in government projects or through consultancy services provided to international donor projects. Practitioners in Sichuan and Guizhou also mostly came from research and education institutes and gained practical experience in internationally funded projects in the mid-1990s. By the end of the century, participatory approaches had been applied in a wide range of sectors, and after some years of internationally supported projects, some local agencies had begun to institutionalise participatory approaches in their work.

In the late 1990s, practitioner networks in Yunnan and Guizhou and regional workshops provided opportunities for sharing experiences, methods and lessons. By the turn of the century, with such diverse experiences among practitioners, there was demand among practitioners in all three provinces to 'take stock' of what had been learnt and to identify common challenges to further promote participatory methods. In 2000, the Yunnan PRA Network convened workshops to enable practitioners from all three Southwestern Chinese provinces (Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan) to reflect on and share their experiences and lessons (Wilkes, 2000). About seventy people took part in provincial and regional workshops, discussing a range of themes, such as experiences in learning, training

and promoting PRA, the impacts of PRA, and emerging themes at the forefront of practice. Key issues identified through these discussions included the challenges to further promote participatory methods presented by the institutional contexts of decision-making in rural China, as well as the particular contexts faced by government, donor and NGO projects. With a common identified need to persuade leaders to create institutional space for upscaling and deepening participatory practice, the need to demonstrate and convince leaders of the impacts of participatory approaches came to the fore. PRA practitioners, whether from research institutes or government, also frequently commented on the cost (in terms of human and financial resources) of participatory approaches. Some government projects had already begun to institutionalise PRA in regular work procedures. However the time incurred in PRA activities and difficulties in linking the outputs of PRA with the information requirements of existing planning systems were seen as obstacles. On the other hand, some government departments had already realised the benefits of community participation for project relevance and sustainability. But practitioners still felt that senior officials needed a better understanding of the trade-offs between costs and impacts.

In response to these identified needs, in 2000 the Yunnan PRA Network, with grants from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) *Pathways to Participation* project and Oxfam Hong Kong, supported 14 practitioners to return to project sites where participatory methods had been used, in order to explicitly identify the impacts of using participatory methods. The 14 case studies presented at that time covered a range of sectors, such as natural resources management, water infrastructure, agricultural extension, microcredit, PRA in urban areas and PRA and gender. Some studies were conducted by researchers, and some by staff of the govern-

Table 1: Summary of the impacts, benefits and preconditions for 'voice' and 'influence'		
	Impacts and Benefits	**Preconditions**
'Voice'	1. Improved information generation and sharing	• Respect, transparent working procedures
	2. Improved relationships	• Repeated interaction over time
	3. Changes in personal attitudes and awareness	• Gradual learning process; sufficient time; practical experience; availability of full and trustworthy information about the project and the role expected of them
'Influence'	(In general:)	• Villagers have access to full and trustworthy information about their expected role • Open and equitable system for discussion and decision-making • Good facilitation
	4. Releasing drivers of social energy	• Alignment of project with villagers' interest • Creation of awareness of common interest • Respect and creation of confidence • Community institutions that provide structures that release energies
	5. Changing roles	• Increased awareness amongst villagers of the role expected of them •Gradual and continual learning process among staff and villagers; learning through practice • Community institutions that provide structures that enable shifts in roles • Supporting project management mechanisms
	6. Commitment to follow-through	• Active involvment in decision-making
Overall	7. Creating institutional structures that support community participation	• Community institutions for self-management • Supporting project management mechanisms

Source: Wilkes (2001)

ment agencies that implemented the projects. Most studies did not employ formal controlled comparison methods. But two case studies focused on communities where the same project had been designed twice, once in a conventional way and once through a participatory process. Two case studies compared the costs of conventional and participatory approaches, and several case studies examined the challenges to scaling up, including two studies of the impacts on the quality and results of participatory projects when rapidly scaled up using conventional government manage-

ment approaches. Despite the lack of formal methods used in the studies, this was the first time in China that research was conducted attempting to clarify the impacts of participatory methods, as opposed to simply extolling the virtues of participation as much development literature is wont to do.

