Grassroots Participation

How to Involve People in Rural China

Village in Sichuan Decides on its Future

Yunnan Farmer Becomes Businesswoman
Contents

3 Let the People Decide!

The history of grassroots participation is not very long but Amity has found this approach extremely useful in its poverty reduction effort. Why?

5 How to Vote for a Future

In Sichuan, a village delegation convenes to discuss how to improve living conditions in their hometown. Implementing the idea of grassroots participation is not easy as villagers are not used to being consulted. But farmers soon become interested when Amity staff encourage even those who cannot read and write to take a personal vote on village development.

8 A New State of Mind

In a personal story, Amity staffer Tan Hua describes her first trip to a Yunnan mountain village where people have sunk into utter passivity through poverty and lack of hope. Can Amity encourage them to come back to life?

9 On Track for Success

A young farmer from the Wa minority turns into a businesswoman and an Amity volunteer after receiving microcredits, training and encouragement.

10 News

The Amity Foundation is an independent Chinese voluntary organisation. It was created in 1985 on the initiative of Chinese Christians. It has worked to promote education, social services, health, and rural development in the underdeveloped areas of China. Amity’s work is grounded in the belief that all human beings share the same dignity. Abiding by the principle of mutual respect in faith, Amity builds friendship with both Christians and non-Christians in China and abroad. In this way, Amity contributes to China’s social development and openness to the outside world. It makes Christian involvement and participation in meeting the needs of society more widely known to the Chinese people and serves as a channel for people-to-people contact and the ecumenical sharing of resources. Helping to develop civil society in China is one of the key aims of its work. The Amity Foundation has about 40 full-time staffers at its Nanjing headquarters. Hundreds of volunteers work with Amity all over China. The foundation receives funds from partners abroad as well as in Hong Kong and mainland China.
Let the People Decide!

If you want to help someone it seems natural to ask what they need. So it is surprising that the idea of “grassroots participation” is fairly new in development work.

Between the Second World War and the 1970s, huge amounts of aid funds were given to the governments of poor countries to finance the development of their infrastructures, hoping for a so-called “trickle-down” effect. But even back then, doubts were raised regarding the effectiveness of grand-scale, government-to-government aid. All too often, it failed to relieve poverty, reduce pollution or improve infrastructure. In fact, it often made the situation worse because relief projects and development programs, designed in the lofty offices of Western aid agencies, were seldom adequately adapted to local circumstances.

As a consequence, a new “participatory development approach” was pioneered by aid agencies to counterbalance ineffective funding. Aid was increasingly given to people at the grassroots. Poor people were involved in the process of selecting, planning, implementing and monitoring aid projects and they were held responsible for the outcome. When local people were invited to participate in the decision-making process they came to regard local development projects as their own. Moreover, this new approach made aid experts of NGOs as well as local authorities look more closely at the specific circumstances and the root causes of poverty in a particular region or village. By listening to the people at the grassroots directly, they were now able to adapt policies more adequately to a specific local context.

Adapting to the Chinese context

In China, grassroots participation was pioneered in the early 1990s. Amity started to apply the participatory method extensively when, in 1993, the organization’s main development focus shifted to the poor provinces in Western China. This method proved successful not only in projects related to poverty alleviation but also in social welfare projects.

Zhang Liwei, Amity’s Associate General Secretary, explains the three main advantages of involving beneficiaries directly: “Politically, it gives people more power because they can play an active role in a project’s decision-making process - in other words, farmers can exercise democratic participation. On a social level, ‘participation’ can pave the way to a more equal society in which no-one is left behind. Economically and financially, poverty alleviation efforts which take farmers’ decisions into account get better economic results, because people actively support the whole concept.”

Should the government be involved

In order to be as efficient as possible, Amity has made it a rule to invite not only the beneficiaries to get involved in grassroots participation projects but also development experts and government officials. That development experts need to be consulted seems obvious, but what about the government? “The government needs to be part of it,” says He Wen, director of the Integrated Development Division, who has 12 years of experience in the field. “Government officials need to understand the problems and needs of poor communities better than before so they can actually help these communities.” When local officials are invited to join Amity staff on a project visit, they will ask villagers directly about their opinions, listen to their

Speaking with beneficiaries directly about their needs and concerns is key to “grassroots participation”. An Amity staffer (left) is recording what a farmer from Sichuan is telling her about her life circumstances.

