

# A Study on Villagers' Participation in Rural Regeneration: The Case of Taiwan

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## Abstract

*To encourage the overall development in rural areas in the Republic of China, Government promulgated "Rural Regeneration Act" in 2010. In this study, we examine the current situations of villagers' participation in rural regeneration project in Taiwan. Government promotes bottom-up approach and encourages residents to fully participate in the discussion of rural regeneration. However, our results show that the process of bottom-up villagers' participation is just for community to officially meet the requirements from government. The problems of villagers' participation are addressed and the strategies for villagers' participation in rural regeneration are also suggested.*

**Keywords:** Bottom-Up Approach, Villagers' Participation, Rural Regeneration.

## Introduction

Villagers play a major role in rural regeneration. An active participation of villagers in important decisions is the best guarantee of a success in building capacity for rural regeneration (Jacobson, 1993; Murray and Dunn, 1995; Dervin and Huesca, 1999; Jacobson and Servaes, 1999; Shortall and Edwards, et al., 2000; Shucksmith, 2001; Scott, 2004; Clark, et al., 2007). Villagers understand local things very clear and have their own views, expectations and visions regarding the changes and developments in the villages in which they are growing up. Therefore, in the process of rural regeneration, villagers must express their views regarding developments in rural industries (Zografos, 2007), work environments, living spaces (Zavadskas and Antucheviciene, 2007), environmental improvements, (Meurk and Swaffield, 2000), social, cultural and historical relics in their village. Their views and ideas should be discussed and integrated to the regeneration planning to reach the goal and realize the dream of the villagers. Therefore, the government in Taiwan promotes bottom-up approach and encourages residents to fully participate in the discussion of rural regeneration.

To promote the overall developments in rural areas, the government in Taiwan promulgated "Rural Regeneration Act" in 2010, and placed 150 billion NT. dollars (approximately 5 billion dollars) in rural regeneration fund to implement rural regeneration plans. The Government stated that implementations of rural regeneration have to take into account of production, living and ecology (article 4 of Rural Regeneration Act) and to focus on preservation of rural culture and neutrality of rural landscape. At the same time, the plans have to be along with the needs of rural residents (articles 9 and 10). Furthermore, the plans have to promote bottom-up participation systems in order to implement the mechanism for villagers participating (Article 16 of Rural Regeneration Act) to assure the outcomes of rural generation in line with the expectations of the villagers, (Whittaker and Ian, 2002; Fraser et al., 2006; Stockdale, 2006; Hajjar, 2013; Christopher A. Thoms, 2008; Rodela, 2010; Long, 2011; Messely et al., 2013). However, the operation process of bottom-up villagers' participation is just for community to officially meet the requirements from the government.

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Participation issues including how villagers express their opinions on the future development of the village are essential. Additionally, training issues including how to assist villagers to understand the meaning of rural regeneration are critical. The goal of this research is to examine the current situations of villagers' participation in rural regeneration project in Taiwan.

## **Research method**

We use qualitative exploratory method to analyze the current situations of citizens' participation in rural regeneration plans. We interview local residents including elites of communities; collecting their own opinions regarding participation of local citizens in the process of decision making. Additionally, documentation, archival records of manpower training programs in focused communities are also gathered to display the outcomes of government's manpower training programs. Direct observations are also employed to assess the current issues of citizens' participation.

In this study, we select eight rural communities implementing rural revitalization plans to conduct an empirical study to investigate the process and the mechanism of villagers' bottom-up participation and how villagers' participate in rural regeneration planning. Finally, the problems faced in bottom-up participation are discussed and the solutions are provided.

The focused communities are all located in central Taiwan. They are Hsieh-Chen community in Xin-She Dist.; Xing-long community in Tai-ping Dist.; Gong-Lao-Ping community in Fang-Yuan Dist.; Gong-Ming community in She-Lu Dist.; Zhu-Zi -Keng community in Da-Li Dist.; Xin Zhuang community, in Shen-Gang Dist.; Qing -Fu community in Dong-Shi Dist. and Song-He community in He-Ping Dist. The populations of selected communities are between 800 and 6000. Agricultural productions are the major economics actives in those communities.

The elite group in the community includes political administrator such as a village head, borough chief, the chairmen and leaders in community development associations, the business owners and civil servants in government institutes. The communities are all located in rural areas which experienced problems of aging population and the emigration of young population. The community development associations have organized different types of committees to take care of local affairs. In the committees, the local issues are discussed. If necessary, a public hearing to collect public opinion regarding the important issue will be held. We observe what local residents behave in the meetings. We interview local residents regarding their knowledge about rural regeneration and the recognition of their role in the generation project.

