

Participation processes in seven Chinese villages towards sustainable future images by implementing small project concepts

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1 ABSTRACT

Within the three year research project SUCCESS in the 5th framework programme of the European Commission, Oikodrom was coordinating, we have initiated and conducted a participation process in each of the seven case study villages. The processes aimed at the involvement of village dwellers to actively take part in a participatory sustainability research.

For combing the local knowledge of the villagers and the expert knowledge of the scientists we have introduced a negotiation process between the expert-pool of SUCCESS and the village dwellers. One main task within this process was the conception and realisation of exemplary small projects by implementing the sustainability concept in each case study village. The work on the project concepts and the implementation of them were important elements of the participation process, because village dwellers directly could check out their possibilities and the limits of their engagement. Being aware and interested in their (built) environment is the main aspect of an "emotional co-ownership" with a community.

With the help of participatory methods dwellers articulated their needs and interests and exchanged them with the scientists according to the sustainability concept. The implementation of the ideas which have come up had to be negotiated. First within the villages, who have carried out the ideas and concepts and second within the scientific expert pool. Feed back loops guaranteed the exchange between these two levels of decision making. The final decision was made by the villages themselves. Dwellers enhanced their resources and capabilities and became representatives of their own ideas. Villagers groups that worked on local project concepts, future labs and discussion rounds supported this continuous process.

We have constituted gender and age balanced village groups as continuous staff in the villages, consisting of at least two settlement managers and the critical reference groups, both composed by village dwellers. They had regular meetings in the villages to discuss and decide about the sustainability process in the village and the small project ideas. The constant linkage between the staff in the villages and the expert pool were the responsible team leaders with their bilingual language skills and their scientific expertise as an SUCCESS participant, combined with their local anchor.

Following the concept of sustainability we have worked out selection criteria that should help for the self evaluation process in the villages. The village groups developed proposals and ideas for local sustainability projects following these selection criteria to shortlist the range of collected ideas.

Besides the empowerment effects of participatory processes the SUCCESS study had impact on three levels:

the villages, the policy making level and the scientific level. There were a lot of observed upcoming awareness processes and activities in each of the case study villages, especially concerning their specific local situation. This includes tangible actions like building activities as well as participatory discussions and processes. The SUCCESS project gained much attention by the local governments. The bottom up approach of the SUCCESS project, involving villagers, based on their needs and potentials gave a well observed example both for villagers and the local authorities. The discussion about the local project ideas gave the research team the opportunity to deal actively with the real conditions in the respective village and to see the partners in the village as the owner of their own questions, needs and wishes. In this way, it forced to consider the wider consequences by exercising in a small scale.

2 INTRODUCTION

As the SUCCESS project followed a case study approach with seven villages in six Chinese provinces the research team had to facilitate the involvement of peasants in Chinese rural areas. Following the sustainability definition, which was agreed by the SUCCESS consortium (Levine et. al., 1999), sustainability among others has its local expressions. So one major aspect was the work on the spot in collaboration with the village dwellers in the respective case study villages.

Scientist working together with non scientists and tending to transfer scientific results into praxis follows in principal the approach of transdisciplinary research, although there is still no common understanding of the terminology (Loibl, 2005). Furthermore there do not exist consistent evaluation criteria for public participation methods (Rowe, Frewer, 2000). Adequate tools and methods have to be developed with regard to the specific research questions.

For combing the local knowledge of the village dwellers of the case study villages and the expert knowledge of the scientists of the SUCCESS consortium Oikodrom has introduced a negotiation process between this expert-pool and the village dwellers. The idea of conception and realisation of exemplary small projects by implementing the sustainability concept in each case study village as one part of the initiated participation process was carried out by Oikodrom after long term experience in theory and praxis and is based on the general assumption that inviting the public to be part of decision making processes improves the likelihood that the resulting decision will be considered appropriate (Renn, Webler, Wiedemann, 1995) and find more acceptance.

In the context of a research study participatory generating tangible projects is an innovative approach. It combines two streams that have been seen contradictory. The sustainability negotiation process aims at the involvement and awarenessraising of the dwellers and at the same time compasses information that complement the scientific results.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Concept of Local Sustainability Projects

Participation in the sense of empowerment means activating concerned people in detecting their own interests and potentials to achieve both, awareness raising of local conditions and strengthening the capacity for sharing their own topics in "organised efforts and actions that use the instruments of democracy". This so called advocacy (Ondrusek et.al, 2003) is a pre-condition for the self reliance in future development. The intended local sustainability projects which were elaborated and managed by the villagers themselves, had empowered them trough the experience of a successfully process from the first ideas to the final realisation.

