



EU-China NGO Exchange 2015

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"Spect-acting" sustainable water consumption: Eliciting and recognizing multiple ways of knowing through Forum theatre

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"Spect-acting" sustainable water consumption: Eliciting and recognizing multiple ways of knowing through Theatre Forum

The joint project envisaged the examination of sustainable water consumption. Participants "spect-acted" in knowledge co-construction processes on water consumption in the European and Chinese context through Forum theatre. Spectators have become "spect-actors" offering an intimate, interactive personal experience inspired by everyday stories. Eliciting multiple perspectives by the use of Forum theatre, local narratives and mental maps have been created to explore local sustainability transitions. In China the links between climate change and drought, Yi and Han cultures and religious practices, irrigation and livelihood strategies have been examined while in Europe the project has focused on drinking water and paradoxa of consumption behavior.

Knowledge co-construction through Forum theatre

Forum theatre is a participatory drama form invented by Augusto Boal in the 1960's in Brazil. Forum theatre as a form of interactive theatre elicits differing assumptions and visions on a problem and its manifold interpretations that also determine the choice of responses to solve this given problem. It serves as a learning site where knowledge is generated jointly by participants. The audience moves on stage to become part of the actors and to test propositions on how to change a conflict or a dilemma displayed in a performance. Since the play is based on personal stories and a micro-level of a social setting implicit knowledge is revealed through changes of gestures and behaviors that are otherwise often ignored and remain tacit (Reich, 2012). Implicit knowledge becomes visible through the act of performance, which is why Köck (2014) refers to the term performative collective knowledge production. A Forum theatre process consists of two phases, a preparatory phase, where a scene is co-constructed and the forum phase, the performance phase, with a greater public. Both phases are facilitated by the so-called joker.

Chinese twinning activities

The Forum theatre scenes have been fed by everyday stories. In interviews and feedback loop diagrams narratives and mental maps have been collected in the two villages Xiao He and Xing chu, Yao'an county, Chuxiong Prefecture, in Yunnan. These villages face drought, loss of biodiversity, rural exodus and several socio-cultural transitions such as a homogenization of society where a lot of cultural and religious rituals are not practiced anymore. Co-constructing knowledge on the main transitions and ambiguities involved addresses both relational, implicit and content specific aspects of knowledge while eliciting perspectives of all stakeholders who have been identified as key actors including the interdisciplinary research team, Han and Yi farmers, village committee members, a private water company representative, a Bimo (priest and intellectual in the Yi culture) and a regional agricultural agency. Thanks to the project different perspectives on ongoing transitions and the nexus of traditional knowledge, biodiversity and culture conservation of minorities in Yunnan and adaptation to drought have been elicited by the key actors as identified by the interview partners.



Furthermore as a preparation for the exchange activities a train the trainers workshop on Forum theatre has trained other NGO participants, a representative from a student union, PhD students and a representative from a local environmental government agency. Thus links between different actors in Yunnan interested in Forum theatre have been established.

During the workshop meeting in Hangzhou a scene has been co-constructed with twinning exchange participants in order to elicit cultural differences in the practices at work and potential challenges that occur in a cooperation between Chinese and European NGOs.

European twinning activities

In the European context a workshop on Multifacets of drinking water consumption has been organized in Berlin to elicit barriers to tap water consumption and different visions on the value of water across cultures. The workshop enabled a vivid discussion with local water actors in Berlin on tap water consumption and potential joint activities between groups that work on similar subjects. In a further workshop at University of Twente a workshop on knowledge co-construction, Forum theatre and water management has been conducted where workshop participants jointly explored Forum theatre as a tool to elicit different views on drought.



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Creating networks

The workshops in Hangzhou and Brussels were crucial for the creation of a network with other NGOs in Europe and China working on similar issues. In future activities a collaboration with NGOs that use informal education methods is envisaged, as well as a joint publication on Forum theatre during the exchange activities in China. The project has been presented in a transition research context during a webinar. The use of Theatre forum in research, informal education and in a Chinese context is an innovative approach that we would like to explore in future activities.



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Conclusion and further activities

In order to co-construct scenes and knowledge on the nexus of traditional knowledge and culture conservation and adaptation to drought thanks to this exchange a first Forum theatre scene has been co-created. The exchange enabled the twinning team to work and test Forum theatre in different cultural contexts and discuss the challenges that are involved in each context. While Forum theatre aims at displaying perspectives on a given problem or conflict in our experience in Yunnan Forum theatre was rather striving for reinforcing harmony. We appreciated the discussions with workshop participants on how to solve this paradox in a Chinese context. In future activities we would like to spend more time in the villages and to work with smaller and targeted audiences to put every participant at ease. To better understand the rich cultural diversity in Yunnan more attention will be paid to the choice of interview settings. A further challenge consists in the choice



of methods when working on conservation of cultural practices. How can the imposition of new methods, such as Forum theatre, in the conservation of traditional practices been avoided? We tried to include local traditions in the Forum theatre scene. Methods need to be contextualised and localised e.g. through arts-based methods, such as the integration of the left leg dance, a traditional Yi dance, in the scene. We would like to explore further arts-based methods in our future project. Future collaboration consist in elaborating a joint project proposal on the nexus of conservation of indigenous knowledge, knowledge co-construction and adaptation to socio-ecologic change on water and renewable energy. Furthermore other NGOs have manifested their interest in collaboration and were particularly interested in Forum theatre. During the exchange period a Train the Trainers workshop was organised where NGOs based in Kunming have been invited. In the future further scenes could be co-constructed with the interview partners and other key actors to agree on a common understanding on the described nexus. An Agent based model could be developed to upscale the results. A (formerly active) community of practice to test and develop different scenes and tools to elicit knowledge that meets on a regular basis could be revived involving a range of different actor types such as actors, NGOs, students, researchers to discover the potential of Forum theatre in Kunming. In Berlin next steps consist in linking existing initiatives and eliciting visions on tap water consumption with further relevant stakeholders.

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