## **The problems of villagers' participation**

In accordance with Article 30 of the Rural Regeneration Act, each community has to encourage residents to participate in manpower training programs. In each year, as the number of classes is limited, the increasing in the enrollment has resulted in long waiting time for training program. This has impacts on the operation of rural regeneration. Further, the problems of manpower training program are listed as followings:

### **Bottom up participation is not stressed in training courses**

Current communities' rural manpower training programs sequentially arrange a number of training courses and hire professional instructors to help communities to explain the concepts and offer the skill needed for the implementation of rural regeneration plans. However, as stated by a chief of village in Gong-Lao-Ping community, curriculum planning is not connected very well. In the context of courses, the spirit of bottom up participation is

not stressed. Therefore, villagers attending the programs can not understand the overall concept of rural regeneration and what is their role in relation to the rural regeneration plan. It is questionable that villager can really understand the meaning of rural regeneration plan and that the training program can help the villagers to develop and write rural regeneration project.

### **The effect of manpower training program is exaggerated**

The authority of rural regeneration requests the participating community to report the number of classes and graduations from the training program. However these statistics cannot display the exact results of participating manpower training program. Residents do not realize the real spirit of bottom- up participation. Furthermore, rural regeneration counseling sessions or workshops to further help residents understanding the concept of bottom-up participation are not available; these make the effect of manpower programs weakened.

### **The rural community regeneration plan is not comprehensive**

Government provides writing guidelines for rural regeneration programs to help communities prepare their rural rejuvenation plans. The writing guidelines help villagers understand the meaning of rural regeneration and provide rural regeneration plan with a reference basis. However, the writing guidelines are not incorporated with courses in the manpower training program to explain the concepts of rural regeneration plans in detail. Moreover, according to the opinion of chairman of Hsieh-Chen community development association, villagers even don't recognize the correlations between the guidelines and connotations of rejuvenation plan. The plan of rural regeneration programs is not helpful for guiding the implementation of rejuvenation project. For example, regarding the development in rural industries, the writing guide did not advise villagers to explore the current population structure and industry structure in the community. Therefore villagers cannot understand the current employment, occupation, income situations in their community, a borough chief in Gong-Lao-Ping community added. In addition, although there existing an institute for the development in rural industries in their community, residents cannot understand the operation situation of the institute. Therefore, they cannot further provide the basis and method and propose actual ideas to promote the industrial development.

Regarding on improving of community facilities, the improvement of living environment needs to understand the current situation and problems of the community's present vacant space and the related housing restoration. Using the existing settlement as a base, the ideas and projects are proposed to carry out the overall improvement of the environment of community.

In respect to the construction for transportation, the present situations of streets and alleys in the community, the problems and current situation of road width, parking spaces in community should be described in detailed. Therefore, the center of ideas and suggestions for the current traffic improvements of the community are recognized. Thus, a project can be proposed to improve the village's transportation facilities and unused space.

Rural population is gradually aging because of emigration of young population. Therefore, care of the aged population has become an important topic of the development of community. Currently, communities have recognized the status of the population or problems, but how to develop countermeasure to solve them have not been taken into account in the rejuvenation program.

### **Limited time in discussion**

Due to limited time in discussion, villagers are not able to fully communicated with each other and fully reflex their opinion for the regeneration plan. There are problems in the

integration of opinion, lack of aggregation in community awareness, which are contrary to the spirit and meaning of bottom-up villagers' participation, as said by chairmen of community development associations in Hsieh-Chen community; Xing-long community; Gong-Lao-Ping community.

After participating in the man power training program, rural communities are allowed by government to develop their rural regeneration projects. In general, the community has to propose rural regeneration plan in time in order to have grant funds approved by government as soon as possible (Servaes, and Arnst, 1999). This results in the problems that community regeneration plan is put forward too rapidly and the discussion is not entirely covers all issues. In a short period of time, it is difficult in understanding the current situation and problems of rural industries, culture, historical heritage, land use, rural life and landscape architecture. The characteristics and local rural needs and the requirements from villagers are not fully grasped neither. Under limited time, villagers cannot actively participate in the discussion and coordination and neither can assess whether the items in community improvement projects are urgently needed. By this way, how can villagers to create the hope of their communities and reach the overall goal of rural regeneration and rural development? To sum up, in the limited time, community development association is lack of overall discussions, especially for the issues for development of rural industries, infrastructures, social culture and ecological environment. Furthermore, not all villagers can participate in the meeting, the conclusions are not comprehensive. According to chairmen of community development associations in Gong-Ming community, Zhu-Zi -Keng community, Xin-Zhuang community, Qing -Fu community the results of the discussions are difficult to cover all aspects of rural regeneration and sustainable development. This leads to the lack of analysis in the situations in the rural regeneration plans. Therefore, the plan is not served as a guide for the rural generation and development of policies.