To synthesise the findings of the 14 case studies, I employed an interpretive framework based on an understanding of a participatory process as consisting of participants 'having voice' and 'having influence'. 'Having voice' implies that

participants engage in information or knowledge generation and sharing, while 'influence' refers to participants being able to have an actual influence on the decisions made in the process. In analysing each case study, I identified what types of impacts or benefits for 'voice' and 'influence' participatory methods had, and identified the key factors or preconditions which brought these benefits about. The main results are summarised in Table 1. Clearly, this required great oversimplification of the rich detail in the case studies.

Key findings on the impacts and benefits of participation

What can giving or having 'voice' do?

The case studies provided evidence that participatory approaches can improve communication and improve relationships among project participants. Several case studies reported that shifting from traditional work styles to a more participatory mode had beneficial impacts on the generation and sharing of information between locals and outsiders (e.g. local officials, technicians, project staff), by enabling direct communication between project staff and villagers, enabling researchers undertaking surveys to avoid subjective biases, reducing survey refusal rates, and allowing the villagers' own creativity to come into play, such as by drawing on indigenous knowledge. The most common factor that enabled improved communication was the perception by villagers that staff were giving them respect, which also improved relationships among participants. Improved relationships – characterised by equality, cooperation, mutual understanding and mutual trust – were built on repeated interactions that took time.

Changed understandings and attitudes on the part of both villagers and staff were found to be preconditions for changing the roles each played in project and wider development processes. Specific attitude changes on the part of staff included increased appreciation of the capabilities of villagers, and changing understanding of villagers' role as the main actor in development. This transformation also depended on changes in villagers' attitudes towards their own roles in development, such as increasing awareness of their potential role in pursuing self-development and the realisation that they should and can do things for themselves. In most cases, changes in attitude and improvements in relationships took repeated interactions between staff and villagers over time. Sometimes improvements in relationships were noted within a year during which staff made repeated visits, but one example where conflict with nature reserve staff preceded the participatory activities, changes were noted over a much longer period of 5 to 6 years. Transparent work procedures and full and trustworthy information about the nature of the project were also identified as essential preconditions.

What are the benefits of participatory decision-making?

In the 14 case studies, villagers took part in a range of decisions at different stages of project activities, from needs assessment through to post-project management of infrastructure or natural resources.

Several case studies argued that farmers' participation in decision-making enabled farmers to pursue their interests. It enabled participants to form a common awareness of their common interests and consensus on the importance of cooperation in order to achieve those interests. One case study reported on a process of facilitating villagers to formulate new forest management rules, in which there was no project funding apart from that required to cover the facilitator's cost. This case showed that interests need not be defined by farmers' interest in obtaining project funding as is commonly assumed.

Other case studies argued that participatory processes – which give villagers a

sense of respect, a sense of being the 'host in their own home', and which draw on their own tangible and intangible resources – enable 'spiritual energies' to be released at individual and community levels, and that it is these energies that fuel local participation in development action.[1]

Adopting participatory approaches also enabled government staff to change the focus of their work. For example, there was a shift from conflict resolution to service provision and from enforcing rules to facilitating community development. At the organisational level, participatory development implies significant shifts in the roles of government agencies. Along with the decentralisation of some decision-making powers to farmers participating in projects, government agencies were able to focus more on providing services and training, ensuring organisational structures, assisting farmers and providing information.

In general, the case studies suggested that there are several possible preconditions for villagers to take part effectively in decision-making processes, including:
• access to full and trustworthy information on the nature of the project ('informed consent');
• outsiders should trust that villagers can make the right decision;
• villagers should fully understand the expectations of their role;
• the decision whether to participate or not should be voluntary;
• establishing an equitable and transparent system for decision-making prior to making any decision to ensure that 'voice' can translate into 'influence'; and
• good facilitation of negotiations between different interest groups.

Institutional structures and mechanisms were found to be important in enabling and supporting participation. Community management institutions were established in half of the projects analysed.

These institutions were important for enabling villagers to cooperate, access and provide services and for ensuring that activities continue beyond the lifetime of the 'project'. These institutions put in place appropriate structures, processes and incentives for action. Villagers also stated that the new management regulations and institutions gave them the confidence to develop, as well as an increased sense of responsibility and enthusiasm. Community institutions can also provide structures that enable shifts in roles among project staff and villagers, since some of the tasks formerly taken on by project staff (e.g. planning the location of water tanks, monitoring use of natural resources) could now be performed by villagers.