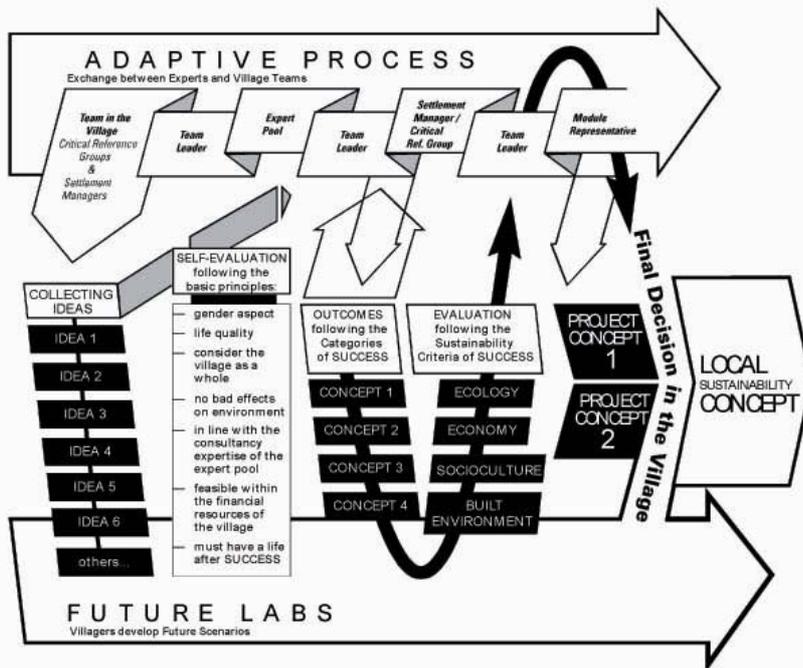
The work on the project concepts and the implementation of them were important elements of the participation process, because village dwellers directly could checkout their possibilities and the limits of their engagement. Being aware and interested in their (built) environment is the main aspect of an "emotional co-ownership" (Dumreicher, Kolb, 2003a) with a community. It is the specific social actions that produces this kind of vicinity which creates the relation to a village or district. The debate about the small projects always contained aspects of infrastructure which concerned finally the village as a whole. In many cases one aspect had led to another, and brought up by this latent needs that had to be discussed. For example building a community house in a village, raised the question of where to locate the new building. Defining a place which was finally accepted by all villagers had led to an unuttered conflict about illegally but accepted occupation of this (public) place by one family, and so on.

The discussion about the local project ideas gave the research team the opportunity to deal actively with the real conditions in the respective village and to see the partners in the village as the owner of their own questions, needs and wishes. In this way, it forced to consider the wider consequences by exercising in a small scale.

The Sustainability Negotiation Process

With the help of intercultural communication methods (Marschalek 2005b), dwellers articulated their needs and interests and exchanged them with the scientists according to the sustainability concept. The implementation of the ideas which have come up were to be negotiated. First within the villages, who have carried out the ideas and concepts and second within the scientific expert pool. Feed back loops guaranteed the exchange between these two levels of decision making. The final decision was made by the villages themselves. Dwellers enhanced their resources and capabilities and became representatives of their own ideas. Villagers groups that worked on local project concepts, future labs and discussion rounds supported this continuous process. For the researchers, the concepts gave examples of feasible concrete measures that the participants could discuss along the line of sustainability. Developing the idea of a small project was important for both processes in the SUCCESS project, the local participatory process as well as the scientific process. When developing the projects, both sides could show their view and could exercise reciprocal auditing (what is the expert view on the proposal that comes from the villagers? what is the villagers view on the comments from the expert-group?). The adaptive negotiation process increased the effectiveness of the research and improved the meaningfulness of the information which had been generated. In this way, the findings in the scientific process were involved in the settlement process.

