

9/2010 - 9. September 2010

Sustainable Community Building and Grassroots NGOs Workshop Report, Guangzhou, 9-11 July 2010

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The workshop in Guangzhou was held as a part of the China-Europa Forum and took place just a few days before the 3rd Biennale of the Forum held in Hongkong between July 12 -14, 2010. ²

The China-Europa Forum is a new kind of society-to-society dialog process to address our common challenges.



Representatives of all sectors and professions take up subjects of their concern and discuss the issues that are common to our contemporary societies. Participants' individual experiences are the starting point of continuous debates on the internet, as well as at biennial meetings organised alternately in China and in Europe.

The community is the basic form of social life

In the framework of the Biennale 2010, the Guangzhou Institute for Civil Society and the German Asia Foundation jointly organized the



workshop on Sustainable Community Development and Grassroots NGO. Invited participants were associations from Sichuan and Guangdong as well

as from Latvia, France and Germany. The topic focussed on the role of social and environmental associations in building sustainable urban communities. In fact, special attention was given to housing communities.

Although the workshop was supposed to focus on the role of grassroots NGOs, participants from both regions did not necessarily represent grassroots NGOs. They were rather representing social enterprises, bottom-up established property management agencies and housing cooperatives.

Topics of discussion were how especially citizens associations/ NGOs can help to

- control their own environment and stop to be controlled by external forces
- build healthy communities in regard to innovative (or alternative) forms of communities
- support urban environmental upgrading
- create sustainable livelihoods for community members.

The case studies included

from Europe:

- "Selbstbau Housing cooperative,, a cooperative established in Berlin during the reunification process of Germany
- Worgamic, a social enterprise lobbying for organic waste recycling projects, circular economy and actions adapted to local communities
- Association of Management and Administration of Latvian Housing, a NGO-housing management association lobbying in favor of residential interests during the process of privatization and restructuring.

from China:

- New Hometown Project, a 3-years- reconstruction project, which is community-orientated providing public services, community cultural activities and vocational training for victims of the 2008 Sichuan Wenchuan

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² See www.china-europa-forum.net

earthquake who are still living in temporary homes

- Youth Community Service Volunteer Station providing all kinds of services for residential groups (which was clearly organized along a top-down pattern)
- Green Point Youth Environment Education Center
- The Conservation International China projects on eco-tourism and community and biodiversity projects in Sichuan and Tibet
- Community Development Centre, which represents the ownership association and describes their activities in establishing self-administered property management.

Inspiring lessons learned from China have been

- ...that the ownership associations see themselves as a part of the much broader “citizens rights movement”
- ...the comprehensive activities of the urban environmental education organization
- ...the success of NGOs working in rural areas – Sichuan/ Tibet – it helped to smooth conflicts between local government and indigenous people.

Inspiring lessons learned from the European side were

- the self-administration of urban communities (how to control your own environment)
- the establishment of social enterprises for integrating waste reduction, farming and gardening in urban areas.

Some background information on the topic

In Europe, the urban community movement mostly started as self-help- or protest movement. The main goals were the fight against housing speculation, the protection of local communities or the upgrading of the district. A quite new trend is the merging of urban NGO movements with the Third Sector. Especially in Great Britain, local community organizations participate in regional planning processes and urban modernization programs. In certain districts, programs for the integration of gated or marginalized communities, high percentage of unemployment and urban poor, are led by interest groups coming directly from these districts. As we learn from the French case study, NGOs also can change into or additionally found a “social enterprises” which provide the income for the NGO. Again the German case study shows that community solidarity does

not only help to prevent the demolition of houses but established a new model for low-rent urban flats in an upgraded urban environment which creates sustainable livelihoods. In the case of the Berlin case study, that self-help initiative created a model for sensitive city renewal and triggered many projects of similar kind. In these projects, new spaces are created to realize ecological and peaceful lifestyle. Other examples will show the difficulties bottom-up initiatives have to face.

Communities in China are experiencing risks due to a number of factors including the long-term governance of nationalism and the development of market economy impact on social values and ethics. Also, the social structure of local urban communities changed a lot during the last 20 years. This means that new challenges and conflict resolution patterns need to be established. Especially, the influx of rural migrant workers and the existence of rural villages pose great challenge to the communities as well as to the urban government. Therefore, we are here to learn more about citizen movements and organizations which want to participate in solving existing problems. It is especially of interest to find solutions for the construction of sustainable communities. This adds fundamental values to guarantee a social life of harmony, prosperity and inclusion.

Workshop results:

There have been many similarities and differences between the Chinese and the European cases. The differences were mainly in scope and degree of certain situations. Similarities were the care for housing for vulnerable groups (elder, poor or unemployed) and the question how to protect the vested interest of social groups (residents, ethnic groups, indigenous people, poor/rich, ownership associations). During the workshop, heated discussions evolved around the topic how to learn from the German and Latvian case study and how to establish a sustainable regulatory framework for autonomous property management. The participants agreed that only bottom-up participatory approach in establishing an organization, ruling an association and designing the projects can guarantee sustainability.

Sustainability impossible without money

Although bottom-up approaches are essential for sustainability, the Chinese pointed out that without sustainable funding all work would be in vain. Therefore, another core question focussed on the method how to mobilize funding for the establishment of collective green movements of resi-

dential communities or the self-administered housing management. The French case demonstrated a good method to combine green education in communities or schools with income-generating mechanisms. mechanisms (social enterprise). Finally, it was highlighted by the Chinese side that in the coming years NGOs will play a crucial role in representing community interests and empower the citizens to fight for their rights during the transformation process of urban and rural communities. Some even argued that the government is restricted to only providing the technical infrastructure for transformation. NGO are obliged to provide the “software” for democratic transformation, especially in sustainable urban and rural communities.

Future actions:

In the closing session, both sides agreed that further exchange would benefit both China and Europe. Above that, some very concrete ideas were developed:

- Collaboration and knowledge exchange between thematic similar NGOs (Latvian housing management/ German self-administered initiatives/ Chinese ownership associations or community initiatives on environmental education – Chinese Green Point – and French urban garden and composting initiatives)
- Exchange of best practices concerning communication between government, property management and citizens interest organizations
- Agreement on the superiority of bottom-up approaches concerning the organization of interest or interest associations
- Knowledge exchange and jointly organized publications esp. concerning analysis of different concepts of community, financial management of ownership org.
- Consultation on how to reorganize Chinese institutions supporting more public services and strengthen NGO and citizens participation

- Joint publication on different concepts of community in China and Europe.

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Herausgeber: Asienstiftung für das EU-China-Civil-Society Forum.

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