### **The strategies for villagers' participation in rural regeneration**

#### **Villagers 'are encouraged to participate in discussion of issues categorized by production, living, and ecology**

Basing on communities developing topics, all participants are invited to take part in different groups to fully discuss and explore the problems faced. In next step, a plan is developed to solve the problems (Chang, 2011; Liu, 2001; Liu; 2002, Liu and Yang, 2015). Currently, in community meeting, generally, there are between seven to eight topics needing to be discussed. The discussions do not deep enough to cover overall concept. Furthermore, the results of discussion are not integrated with the opinions of villagers to enhance development of rural regeneration.

Therefore, we should encourage villagers to focus on the issues regarding community development. The issues are categorized by production, living, and ecology. For example, the issues are covering improving in the living environment, public facilities, house renovation, development in industries, local culture and environment and other aspects. It is important to invite the residents who are interested in community development issues for a more fully discussion regularly.

Therefore, we have to strengthen the participation of villagers in rural regeneration program to have a detailed discussion about different topics and issues covering production, living and ecology, then integrate the opinions of the villagers to develop ideas and solutions for important development issues. This is an important subject for rural development. Only under a detailed and careful analysis of the status of community development and problems, development plan can be comprehensive.

While communities propose a plan of rural regeneration, the issues explored are not entirely complete and comprehensive; just filling the requirements from writing guide of rural

regeneration plan. The villagers did not really understand the connotation of regeneration plan and its integrity with rural regeneration.

In fact, to strengthening the villagers' participation, we should consider the overall issues of community development (production, life and ecology). The welfare of residences should be the top priority (Liu, 2001; Liu, 2002). It is helpful to implement a mechanism of villagers' participation to improve the living and recreational conditions of communities to create sustainable development (Moseley, 2003). For example,

a. Living: the problems of community roadway, driveway and sidewalk, planning of alleyway street and parking space, access roads and road recreation (hiking trails, bike paths) and their linkages. Planting green landscaping, landscape style, the status of the house renovation issues, updates tin houses and improvement of idle space and so on, are all important issues to improve the living environment. Community developments are advised to take into account the maintenance of distinctive style and traditional style.

b. Production: Scale of agricultural production, prices, revenues and income, production and marketing conditions and problems, the prospects of rural tourism development, feasibility recreational development, etc., should be further discussed by villagers.

c. Ecology: disaster prevention in flooding areas, greenize and naturalized water streams, centennial archiving and protection of biodiversity and habitat of animals and plants trees etc., basic maintenance of the ecological environment for the community.

The discussion of the problems and countermeasures mentioned above should be discussed in detail by villagers. The the community association should be structured by groups to deal with the issues of production, life and ecology in order to thoroughly discuss community's vision and future. All in all, the connotation of villagers' participation should follow the principles that agriculture should be established on the integration of production, living and ecology systems. The expression of the views of all community residents should be integrated under the considerations of production, living and ecology circumstances. The encountered problems and the countermeasure should be explained and discussed in detail for further budget planning and executing annually.

### **The Analysis of the situations and problems of the community should be used as base for planning**

a. Development in rural industries.

The current situation and problems such as the the production of the agriculture community, sales, income and earnings should be analyzed and explained in detailed. Besides the issues in regard with the scale of agricultural production, and marketing facilities, cost, price and market gains, income other issues regarding the current status of secondary and tertiary industries (such as commerce, manufacturing and bed and breakfast business) within the community must be analyzed. Rural tourism has to to further illustrate the status of existing tourist's accommodation and catering and the population problem. Otherwise, we are not able to set up a feasible renewable plans and ideas of development to promote the development in rural industries.

b. Infrastructure and the development of rural settlement

It is better to focus on community transport road (the main road, access roads and secondary roads) and paths within the community. The status and lane-width of alleys, industry road, road index system and parking space are needed to be focused as well. We should use graphic illustration to show the problems. Besides the current status of the community bike paths (routes, road width, road index and safety measures) should be analyzed and described. Further communication with the residents to considering connecting one-way streets and bike path in order to create a healthy leisure opportunities for rural tourism development is needed.