Below Farmers are waiting for everybody to arrive for a group discussion on village development.
stories and see the extent of poverty first hand. This can be a staggering experience because a lot of them are used to dealing with social problems in the seclusion of their town offices, far away from the realities of village life. Ideally, involving government officials leads to better cooperation between the farmers and the local government.

**Not a cure-all**

Grassroots participation can certainly not solve all of the development problems in rural China. Cao Feilian, a young doctoral candidate in sociology who has visited several such projects during her research on Amity’s development work, describes clearly what can be expected from the participatory method: “It can help empower people to take their fate into their own hands, it can improve their material living conditions and it can eventually be another step towards a civil society in China,” says Ms Cao, “but it cannot wholly meet the spiritual and moral needs of the peasants.” This void has to be filled in a different way.

In any event, inviting people to participate personally already makes a big difference to them: join a meeting where peasants are asked to give their opinions and cast their votes on what they want in order to develop their village – and you will be surprised to see how very happy they are.

Will the participatory development approach have a sustainable impact then? First of all, this will depend on a sustained willingness of local and higher authorities to support a more active role of farmers in managing rural development. Then, it will be decisive if grassroots participation theory will become part of the higher education curricula in China, e.g. in the agricultural universities, where future rural development experts are educated. And, finally, a long-term success will depend on the people at the grassroots level themselves. Only if the farmers manage to take the initiative and participate in designing their own future will this approach succeed. Amity, in any case, is supporting them in their effort wholeheartedly. So far, the future looks promising.
The big meeting is scheduled for three in the afternoon. Delegates from every hamlet of Shitankou Village have been told to meet in the courtyard of an old farmhouse tucked away in a lush bamboo grove. With its fine woodwork and stone carvings, the farmhouse tells of better times. But they have long gone.

The peasant representatives arrive unhurriedly, perhaps a bit doubtful about this meeting they have been told will change their future for the better. All too often, promises have been broken and dreams scattered. The faces are weather-beaten; sweaters and jackets, all patched up. Most are wearing Mao suits and cloth slippers.

The peasants in the foothills of the Daba mountains near Langzhong in Northern Sichuan are poor. The wooded slopes are steep, allowing for only small terraced fields to be used for growing rice and taro. The soil yields little because the irrigation water tends to run straight through. An aqueduct, constructed in the early seventies by PLA soldiers deployed to fulfill the government’s goal of improving infrastructure through water engineering, is hovering high above the valley. But the effort has not improved local farmers’ access to water. The water is flowing somewhere else, and the village women continue carrying buckets on shoulder poles for hours every day to fetch potable water from a cistern.

Not long ago, arable land was taken away from local farmers to make way for a river dam designed to generate electricity for the energy-guzzling cities downstream. Energy is not what these peasants need, anyway. Economic development has passed by their village. Only a few narrow footpaths along the paddy fields lead to the farmhouses hidden in the thick mountain forest.

This is why people in the area are al-
most completely sealed off from any trade with the outside world and therefore from any hope of improving their lot. Farmers mostly grow what they eat and eat what they grow. Food is scarce, because the water reservoir at the dam has submerged the best farmland. Peasants on average have only 0.65 mu per person (about 435 square meters) of barren land left, according to an official survey. This is not enough to survive on. Without enough farmland, without jobs and without a proper road, the younger farmers have no choice but to part with family members and leave for the big cities in the East or the coal mines of Shaanxi.

A new decision-making style
But today, on a mild and sunny December afternoon, the future looks brighter for a while. By now, a desk has been put up in the courtyard and a big piece of paper is attached to the white-washed clay wall of the old farmhouse. The peasants, around thirty men and women, have taken their seats on small benches, all facing Xu Qingke, a young staffer from Amity’s Integrated Development Division, who is about to speak to them.