Sustainability Negotiation Process / Researchers and Village Teams



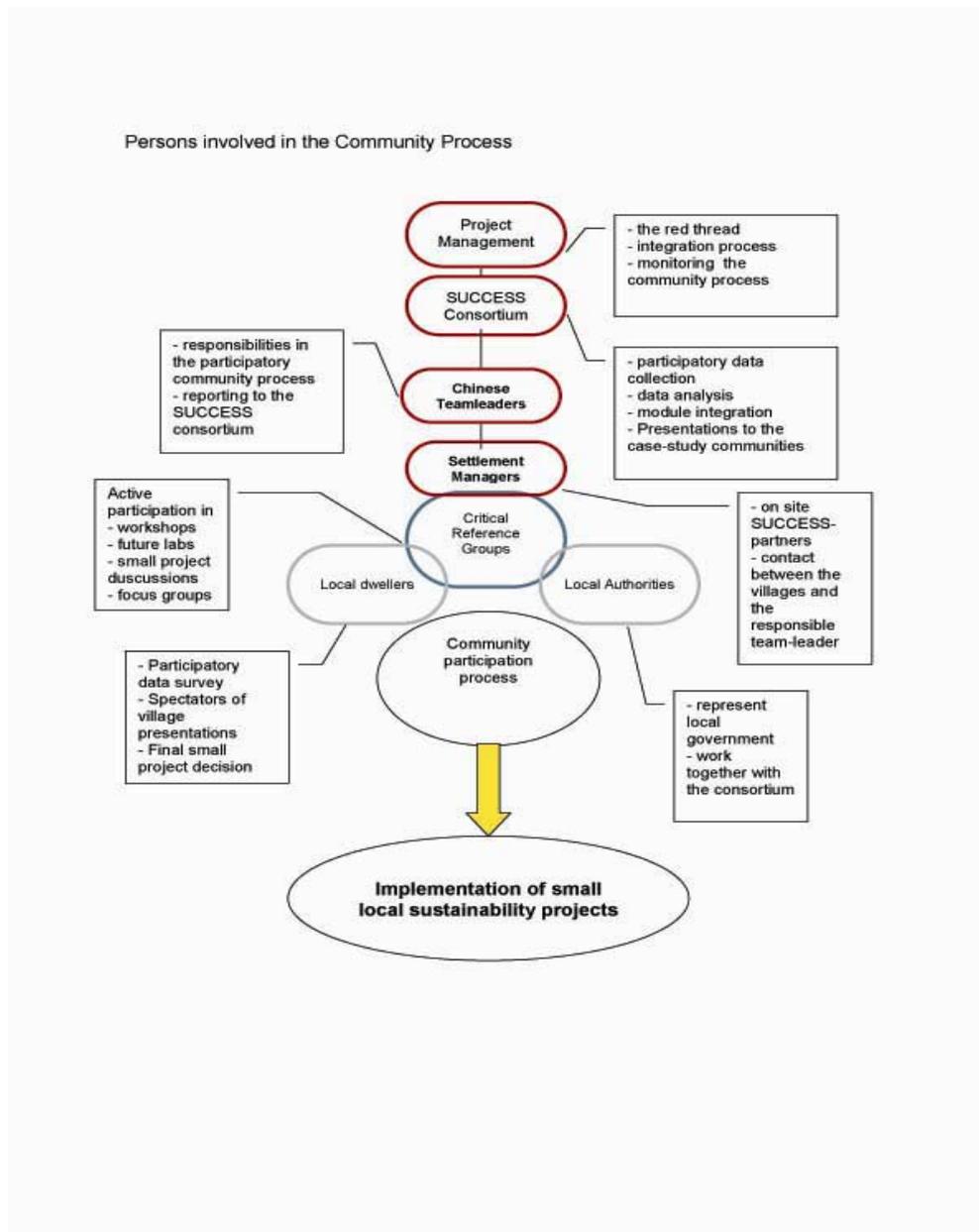
Graphic 1, Oikodrom © 2003

3.2 Persons Involved in the Process

3.2.1 SUCCESS Team leaders

The leaders of the teams in each case study village played a significant role within the SUCCESS study. Besides their specific expertise in the pool of experts they had many other tasks such as selecting the case study villages. Much preparation work had to be done to inform village representatives about the project and to get the necessary local commitment. The team leaders conducted the participatory process in the village. They nominated the settlement managers and helped in building up critical reference groups. They initiated regular meetings of the groups which were organised by the settlement managers. The team leaders were in constant contact with the village teams and gave regular reports to the scientific co-ordinator about the work progress in the village. At the integration conferences, where all experts took part, the team leaders conducted village related working groups and communicated key information gathered from the village dwellers. The team leaders were also responsible for communicating back the results of the research to the villagers.

In addition, the field study visits of the researchers were organised by the team leader with support of the village teams. With their language skills of Chinese mother tongue and excellent English and their scientific expertise combined with their local anchor, they acted as communication bridges between the local dwellers and the SUCCESS pool of experts during the negotiation process.



Graphic 2, Oikodrom © 2004

3.2.2 Settlement Managers

In order to carry out the participatory process, every SUCCESS village had at least two people (a woman and a man) who were on site SUCCESS-partners. The settlement managers were responsible for facilitating the working relationship between the villagers and the responsible team-leader, ensuring good communication. They were in constant and direct contact with the team leaders and were

well accepted by the village dwellers. The settlement managers were responsible for the transparency of the participatory process in the villages and the documentation of the villagers meetings.

