PART VII
Conclusions

Changing spaces at the interface of government and citizens

31

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This issue has presented a wide range of very different experiences from various sectors, organisations and regions in China, in experimenting with and using participatory approaches. The overarching themes of the contributions have been to engage with the government around issues of participation and how to make a 'government-led' approach to participation workable and credible. Although some of the practices and reflections may seem basic, the experiences presented have significant implication for the wider discourse of governance issues in the Chinese context. The articles in this issue revolve around the recurrent theme of how relations at the government-society interface can be transformed, a topic which is at the heart of the overall development and reform agenda in China, thus directly impacting the well-being of hundreds of millions of people.

Emerging issues

The contributions present various facets of participation in the context of China's most impoverished regions. Common themes emerging from the articles are:

• There is the lack of clarity on **roles and responsibilities**, both on the side of the government and the community. New forms of engagement require greater responsibility on the community side, but communities often do not understand what these responsibilities should include and there is reluctance on the side of the local government to let go of control. There is a feeling of gratitude and excitement on the side of the communities who experience a sense of responsibility (as demonstrated forcefully in Nati's article (Part I, Article 4), but there are also questions on who – outside of the formal power structure – should take responsibility (see Qin Guozheng's article – Part I, Article 5) and how (see Song Haokun's article – Part I, Article 6).

• A concern that impacts communities and government alike, driving their joint engagement in the process, revolves around issues of **transparency and accountability**. Participation is regarded, on both sides, as pivotal to achieve a more

Miao women participating in participatory poverty monitoring in Huanjiang, Guangxi Province.

transparent allocation and use of funding.[1] This features strongly in the case studies by Qin Zhurong, Yang Gang, and Song Haokun. The desire to be more transparent and accountable in the use of poverty reduction funds puts pressure on community leaders and local government officials – from above (higher government levels) and below (community levels).

• There is general willingness on the side of the government to engage with the poor, but they experience difficulties in finding appropriate ways to **engage effectively**. A particular challenge has been to go beyond the idea of the community as a whole, and reach out to marginal groups within the community. Particularly in multi-ethnic settings, facilitators are searching for effective ways of communication, often working through intermediaries, usually community representatives in positions of power. The facilitation of internal disputes about distributional issues, and building consensus is challenging and community leaders are usually expected to resolve conflicts with-

out interference by government officials (see Qing Guozhen's article – Part II, Article 10).
• Related to this are **equity** issues. Communities are often seen as homogeneous units where equalising forces, like strong values for equal distribution of benefits or mechanism for mutual exchange, are at work. Issues of social inclusion and issues of distribution (e.g. of project benefits) within the community are seldom raised. It is often readily assumed that communities themselves will be able to achieve fair distribution in line with their egalitarian practices and values; thus little is done to address elite capture within the community (see Wang Jianping's article – Part II, Article 12).
• Issues relating to **indigenous culture** and organisation are adding an additional layer of complication. Facilitators are often struggling to overcome cultural and language barriers, which make it particularly difficult to engage effectively. Among ethnic minority groups, there is a longstanding tradition of *de facto* autonomous livelihoods, with

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[1] The impact evaluation of PRCDP finds that communities see the improved transparency as the most important outcome of the participation process (ITAD, forthcoming).

limited, or contentious interaction with the government and hence a lack of trust and mutual understanding.[2] A number of case studies revolve around how – through the process of participation – relations of trust and understanding are built (see Li Hui (Part VI, Article 27), Qin Guozheng (Part I, Article 5), and articles in Part II).

• Related to this are issues of **cognitive justice** and how it can be put into practice (see Maruja Salas' article, Tips for Trainers, Article 32). The key challenge is around taking the views of the poor seriously and how to develop sustainable strategies for poverty reduction, based on a better understanding of the realities of poverty. Practices of participatory poverty analysis are leading to a contextualised understanding of poverty which puts the perspectives of the poor at the centre (see Qin Zhurong's article, Part III, Article 15).

Emerging trends: What has changed? Who has changed?