In the projects documented, participatory approaches were applied as part of a wider range of project management mechanisms. Some mechanisms specifically supported the adoption of participatory methods, such as requiring evidence that technical designs had been approved in community meetings, or linking staff salaries to outcomes of villagers' activities. Other mechanisms, such as requiring receipts for materials as they passed along each stage of the supply chain and public announcements of fund use, were not specifically designed to support adoption of participatory approaches, but were considered to have helped in creating a transparent operating environment that mitigated potential obstacles to villager participation.

What are the risks and limitations of participatory approaches?

Villagers alone were found to have limited knowledge of technological options and information on market opportunities outside the scope of their available information. Farmers were found to choose projects with which they were already

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[1] 'Spiritual energies' is used as a catch-all to refer to the excitement, pride, satisfaction and other mostly unmeasurable dispositions in people who have been prompted to individually and/or collectively promote collective action.

familiar and that had low levels of investment and thus lower risk. Most case studies reported ways to resolve this potential limitation, and concluded that participation is not a process of 'bottom-up' decision-making, but a process of 'multi-stakeholder' decision-making in which successful planning is a joint product of villagers' and outsiders' wisdom, or of villagers preferences or knowledge about their own needs and capabilities on the one hand, and information on market and technological options provided by outsiders on the other.

The cost of participatory approaches – particularly in terms of manpower – has often been raised as a limitation. Three case studies examined costs of facilitating participatory approaches, two of them in comparison to conventional approaches. Costs of participatory components of projects examined were found to range between 0.1% and 3.6% of the total investment cost. Although this seems small, officials were still found to have a clear preference for adopting cost-minimising approaches, especially when there is no special budget item to cover these costs, as is the case in large-scale government projects.

Participatory approaches – as with other conventional approaches – have almost always been introduced in China in a top-down way. Both staff and villagers often begin with a passive attitude to the acceptance of PRA: either they are required to adopt it or they are unsure about the benefits that the approaches will bring for their work. Participatory approaches require a gradual learning process on the part of villagers, local staff and government officials. For frontline staff and for project managers, learning occurs mostly through practice, for which allowing sufficient time is a precondition. The emphasis on gradual learning seems to be extremely important and was a major conclusion of the majority of case studies. If insufficient time and consideration are given to enabling gradual learning, passive participation may result despite the adoption of participatory approaches. Rapid scaling up may also increase farmers risk to levels beyond their coping capacity.

The role of reflections in learning about participation

The Southwest China reflection process occurred at a time when many practitioners in Southwest China had just shifted from an understanding of PRA as a set of survey tools, to engagement with participatory approaches as part of a process to support development action. By documenting, analysing and sharing the impacts of participatory approaches in action-oriented development projects, the reflection process and the case studies helped practitioners to deepen their understanding of the potential, preconditions and options for participatory approaches to development action.

The importance of changes in personal attitudes and behaviour, as had been stressed by Robert Chambers (e.g. 1995, 1997), was noted in many case studies. But they also showed that personal attitudes and behaviour are shaped by the position of villagers and project staff in institutional contexts. Incentive systems and decision-making procedures were highlighted as important obstacles to change in government agencies. Case studies analysing the impacts of rapid upscaling of participatory approaches highlighted the importance of wider institutional contexts for supporting participatory approaches. Some practitioners went on to look beyond participation in the project cycle to examining organisational management and development options for institutionalising participatory approaches in departmental work procedures. At a time when China's Village Democracy Law (1998) had just been promulgated, and the first round of village elections were just beginning, several case studies highlighted the importance of building community institutions to support villagers' involvement in decision-making.

The wider governance context of participatory approaches was firmly put on the agenda of PRA practitioners around the time of the reflection process. Both researchers and development practitioners moved 'beyond the project cycle' to examine management issues within implementing agencies (e.g. Wang and Sun, 2002; Han, 2002; Zhao, 2006) and the wider institutional environment that shapes communities' opportunities to have voice and influence decisions (e.g. Zuo, 2003; Zheng, 2006; He *et al*., 2007). In this, they have been further supported by some government initiatives, such as the requirement to develop participatory poverty alleviation plans (PADO, 2001), and the many other institutional reforms that have continued to be implemented in China's rural government systems since.

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