Before the trip, young Amity staffers went through special training on how to talk with villagers simply, clearly and in a friendly way. Peasants need to be encouraged, because they are not used to being in the spotlight. “We, from Amity, come from the big city of Nanjing,” says Xu Qingke, trying to break the ice, “have you heard of it?” The farmers are not sure. So he decides it is better to go right into the matter.

His job is to explain that the village will receive economic help based on what the villagers say they need. It is all up to them and only them, the farmers at the grassroots. Amity is here to help them discuss and vote, says Xu Qingke. After this announcement there is a complete silence.

Such radical ideas are new in Shitankou. Decisions have always been made by the authorities. But this time, obviously, it is different: though the village leaders are attending, they watch from a distance, silent and curious. They are not supposed to speak, but only to listen to what the peasants have to say.

Discussion and election procedures, whose rules were negotiated with local authorities in advance, require the usual decision makers to keep to the sides. Peasants should be free in their choice. Nevertheless, the fact that the government does not play a leading role does not mean it has only a walk-on part. Local authorities are expected to give their fair share of support, provide a certain amount of funds and help wherever necessary.

Daring to speak
Slowly, the audience’s reluctance is melting away and people start laugh-
ing when a farmer jokingly complains that his home looks like a pharmacy for all the medicine his family needs to take against foul water. After he is advised to move his cistern away from the toilet, everybody turns to a serious discussion on how life in Shitankou can be improved. How can the cracking clay walls of houses be replaced? How can food and income be increased? How can the village connect with the outside world? How can education for children be improved?

While the debate is becoming more animated and Xu Qingke is sweating, trying to give everybody a chance to speak, the large paper on the wall is filling up with pictures of a gas stove, goats, pigs, rabbits, an electric light bulb, a clinic, a kindergarten, a road. Like a letter to Santa, it is a list of things villagers would like to get.

A final vote
After an hour, the final vote is being cast. Participants are invited to prioritize for themselves the items, from most important to least. While, at first, the more daring ones walk up and mark their choice on the paper, even those who cannot read and write can eventually be convinced to join when they are offered tactful encouragement and help.

Unlike farmers in the neighboring villages, who voted first for a road, the villagers of Shitankou opt for gas stoves as the most pressing need. This, together with a road and microcredits for raising livestock is what they will probably get over the course of the next year. But to assume that the village people will eventually receive whatever they wish for would be wrong. Granting microcredits and investing in infrastructure demand careful consideration of local natural circumstances and possible changes in market forces: if everybody raises rabbits, the price of rabbits will drop. Not until economic experts have been thoroughly consulted will funds be granted.

For the villagers, too, the work has not ended with today’s vote. As soon as the project gets underway, they are expected to monitor the allocation of funds, take part in construction work, make sure things run well and cooperate closely with local authorities.

Only if the farmers, the government and Amity achieve this cooperation, will the project succeed and become a model for future development.

A future ahead
Today, a few months after the grassroots election, the project is well underway. It could eventually help around 8650 people in Shitankou and three neighboring villages. Positive economic results remain to be seen; but one big success is already visible: the peasants are just very happy that they have been asked.

After the session villagers are beaming, some are shaking hands with Amity staff, some are running off to tell others in the village what they had just witnessed - rather, taken part in. “Have you experienced such an election before?” one of the Amity staffers asks. “No, never!”

If things go well, the peasants will continue participating in the development of their village. Roads which can be used under any weather conditions are crucial to spur economic development. To raise their low living standard, desperate villagers built this bumpy road by hand. But since villagers lacked any technical expertise, the road was too bad to boost trade and traffic.

In the remote hills of Northern Sichuan, arable land is scarce and the soil is barren. Farmers survive on planting taro, rice and wheat. With an average of 450 square meters of land per person, farmers cannot survive.
Perhaps it is because it was my first project visit that the village of Liu Dong Tun in Guangxi province has stayed in my mind. I remember this trip as if it happened yesterday. It was in August 2004 when I first came to Liu Dong Tun. I had only worked two weeks for Amity at that time. On our way I saw many beautiful valleys and deep ravines. I marveled at the beauty of nature and the tenacity of people who lived in these remote mountains. I still remember bumping forever on a mountain road winding along the cliffs and gorges and eventually walking uphill for more than half an hour until we finally arrived at Liu Dong Tun, a village of the Yao minority.