Critical Reference Groups

Every village had established a so-called critical reference group, consisting of 8 to 25 village dwellers. The installation of these village groups led to the identification and involvement of the people concerned. It enhanced the relevance and creativity of the new agreed actions and the commitment to further research them and implement them. In this way, the disciplinary findings of the various work packages could be integrated to the settlement process.

The critical reference group assisted the research process by attending the consultation meetings and providing helpful feedback. They had regular meetings in the village to discuss and decide about the sustainability process in the village and the implementation of the small project ideas. There are ninety records of such meetings. At the end of the project, members of the critical reference group were given a certificate confirming their participation.

3.3 The Workflow of the Process

The phases of the settlement process followed the general timetable of SUCCESS and used the face-to-face-conferences of the SUCCESS consortium for developing the inter- and trans-disciplinary negotiation process. The project was organised according to the following stages:

The villagers expressed their interest in the process. This phase had been accomplished before the start of SUCCESS. Every village had prepared a written document showing its interest.

Basic information: the settlement dwellers were informed about the SUCCESS study, about the role and expertise of the scientific expert pool as well as of their own role. The information also contained the limitation of SUCCESS ("this is not a development project") and expectations from the village. This information was either given to a group of representatives of the village or during a public assembly.

The process of ideal-making. This process was the core activity during the SUCCESS project. It involved the dwellers according to the rules of the critical reference group. It aimed to define the potential of the settlement in relation to sustainability and defined the local topics of such a process starting from the question "What to maintain and what to change?"

The phase of group meetings. These groups developed proposals and ideas for local sustainability projects according to the following selection criteria:

- Raise the life quality in the settlement
- Be able to put into practice at the village level
- Fit into the sustainability concept of SUCCESS
- Concern public (common) space
- Fit into the official regional policy
- Be an example of good practice for other villages
- Have a life after the end of SUCCESS

The negotiation process (see graphic 1) between the expert-pool of SUCCESS and the village looked for ways in which both knowledge bases, the local knowledge and the scientific expert knowledge, could be combined. This process used proposals for activities and projects that the village had worked out, including defined responsibilities and the time frame.

As the agreement of all dwellers was important, the last step of the negotiation process involved in many cases the whole village.

Implementation phase: After finishing the negotiation process all villages began the implementation of the decided projects within the duration of the study. At this stage all local projects are effectively implemented with options for further activities.

From participation to self organisation

In this phase dwellers themselves continued the process which was initiated and conducted

by the project team. The dwellers have experienced fields of activities and entered thereby new "spaces of opportunity and possibility" (Levine et. al, 1999). The motivation to engage themselves in such a process comes out of the successful participation and the gained awareness of the dwellers about their potentials and possibilities. This process in one community can be a starting point and acupuncture point in a certain region for the development of a civil society.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Local Projects relating to Village Typologies

Through the participatory elaboration, the agreed small projects illustrate the village patterns and the identified needs of the village dwellers and also correlate with the village typology as clearly stated in the final paper (Liu, 2005).

The following table shows the three types of Chinese villages we have encountered within the SUCCESS study and the effectively implemented small projects in each of the case study village.

Village type	Village name	Implemented project
Agriculture-based communities	Du Jia	- Solar panel - Biogas pit - Basketball court
	San Yuan	- Dongba evening school - Entrance door to the village
	Jiang Jiazhai	- Concrete roads within the village - Garbage boxes - European Trees
Rural-urban partnership communities (peri-urban communities)	Bei Suzha	- Internet/computers for the village school
	Chi Qiao	- “(Big)Hands-in-(Small)Hands” meaning frequent friendship parties of collage students (Big-Hands) and the children of Chi Qiao primary school (Small-Hands)
Eco-tourism based communities	Xia Futou	- Public bath house
	Xiaoqi	- Drink water system completed (pumping station, water storage tower, pipes to the households

Table 1, Village Typologies

The table above clearly illustrates the significant outputs concerning the replicability of the results.

In the peri-urban villages like Bei Suzha (Hebei province, south of Beijing province), that are likely to be integrated into the city, the villagers have a strong wish for a better education. Bei Suzha is located at the edge of Hengshui, the prefecture city that is nowadays 50 times bigger in its area and 20 times in its population than it was in the 1960es. In Bei Suzha, the villagers decided through the process of secret election to invest in new computers and internet access for the school. This correlates to the outputs of other participatory methods, such as the photo-interview: Education was crucial within the surveys. "For the young generation, the school carries one more important significance: it is the place for good education, it is also a basis for the future: learning Putonghua, is learning the right Chinese language at school for the professional biography". (Dumreicher, Kolb, 2003b). Having good teachers that are able to speak Putonghua and a good school infrastructure was the wish of the villagers so that their children could find well paid jobs in the city.

