

Central Taiwan's Rural Development

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Introduction

Professor Dr. Chien-Zer Liu, director of the Graduate Institute of Rural Planning, NCHU, and also teacher of Rural Planning and Rural Development Policy, cordially invited us to join him and Prof. Dr. Dr. Schung from Bonn University, Germany, during his visit in Taichung. Obviously, we were extremely pleased to accept such an invitation. Therefore, we accompany the eminent Professor during his stay in Central Taiwan from Monday, December 11th to Thursday, December 14th. Before giving our thoughts about Central Taiwan's rural development experiences, we will describe the activities we did, along with some comments.

Description of the activities and comments

A Monday, December 11th

Early in the afternoon, Prof. Dr. Schug gave a speech at the NCHU in front of students from the Graduate Institute of Rural Planning and the Department of Applied Economics. The topic was European Union Agricultural Policy. The speech was clear and well constructed although this topic is quite complex. We appreciated the fact that he underlined the impossibility of harmonizing and centralizing all the agricultural policies in the European Union, because it shows how the regional and local realities do matters and why the national governments are still meaningful. Also, he was able to vulgarise the 2003-2004 reform that the EU Agricultural Policy underwent, showing the necessity for the policy to evolve and improve in regard to the changes in the national and international environment.

In the evening, we attended to the welcome dinner, hosted by Prof. Dr. Hwang, Dean of College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, NCHU, at a Japanese restaurant along with some professors.

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B Tuesday, December 12th

In the afternoon, we were invited by Mr. Liu, director of Land Readjustment Engineering Bureau (LREB), Ministry of Interior, to visit the office. We were introduced to the history, the structure and the activities of the organisation. We were pleased to discover that the Bureau adopted a sound and integrated approach to urban development and land readjustment affairs, as well as it took into consideration the ecological and the environmental aspects of development. However, we doubt that an institution mostly aimed to do engineering, zoning and urban development can pursue sound rural development, although the farm and rural community land readjustment section seems to do a fair and much needed job. Indeed, the cultural and the social aspects, as well as some part of the economics, are not directly taken into consideration by the Bureau. For example, the rural community land readjustment is an effort aimed to shorten the gaps between cities and villages, but only in terms of infrastructure. But maybe it is a prerequisite and the first step towards development...

After being initiated to the mission of the Bureau, we visited the project of village renewal in Song-Ya, Taichung County. It was the opportunity for us to compare the actual village renewal to the theory we learned in class. Although this project seems to be a success, the traditional and unique style of the village was not kept in the process of renewal. Indeed, we found there only one traditional house and all the new constructions were modern and urban in style. There were also a number of lands that was not used and the village did not seem vibrant with merely no one in the streets. In sum, in this village, the infrastructures and living conditions have improved after the renewal, but they lost the traditional and cultural aspects in the process. From what we observed, the environmental aspect did not seem to be considered by the parties involved in the renewal, and unfortunately, we did not have the chance to feel any economic vitality in the village.

In the evening, we attend to the dinner hosted by Director Liu, LERB. Some government officials and us enjoyed Chinese-Taiwanese food.

C Wednesday, December 13th

In the early morning, we left NCHU for a field trip to Jhushuan Township. Once we arrived there, we visited the Bamboo Cultural Garden Area. We were introduced to a variety of kinds of bamboo along with some products made of bamboo. This visit has made us realize the importance of keeping and redevelop this industry, because it clearly fulfills the criteria of sustainable development. However, this industry is highly competitive on international markets. Thus, the bamboo producers and the professionals of bamboo technology have to innovate in order to add some value to their products.

Then, we had lunch made from fresh and local products in a B&B called Lao Wu (Old Five) Resort. The guesthouse exterior design combines Japanese and ancient Chinese and is surrounded by nature.