The introduction of participatory approaches has been a journey of almost 20 years, and is continuing. The issue provides a vivid testimony on how myriads of practices are gradually moving the agenda on participation. Change is happening, albeit gradually, through transformative practices and through direct engagement with the government, which has happened over a long period and often not without tensions. There is plenty of evidence that participatory approaches are increasingly integrated into government policies and practices (see articles in Part VI).[3] Naturally, interpretations of participation vary, but the government has a strong tendency to align
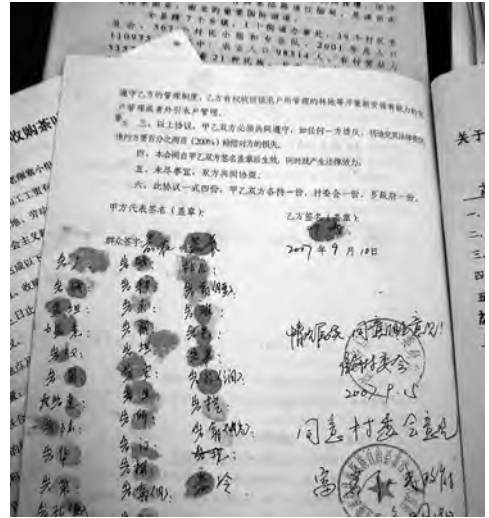
Contract with a tea processing company signed by all farmers of the community; previously contracts were signed by community leaders only.

the discourse with its own political agenda. This is likely to give way to a particular 'Chinese' interpretation of participation.[4] The government agenda had at certain times given strong support of grassroots or self organisation and mobilisation of the masses, which entailed forms of consultation at various degrees.[5] What appears to be new in the recent agenda is the strong commitment to improve (pro-poor) services, while also addressing issues of accountability.

The reform of government services has created a space, which is gradually being populated by local players. It is however not easy for poor communities to claim this space. Limited resources and capacities to effectively organise and express themselves are part of the problem and they are often taken as excuse to withhold delegation of power. The reflections in this issue show that

[2] For a history of ethnic minorities in mainland Southeast Asia (including Southwest China) see Scott, 2009.
[3] Limited evidence of the effectiveness of participatory approaches is an issue though. Some evidence has been presented in the early PRA Net reflection workshop (see contribution by A. Wilkes in the Prologue to this issue). The CDD pilot project has undertaken a survey to assess the effectiveness of the CDD approach (see contribution by Li Hui, Part VI, Article 27). A more comprehensive final evaluation of the participatory approach in PRCDP, based on five annual surveys, is underway.
[4] Previous discussions of participation often focused on the 'strangeness' of the concept and the 'differentness' of the understanding and application of participatory practices in China, which would make it difficult to adopt or disseminate given the politic-economic context. (See for example Plummer and Taylor, 2004).
[5] See for example Caizhen, 2010.

existing power relations are an important variable, but they are not fundamentally questioned. The articles talk of changing roles, attitudes and mindsets on both sides of the equation and the need for communities to take over greater responsibility for their own development. Power relations within the community are assumed and utilised, but not fundamentally transformed. The underlying authoritarian paradigm assumes that community leaders and elite groups are the key players to enable wider participation. As far as government-community relations are concerned, it is the government who delegates responsibility and creates the space for communities to raise their voice. In a typical Chinese way of squaring the circle, this is giving way to a depoliticised discourse on governance which focuses mainly on technical issues. Within the discourse, the government has retained its central role in defining the space for participation.

Thus a reflective approach to interrogating practices – as it has been documented in this issue – presents a big step forward towards widening the discourse and including the voices of those who are – with and without power – involved in the frontline of participatory practices. Now that the focus has shifted from doing the practice to reflecting on the practice, the discourse has become a transformative experience for those immediately involved and those learning from it. As soon as the underlying issues that influence people's thinking and practice on participation are made explicit there is a growing chance that concerns are openly discussed. From the articles we can see that the discussion has increasingly focused on ways to put basic principles of participation into practice for the benefit of the poorest and most marginalised groups. As basic values of genuine participation are gradually being internalised, the discourse is moving on, from the mechanistic application of tools towards a creative process of negotiating practices, processes and relationships.[6] The incremental changes resulting from this process are part of moving the agenda forward – they provide ideas, concepts, values and practices for interpreting and defining the changing space at the government-citizen interface.

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[6] The tokenistic application of participatory practices was often interpreted as a capacity issue (see Plummer and Taylor, 2004).