Comparable results were also obtained in Chi Qiao (Shanxi province, middle China), another peri-urban village, close to the big city of Taiyuan. The local project carried out by the village group was a co-operative education project with the University of Taiyuan and the school of Chi Qiao to provide better education and job opportunities.

In fact the majority of the Chinese rural population tends to have job options in the cities¹, (Stockholm Environment Institute, 2002) but for most of them this is not possible – or at least at the time of the project. In an agricultural based remote village like Du Jia (Yunnan province, Western China), which is connected with a 7,5 kilometres sand road to the next township (with 5.000 inhabitants) and 50 kilometres away from the county, which is the next bigger city and another 25 to the province capital, the situation is completely different. The arable land of Du Jia is very limited as well as the possibilities for further income sources because of the lack of access to a market. The village dwellers have to deal with the existing resources. One possible solution for them is to intensify the agricultural production, another one is to reduce labour force and costs to set these resources free for other applications. The generated ideas for small projects by the villagers were very different to those of Bei Suzha and Chi Qiao. Suggestions were: The covering of the village drink water tank, better waste management, buying processing machines, raising of livestock etc.

One further outcome of the relatively small amount of money provided by the SUCCESS project was the effect of what we call “seeding money”. That means for the villages a negotiation basis with government representatives at different levels for further support. This was also the case in Du Jia. With the SUCCESS local project money together with financial support of the government Du Jia was able to build solar energy panels and biogas pits for each household. The thereby saved energy and working labour (for example because of no more necessity of collecting fire wood for cooking and heating) opened new capacities for further development ideas.

In San Yuan, another agricultural based village, also located in Yunnan province, but in the northern part, the situation is similar to that of Du Jia in many aspects, and only differs because of the cultural origin of this village.

The majority of the village dwellers is represented by the cultural minority of Naxi people, affiliated to Dongba religion, which is strongly connected to nature and environment. Until the cultural revolution, the village also had a high local value for its wood products. With the upcoming tourism in that region and the present danger of extinction of Naxi language and culture, the possibility for a local project led to different results than in Du Jia, although San Yuan still lives at about 70 % from agricultural production. All project suggestions, like training classes for Naxi language or (re-)building the tree tower, which is a symbolic relict, contained the strong wish for keeping or re-activating the cultural and religious live. Suggestions comparable to Du Jia like building biogas pits – which is nowadays strongly pushed by the national government in China (People's Daily Online 20052) – had different implications

¹ "Most migration in China is to urban areas. During 1980–1998 urbanisation levels grew from 19 to 30 percent—a net movement of well over 100 million people. The level of urbanisation is forecasted to grow to 45 percent by 2010 (United Nations Team in China, 2000). Thus, within the next 10 years, over 200 million people will move to the already stretched urban areas." (China Human Development Report 2002)

² China will expand the scope of six categories of small rural projects: water-efficient irrigation, potable water supplies, road building, **methane production facilities**, hydroelectric plants and pasture enclosures. (Report on China's economic and social development plan)

in San Yuan: The environment protection and the saved spare time which could be spent for Naxi education, especially for women, who are usually obliged to collect fire wood, were the two main motivations.

The village of Jiang Jiazhai is in its situation between a peri-urban village - 4 km away from Yangling, where a famous agricultural university is situated - and an agricultural based village with incomes for the most part from agricultural production. We call this subtype: community based on intensive agriculture. The numbers of agricultural production have to be understood in a different way from other agricultural based villages. In Du Jia for example the approximate 100 % of agricultural production means a subsistence economy. This is not the case in Jiang Jiazhai. It has intensified milk and greenhouse production, which cover the main income sources. The dairy products and vegetables find a booming market in the city nearby. As there is no industry, only few villagers, offering services remote to Yangling.

Proposals for small projects in Jiang Jiazhai were: To build a training centre for high tech agricultural knowledge, to improve the roads inside the village, to prepare rubbish boxes, and to buy some European trees for planting at the side of the main road.

Here we see the combination of the wish first for improving education, precisely the know-how about agricultural production and second for raising life quality in the village. To get rid of the rubbish, get no more dusty boots on muddy roads and improve the appearance of the village with exotic trees reflect attitudes of an urban life style, which the villagers are aiming at, despite keeping an agricultural production which is very profitable for them.

Two of the case study villages represent the third type of Chinese villages we have faced within the SUCCESS study. Xiao Futou (Henan province, middle China) and Xiao Qi (Jiangxi province, Southern China) are eco-tourism based communities.

According to the SUCCESS Strategic Paper (Liu, 2005) the main characteristics of villages of this type are: Improve daily life quality, improve hygiene and sanitary condition, maintain the village pattern within the surrounding landscape, and the local traditional style. In the two respective villages, the small project ideas were the wishes of the dwellers .