I was excited when we began visiting the homes of the Yao but I also started to feel a bit strange and uncomfortable. None of the 27 homes of the village had a single tile on the roof. There were hardly any solid walls: the walls of all the houses were made of something that looked like reed. Some houses even used the bare rock of the mountain slope as one of their walls. There were breaches and cracks in the walls so people living there were not protected against the sun, wind or rain. In the kitchens you could find corn gruel but no vegetables, no oil, salt, soy sauce or vinegar. At least there was this corn gruel but the major part of this food came from disaster-relief supplies as did the clothes children and adults were wearing. To me the most unsettling thing, however, was not the extent of poverty but people’s state of mind.

When we came into the village, nobody took any notice of us. Even when we talked to people, they just did not react. There was not even passive communication. When we went into the homes it could happen that people were lying in bed in broad daylight sleeping. They would not get up even though we would stay for half an hour. Nobody was taking care of the farmhouses; nobody was doing any farm work. The only pastime activity young people would go for was catching little birds in the mountains every day. I was speechless at how people could lose any desire to improve their lives.

Amity’s plan was to offer them training sessions, help with raising livestock, give them easier access to drinking water and build a village “activity bureau”. It was, however, hard to imagine how Amity could start a project here that would involve farmers in managing it in the sense of our “participatory approach”.

But things turned out different. Two years later, in August 2006, when I went again to visit Liu Dong Tun, the scene had changed completely. The local government had helped to tile every roof. People now had rice and vegetables to eat. When we entered the village, every single villager greeted us warmly and invited us to his or her home. People offered us seats and excitedly told us about the changes which had taken place in the village in the last two years: a road had been built and they now had running water. The whole village was clean, the young women had all gone for work outside, and many families now owned a motor cycle. Later, they said, they wanted to raise more pigs and make their village develop even faster.
New Business Skills

On Track for Success

by Xiao Jinqiu

Without enough food, without money, without a house and in debt, she led a miserable life. Then she received a 1000 yuan microcredit as part of an Amity project. She gave a lot of thought to how best this money could be used: to raise animals, to trade in tea, to make handicrafts? One woman took charge of her own life and escaped the poverty trap.

My Name is Xiao Jinqiu, I am 32 years old. I am a woman from the Wa minority and I live in a village called Wengding in Yunnan province. All of my ancestors came from this rather primitive village in the Wa Mountains and our ideas and ways of thinking are replete with traditions handed down from my parents’ generation. I was the first of those few girls from my village who have been able to go to school, but after I graduated from junior middle school I went back home to help with farming. I did what everybody else did, working from sunrise to sunset, toiling in the red soil around the mountains, day after day without change. When I was old enough, I got married in a traditional ceremony, become a mother and just went on with my life.

Then, in 2004, my husband and I left our baby in my mother-in-law’s care and set up our own home. We had to start from scratch, working in the fields without any food, without any money and sometimes even without any place to stay. With the help of some neighbors we finally managed to build a house, but this meant that from then on we were in considerable debt. There was nothing in the house apart from the most basic things like pots, bowls, spoons, a basin and a bed. We had no chicken and no pig. Life was extremely difficult.

Around this time, the Amity Foundation started a participatory project in the village of Wengding. I took part in a meeting of project leaders and local women, where the future development of our village was discussed. At first I didn’t dare to speak but after some time I gained confidence and even got into an argument with other people. Life at home also started to change.

I was given a credit of 1000 yuan after I had completed training in handling microcredits. I spent 400 yuan on 2 pigs and 5 chickens and used the remaining 600 yuan to start a small business buying and reselling tea leaves. I was quite nervous when I bought my first batch of tea leaves from a wholesale but I was able to re-sell it and make 40 yuan in profit.