In regarding with rural settlement development, the current situation and problems of the community house and buildings, buildings and houses remained to be renovated and buildings needed to be updated and repaired (including temporary hut houses and rooftops) and indolent space should be explained in detail by the method of drawing. The explanations can be used to improve the living conditions of communities as well as preserving the rural landscape.

Regarding facilities or locations of leisure activities for residence, we can consider unused space or updating or reusing old houses. Reusing of old house is helpful to maintain native culture in rural villages. These are including renovating ancient streets and alleys with native characteristic and cultural feelings shops (blacksmith shop, tofu shop, etc.). Strengthening villagers' participation and the residents' full discussion and explanation are methods to achieve this goal.

c. Protection of environment and ecology

It is better to pay attention on problems and situation of ecological environment (such as animal and plant water streams, flora and fauna habitation and endangered or protection need animal and plants). Low-lying areas and areas in which disasters often occur are needed to be focused as well. The problems should be analyzed and described by drawing illustration. Some communities having flooding and drainage problems can consider setting detention pond, artificial ponds and ecology pools to solve the problems.

All in all, the analysis of the current status of the community should be strengthened and described in detail so as to use as a base to develop strategies. Residents are encouraged to discuss rural regeneration issues in detail and then provide detail information to use as a basis to bottom-up participation in rural rejuvenation.

### **The manpower training program has to strengthen villagers' recognition of the concept and connotation of rural regeneration**

Curriculum design of existing manpower training program should be able to guide the villagers to understand the holistic concept of regeneration plans and to guide villagers' "bottom-up participation". Therefore, the rural regeneration plan can be carried out. The connotation of counseling curriculum in series classes (care classes, advanced classes, core classes, and regeneration classes) should have its planned, cohesion and coherence natural. The curriculums of various classes should be inspected in order to make sure whether the villagers participated in training programs are really understand the concept of regeneration and its integrity.

Meanwhile, we have to review whether the planning topics, planning concept and financial planning really aimed at resolving the above problems so that it can reach overall development goals of rural regeneration.

On the other hand, the items in renewable projects in rural areas have their priorities. Additionally, basing on the analysis of problems and current status, we consider whether the urgent strategy for overall community development has been included. Also we should pay more attention to make sure whether all improvement strategies should be fulfilled with the requirement of strengthening and maintaining rural characteristics. Maintenance of the unique style of the traditional rural landscape is important development issue.

### **Giving villagers plenty of time to discuss rural regeneration plans in detailed**

The community residents have to understand the perception and meaning of the overall development of rural regeneration and then participate in the process of decision. Community organizations and groups should be integrated to further inspire community residents to participate in groups categorized by production, life, ecology. At the same time, we should encourage the community development association and the participating groups to focus on

community development issues. Residents should have sufficient time to discuss the issues in detailed in order to have an in-depth discussion of community future and to help onward work of rural regeneration.

## Conclusion

The scope of rural regeneration project covers a wide range, requiring taking a careful thinking and discussion process. Under a comprehensive planning, rural regeneration is not just to satisfy the various needs of the villagers in their daily lives, but also to take into account developments in rural industries, socio-cultural and ecological environment. As mentioned earlier, villagers play a leading role in rural regeneration plan. For the overall development of rural regeneration, the important works of rural rejuvenations such as the regeneration planning and participation in important decisions process have to be fully communicated with the villagers. Therefore, the combined resources of the village and civil forces to strengthen bottom-up participation of villagers in rural regeneration project should be implemented following aspects of production, life and ecology. With integration and cooperation, inclusiveness and patience, villagers' participation in the development of rural regeneration planning is the key for rural regeneration and sustainable development to success. Overall, this study shows that rural regeneration project currently unable to actual implement the bottom-up villagers' participation to realize the sustainable development. To implement the spirit of villagers' participation, in this stage, we should strengthen the education and promotion of rural regeneration work. Villagers are enabled to have a basic knowledge of rural regeneration and sustainable development and then can understand the causes and consequences of a regeneration plan. Thus, they can actually participate in rural regeneration. In addition, community counseling should be strengthened to assist communities to explore the issue and the current situation of the community. Having this solid foundation, the planning of regeneration and the development of community are able to be successful.

On the other hand, to strengthen villagers' cognition of integrity and concept of community development, we should invest more time and manpower to education them. Therefore, the level of education and personnel training should be widely extended. Furthermore, the objects of personnel training are to actively create experts in planning and constructions in rural regeneration programs. All in all, if villagers' participation is limited, passive and lack of time, the promotion of rural regeneration will be no integrated effects. We should improve bottom-up participation in rural regeneration to achieve the goal of sustainable development.

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