In Xia Futou, that is situated at a river which has a recreation area which attracted many tourists, most of the undertaken activities were aimed at modernisation. In an exemplary participation process, that united the former split between the up hill and downhill parts of the village, they have together built a public bathhouse.

Xiao Qi which is a village located within an appealing landscape, is a booming tourist area with a very traditional architectural style. Keeping this nature and tradition by coinstantaneous upgrading of the living conditions led to an extension of the village water supply system within the small project budget.

4.2 Impact of the participatory work on small projects at three levels

4.2.1 Village level - tangible and intangible changes in the case study villages

In general the scientific and participatory work in the seven case study villages had a good take-up by the villagers. With the help of the local team leaders the research teams could find a basis of confidence and readiness for an efficient co-operation in each case study village.

There were a lot of observed upcoming awareness processes and activities in each of the case study villages, especially concerning their specific local situation.

A lot of new space was created in the villages. Public space and community buildings which could be used for manifold common activities. Building activities also initiated new spaces for holding open conflicts concerning labour, money, communal shares

or ownership structures. Other tangible actions accompanied the generation of the small projects (like picture boards, cleaning activities etc.). Many common activities were set this way which further led to fruitful debates among the villagers.

Awareness raising processes concerned many societal and economic issues, but also local potentials of the villages. The self-confidence and the protection of their own culture and idiosyncrasies became more evident in the villages.

Villagers also became aware of their own present and future. They highlighted their self-value and the importance of a sustainable future.

With the help of the participatory data survey methods (Jones, 1996) of the research team, the common presentations and workshops and the ongoing discussions in the villages, the villagers got new ideas for decision making and involvement of the dwellers. Equity and transparency were recurrent issues. This observed increasing of social capital was a precondition for the selforganisation in the villages. The small projects would have never been implemented without the contribution of time and labour of the village dwellers themselves. So their organisational skills, teamwork and effort became manifest in their specific projects.

4.2.2 Policy making level and regional development

During the field work of the research teams and in the ongoing work of the local team leaders there was continuous contact between officials and SUCCESS consortium members. Village leaders and other village representatives often accompanied the meetings and presentations and built the bridge between policy and research.

The SUCCESS projects gained much attention by the local governments on township level and also on county level.

Despite of the concrete information about the project activities, the villages became all in all better known by officials and other communities which allowed for better basis for negotiation in the specific region. The case study villages got more assistance, either in becoming model village (Three of the seven case study villages became ecological model villages.) for implementing regional based concepts (like tourism), or in financial support for certain projects.

The SUCCESS project showed examples of many kinds of activities on the spot, which attracted much interest, also from the policy making level. The researchers, accompanied by village leaders had many meetings with local government representatives and gave

presentations of their findings. The such a kind exchanged information gave much insight and new ideas on both sides and led to a lively discussion considering the sustainability concept.

The bottom up approach of the SUCCESS project that involved villagers and was based on their needs and potentials gave a well observed example both for villagers and the local authorities. Innovative democratic and empowerment strategies (like election secrecy in Bei Suzha or open villager's discussions, focus groups, especially with marginalized groups etc) implicated much awareness for the importance of participatory and transparent decision making. The benefits of villager's involvement and equalized strategies that considered the complexity of sustainable development became obvious to policy makers.

The implemented small projects were in line with regional development strategies. So village representatives and teamleaders found a better negotiation basis, combined with the above mentioned effect of "seeding money", the villages could implement governmental intentions adapted to their local situations.

By this the selected case study villages underwent an upgrading in many concerns. They got more attention and in further consequence more support from outside the villages, especially from the policy level. They provided a basis for the replicability for other villages and regions and became this way a field for innovations and attempts. This meant new development possibilities especially for remote villages (like Xia Futou or Du Jia).

4.2.3 Scientific level

During the field study visits the researchers stayed and worked together with their colleagues and the villagers and created this way a living learning process for both sides. Disciplinary information was available at first hand and could directly be exchanged. The researchers identified many interfaces to other disciplines and carried out innovative methods for the integration of the different results. In the field the scientist worked together in multidisciplinary teams and prepared common presentations of preliminary results in each case study village at the end of their visits.

The presentations and discussions with the research team and the villagers gave the opportunity to check if both sides had been well understood. Results gained this way, guaranteed a more precise perception of the current situation.

Different data survey and integration methods were used and brought new experiences for other disciplines. The varying questions brought a wider understanding in linking these questions together. So far neglected data could become more relevant in exchange and in combination with other disciplines.