Then, in 2006, the regional office of Amity in Yunnan started a project in Wengding, in which 500 mu of land were turned into an organic tea plantation. I eagerly joined and planted tea on some of our fields. Other people from Wengding also started planting tea, following the latest technological standards. The tea seedlings grew fast and 90% of the plants survived. After it had been inspected and approved by the department of tea management, the plantation was declared a model tea plantation of the county. I realized that going into the tea business had been the right idea. After a year, I was not only able to pay back my microcredit, I also settled part of the debt on the house.

In the second year, I borrowed money again, this time 2000 yuan, but since more and more people entered the tea business, profits went down. I had to find a new occupation. During that time, the government decided to promote Wa minority culture, trying to attract tourists to come to Wengding. I figured that besides getting a taste of original Wa village life, tourists would certainly be interested in buying hand-woven and hand-sewn Wa crafts. Since every woman of the Wa knows how to sew I made up my mind: with my loan of 2000 yuan I would continue to raise pigs and chickens and then use the rest of the
money to buy yarn for weaving.

I began spinning and weaving day and night and in the end made 20 yuan a day, which is quite a lot in Wengding. My crafts, clothes and tote bags became well known – some tourists even came directly to my door. Through this project alone, I have earned nearly 2000 yuan. Because my pigs had piglets, 12 in each pigpen, in 2006, I will probably earn nearly 1000 yuan when I sell them later. I was able to repay some of my family’s debts.

As the women in my village spent more time on Amity projects and received more training, their attitudes, ideas and ways of working began to change. The Wa women became much less worried and much more willing to have contact with others and help them. Neighbors started taking me as an example, which means that almost all of the Wa women in the village started making clothes, in this way steadily increasing their incomes. The implementation of microcredits gave me and all the women in the village more opportunities to talk to each other. The training sessions did not only teach us techniques but, more importantly, they freed our thoughts, transformed our ideas, taught us how to manage household finances, changed our habits and improved the quality of our lives.

People in the village trust me and are happy to let me organize village matters. Leaders from all levels also confirmed me in my work. In March 2006, I was elected vice-director of the Amity development association in Cang Yuan county. It is Amity that changed me, my life and the attitudes of all the women in the village. Amity helped us leave poverty behind.

---

News

Amity Easter Tour

Experiencing Contrast

This year’s Amity Easter tour brought together more than 20 participants from 8 countries in Asia, North America and Europe. The rich mix of cultural, professional and church-related backgrounds provided fertile soil for a stimulating exchange of views during the 10-day tour of Beijing and parts of Henan province. For everybody, the trip brought new knowledge and understanding of a society in constant flux.

The striking contrast between Beijing’s avant-garde architecture, the renowned historical sites of Henan, the Shaolin Monastery and the Longmen Grottoes, and the stark simplicity of life in Henan’s poor villages where AIDS infected farmers live, came almost as a shock to the group. Accompanied by members of Zhoukou Gospel Church and local village officials the group visited the homes of children orphaned by AIDS and other diseases, a “goat-raising” project for people living with HIV/AIDS (see picture below), and a new agricultural project, which teaches people how to grow trees for additional income.

During the trip, participants of the Easter Tour had the opportunity to see the contrasts between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the modern and the traditional. But most important of all, they were able to see the efforts of Henan Christians in sharing the Gospel and supporting those in need regardless of their religious beliefs.

Feedback to the Easter Tour

“How was the Trip?”

“The Tour has given me a more positive and hopeful view of China.”

Jonathan Tam

“At first, I had the impression that the Chinese government tended to control the churches a lot. However, such perception changed a lot after this trip.”

Alice Chang

“I was especially glad to see more of the countryside without being limited by the confines of a city, because city and countryside are not the same at all.”

Sandy Michael

“I had read about the Henan church in the magazine ‘Bridge’, so it came to life. Henan Pentacostalism resembles the Texas variety. I felt very much at home.”

Roy Birchard

“Hearing and seeing with my own eyes and ears has suddenly made me understand the printed and other material which I have about the Church in China.”

Gerhard Köberlin
New Office Building to be Completed Next Year

On 16 May a groundbreaking ceremony was held at Amity Foundation headquarters in Nanjing for a new office building. Bishop K. H. Ting, TSPM committee chairman and Amity director Rev. Deng Fucun, high-ranking political leaders from Jiangsu Province and Nanjing City, participants of the Amity Round Table, representatives of Amity’s local partners and other guests attended the ceremony.

The new building was planned by the Architectural Design and Research Institute at Nanjing University and the Jiangsu Architectural Design and Research Institute. The 4-storey structure will provide some 800 square meters of urgently needed office space at Amity’s headquarters in Hankou Road.

In its architectural style, the new structure is reminiscent of Chinese buildings from the early 20th century.

International Conference

Roundtable Meeting

More than 20 participants representing 18 organizations attended the 3rd Amity Roundtable Meeting in Nanjing. Representatives came from Asia, Europe and North America, and included both new and old partners.

Discussions during the two day meeting held May 14-15, 2007 focused on Amity’s plans for the next three years. Based on recent strategic planning sessions, Amity projected the roles it hopes to play in the future: being a resource and service provider, acting as capacity builder, and being an advocate and consultant for other NGOs in China. Partners reaffirmed their support for Amity’s work and new directions.

Particular attention was given to Amity’s efforts to register on a national level. Partners viewed this as a priority in developing the self-reliance and capacity of Amity as an NGO in China. Amity reported positive responses to its campaign to raise funds domestically even though its activities are currently limited to Jiangsu Province.

Rev. Heikki Hilvo of the Finish Evangelical Lutheran Mission emphasized the need for mutual trust and respect. He said that the roundtable reflected much needed ecumenism and was a “good form of globalization.” Amity’s General Secretary Mr. Qiu Zhonghui stressed the need for transparency and better communication. Apart from listening to Amity’s plans, partners were able to share updates on their China-related work and activities.

The roundtable meeting was convened by the Asia Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr. Mathews George Chunakara. In his closing remarks, Dr. Chunakara mentioned that the roundtable for Amity was one of many convened by the WCC for churches and partners that needed ecumenical support and solidarity. He and all participants affirmed that there would be another roundtable in Spring of 2009, to be held in China.

Amity-BASF (China) Cooperation

“Sunflower Seeds”

One hundred poor students will continue their education through a new project. The “Sunflower Seeds” project, which was set up by Amity and BASF (China) Ltd., helps to make the dream of a hundred poor elementary school students in Guangxi and Anhui come true. They had been on the brink of dropping out of school but now they will be able to go on with their schooling this summer.

The project was kickstarted during a ceremony on 12 March 2007, attended by BASF’s chairman Guan Zhihua and Amity Associate General Secretary Zhang Liwei. The project supports students at Lantian minority school (Lingchuan district, Guangxi province) and an elementary school in Caoji (Fuyang district, Anhui province). Since these two schools are situated in very remote areas, “Sunflower Seeds” works to make sure that the quality of education which local students receive is raised to a certain level.

Attaching pictures of the students, which are supported by the company, with sunflowers helped raise interest of company members.
Dear friends of Amity,

China has seen great changes over the last decades. It seems to have grown rich. But millions of people are still left behind. Poverty, lack of education, diseases and environmental damage keep them from leading lives in human dignity.

Please help Amity to help them lead better lives.

Make a donation!

You can make a general donation or support individual projects of your choice. For detailed information on projects please contact one of our offices in Nanjing or Hong Kong:

The Amity Foundation,
71 Hankou Road,
Nanjing, 210008, China
Phone: (+86) 25 8326-0802
Fax: (+86) 25 8326-0909

The Amity Foundation Hong Kong, Ltd.,
13/F, Ultragrace Commercial Building, 5 Jordan Road,
Kowloon, Hong Kong
Phone: (+852) 2723-8011
Fax: (+852) 2366-2769
E-mail: amityhk@pacific.net.hk
You can send a crossed cheque or a bank draft, payable to The Amity Foundation, to one of our offices.

You can make a telegraphic transfer (see details on page 2).

To donate online, visit our website: www.amityfoundation.org