The researchers of the SUCCESS study became aware of the participatory impact activated by their research and noted the higher quality of their results (Marschalek, 2005). Participatory data survey methods (like PRA method and photo-interview) and negotiations concerning the small projects not only activated the villagers, but also allowed a deeper insight for the researchers.

The implemented small projects were the final results of a long lasting negotiation process within the villages, as well as with the scientists. Villagers had to vote for the projects and lay their priorities on them. That means that the researchers could identify what was the villagers' main focus. The carried out data and analyses were the source for comparative studies between the villages and finally defining a typology of Chinese villages.

4.3 The Example of Du Jia

As introduced above, Du Jia is a small village in a very remote area in the Southwest of China. In 2004 there were 97 inhabitants living in 22 households in that village. Only a few steps away there is the neighbour village Na Ha with 68 inhabitants, living in 17 households at that time. These two villages had been united until the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of the SUCCESS project, villagers and leaders of both villages had asked for involving both villages in the research process. So the first visible impact of SUCCESS was the common work with both villages. At meetings, presentations and discussion groups (for example women's group) dwellers of both villages took part. Also for the negotiation process concerning small project ideas, both villages were involved.

During the first visit of a small multidisciplinary research team in 2003, containing participatory data survey, group discussions and presentations, the villagers collected preliminary ideas for small projects. The outcome was a list of ten suggestions, which fit into the selection criteria catalogue, but were not ranked or evaluated in detail so far.

At the final presentation of the research team all villagers were informed about these ideas and had the first opportunity to negotiate about them. One example was to buy a common truck, that could be owned by the two villages and support the dwellers to carry their goods to the local market. Not all villagers appreciated this suggestion. Out of this discussion a spontaneous working group of villagers who were interested in that project was arranged. The research team member with the expertise of transport and traffic participated in this group to discuss the possibilities for a group investment of interested people. So this proposal was deleted from the common agenda of small project ideas but was implemented by a smaller group of villagers.

Another suggestion for a small project was the creation of a common public space; A meeting place with additional facilities like a public shower. Most villagers supported this idea, found it "reasonable, but not practicable" (Huang, 2004). They could not imagine the realisation of it and found other topics more urgent, like biogas pits for each household and solar panels. Implementing these ideas would have made the idea of a public shower obsolete, because each household could have had its own shower place then, that was the argument of the villagers.

Another idea was renovating and enlarging the little school building, not only for the lessons but also for holding villager's meetings there. So far, only one representative of each household could join such meetings, due to the lack of space. In consultation with local authorities, villagers got the information, that the school which only had just six pupils at that time, should have been closed and another bigger school for all concerned villages should be built at the township.

The narrow roads within the villages and the ford across the small river between the two neighbour villages were also a topic; To ease the communication between the villages, to widen the roads and to bridge the river. Such building activities were not feasible

within the small project money and at least could not meet the intrinsic needs of the dwellers: They wanted a truck to be able to cross the village, but the narrow roads between the houses did not leave enough space.

After the field visit, some ideas were deleted this way from the list; others were discussed in many more villager's meetings after the departure of the research team. (There exist 30 records of villagers' meetings in Du Jia/Na Ha within the SUCCESS period.)

Among the researchers those ideas and inherent findings were presented and discussed at the following SUCCESS integration conferences. The team leader was responsible to feed back the results to the village and in turn to deliver actual information from the village to the researchers. In two further conferences of the consortium and another three visits of research teams in Du Jia, the negotiation process was continued.

As mentioned above, the visits of the researchers and the activities in the village attracted much interest from local authorities. They visited the research team during their field visits, had several meetings with village leaders and the team leader. Finally Du Jia was nominated as an ecological model village. For every installed biogas pit the villagers got a subsidy from the government that they could afterwards invest in solar panels. After two SUCCESS project years every household was equipped with solar panels and biogas pits. "This significantly reduced the cutting of firewood (now each household may need only 200—500 kg of firewood each year, which is ten times less than they used to). What is more, the use of methane-generating pits made the environment cleaner. The warm water from solar panel greatly improved the hygiene of people, particularly that of women. Here in Du Jia the renewable resources successfully replaced the unrenovable resources and they have brought a new face to social life. Du Jia has set up a good example to the villages around in this aspect" (Huang, 2004).

"People never can be convinced by words", Huang Jiansheng, the team leader of the Du Jia case study has stated at the beginning of the SUCCESS project. They need visible results before they are confident to participate with engagement.

After much attention was gained from outside and their small project idea was successfully implemented, the villagers decided to invest in building up a common space and community center. This idea had been already discussed before.

According to the reawakened relation between Du Jia and Na Ha, it was obvious that this space should be located right in the middle between the two neighbouring villages.

A year before, already during the first field study visit, youngsters had expressed their wish for a common playground. They had shown the research team the deserted basket ball yard at the very edge of Du Jia, a long distance away from Na Ha. They had taken photos of possible places between the two villages and had mentioned the necessity of land conversion because of the paddy fields between the villages. This precondition led to far reaching discussions, which the team leader had to facilitate very carefully. Latent conflicts about the usage of the designated place came up trough the negotiation process. After questions about property and usage rights had been solved, the dwellers of the two villages finally built up a huge flat place in front of a new community house. This place could be used as playground for playing basketball or other activities and for celebrating feasts and holding villager's meetings, which had been expressed by the villagers several times before.

Also the wish for the possibility for celebrating together had become obvious at the first arrival of the research team. That day happened to be the birthday of one researcher and the team brought a cake and little wine. After a short time curious people of both villages had assembled in the small house of the host family to join the spontaneous party. More and more visitors came to sing and dance together with the researchers. It was the first opportunity other than a wedding or a funeral that they celebrated all together. Every other evening of the field study visit the villagers wanted to continue the feast, once in the kitchen of another host's house, once in the living room right after the mid-term presentation of the research team, once in front of one house, lightening a big fire. For the first time they had additionally invited dwellers of other villages from up the valley.

Until now, due to the newly created common public space people of Du Jia and Na Ha are celebrating feasts together. On the last China's "Respecting the Old" – holiday they organised a rich party. "They also invited school teachers from the township to join the dinner party, have a basketball match between the villagers and the teachers. These teachers also bring some gifts to the old persons in Du Jia. Such event is the first in the history of Du Jia. It is also unique among all the nearby villages. What is more, they organise the event independently, without our suggestion or help." Huang Jiansheng said in his recent e-mail, still recording the progresses in the village although the SUCCESS project has already ended.

5 SUMMARY

Designing and implementing a participatory research process needs a lot of effort and time both from researchers and from the involved people, but brings much impact on both sides, too. For the multidisciplinary research team (not only for social scientists) the results were gained on first hand and could be continuously evaluated in the frame of a negotiation process. Concerned people underwent the experience of successfully participation in decision making processes and became more aware of their potentials and intrinsic needs. Within this empowerment process they improved their skills and capabilities towards the self organisation in their specific situations.

To establish a successful participation process a set of pre conditions was needed:

The agreement and the will of local authorities to support the process. Village leaders of all seven case study villages had signed letters of interest before the start of SUCCESS.

On the other hand the trust of the village dwellers in their village leaders was important. Villagers that articulated good governance of their villages leaders were more motivated to engage themselves in such a process.

Responsible persons with specified functions within the process had to be defined.

The constitution of critical reference groups guaranteed the procedure of the ongoing negotiation process which led to further participation of more people concerned. Finally the small project could only be realised with the acceptance and the support of all villagers.

The settlement managers were the constant bridge to the team leader and through them to the research consortium. They were important for organising the meetings and holding the red thread, especially during those periods of time, when the process could not carry out visible results.

The team leaders of the respective village were the key persons of the process. Depending on their communication basis in the village and their personal engagement the process was equivalently fruitful. The better and more regular the contact the more intensive was the involvement of the dwellers.

A set of framework conditions and criteria for self-evaluation had to be communicated to sensitise both villagers and policy makers for the concept of sustainability.

A predefined sum of money was allocated for the small projects to ensure their realisation and a story of success for the villagers.

The transparency of the decision making process and the assignment of the project money was crucial for the whole process.

The villagers generated future images. These defined perceptions of their future lives will enable the villagers to trace their ideas step by step (backcasting).

Many different small projects were carried out in the seven case study villages according to the characteristics of the specific village type. Despite of these ideas the importance of public space became evident in all case study villages. Some villages (like Du Jia) have implemented community places within the small project money. Some villages, as an effect of the participatory process became aware of the importance of community life and found innovative arrangements to create new spaces of possibilities (like Jiang Jiazhai, where an empty shop was placed by the owner at the villager's disposal as a meeting place). Other villages are still working on concepts of community centers, including education and free time facilities.

It became obvious that places need a social meaning and people who feel responsible for them. Creating such new spaces with involved people could open up new options.

In the meaning of sustainability the projects not only addressed ecological and economic aspects. The highlighting of social and cultural aspects was of great importance in each case study village and should be considered even deeper. "Social sustainability determines how people conceptualise their environment, their relations with nature and their attitude as well as the way of behaviour towards nature. And it is important that people recognise their present value. So training, education and self-awareness of the local people are important for the future." (Huang, 2005) The SUCCESS project has taken first steps in this direction.

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