In the afternoon, we visited village of winery and «Holiday on Village», Sinyi Township and Shueili Township. In Sinyi Township, we enjoyed various kinds of high quality and delectable alcohols made from plum. We were pleased and very impressed by the efforts that the farmers' association is putting into marketing development in order to attract tourists and increase sales. The plum producers and the winery seem to fulfill high quality standards, which is a prerequisite for exportation. Then, we briefly visited Shueili Township and the Magpie Bridge, which are located in the Shang-An Region. We were introduced especially to the debris flow disaster remediation. The integrated management plan aimed to completely mitigate and prevent the debris flow disaster was conducted by the 3rd Engineering Office, Soil and Water Conservation Bureau (SWCB), Council of Agriculture (COA), Executive Yuan (Cabinet). The planning concepts and the treatment strategy that were adopted and implemented included every aspects of development, including village community collaboration, so the village, the watershed and the ecosystem could evolve in a sustainable manner. The SWCB has also produced for the Shang-An Region a comprehensive and attractive agro- and eco-tourist guide that is designed to the English-speaking people. We are sure that this guide will contribute to the development of the tourist industry in this region if it is properly distributed to the tourist centers across the island.

Later on that day, we had the chance to visit Sun Monn Lake by taking the boat that crosses the lake. We experienced and witnessed the tourist success story of this admirable lake.

On the evening, we had a delectable dinner, hosted by director Chang, Water and Soil Conservation Bureau (WSCB), Council of Agriculture, in Yuchich Township, Da-Yuan Village.

We stayed overnight in the extraordinary Chin-Pin Lo B&B, which is located in a quiet and beautiful environment near Sun Moon Lake. It was very pleasant, calm and relaxing.

D Thursday, December 14th

We left the tourist home to visit Yuchich Township, Da-Yuan Village. This is another project area of rural development in Nantou County. The visit of a bamboo processing plant was particularly interesting. The plant produces bamboo charcoal that has incredible properties and that can be used in the fabrication of many products. The plant was created with the collaboration with the Forestry Bureau (COA), the Eco-Carbon Development Association of Taiwan and the Industrial Technology Research Institute (Materials Research Laboratories). It is a Certified Agricultural Standards (CAS) Good Quality Forest Products in Taiwan (i.e. certified by the Forestry Bureau of the COA). That again, was an excellent example of sustainable development.

We visited Jhongliao Township, Long-gan-Lin. This is another project area of rural

development in Nantou County. This township, located high in the mountains, was impressive. The renewal respected the four aspects of rural planning, which are: the infrastructures and the living conditions; the society and the culture; the environment and the ecology; and the employment and the agriculture. Nevertheless, the citizen participated to the planning, which guarantee its accuracy. (Chien-Zer, 2005: 52) Regarding the first aspect, the village is easily accessible by paved roads and therefore, the villagers are not isolated. Concerning the second aspect, the initiative to install a cricket field that the community can use freely makes possible an active and vibrant community life. This gathering area enhances the inhabitants' roundness and appurtenance to the village, and also brings visitors to the village when tournaments are occurring. When we look at the environment and the ecology, from what we observed, the village seems to live in harmony with the surroundings. Compared to other villages we visited, Jhongliao seemed clean and free of random waste. From an economic point of view, this village is a success story. Indeed, the community, along with the SWCB, diversified the sources of income by developing not only the production of dragon eye fruits, but also bananas and some woodcraft. We visited the installations used to dry the dragon eye fruits. These dryers were built by the community and are available to the public use. The producers dry the overproduction in order to conserve and sale it all year long. This integrated approach ensures the long-term vitality of the village.

Later on that afternoon, we visited the Water Soil Conservation Bureau, Council of Agriculture, located in Nantou City. Then, we left Nantou for NCHU.

Central Taiwan's rural development experiences

With this field trip, we have seen and experienced the efforts made by the various levels of government in order to develop the tourist industry, especially the agro- and eco-tourism, in Taiwan. Furthermore, with the visit of the several rural area development projects, we were able to compare and analyse the reality of project management from the theory of rural development that we learned in class. Indeed, the fours aspects of rural development, along with the citizen participation, are not always considered by the government. In Taiwan, the ministries and the agencies tend to be specialized into one field and therefore, are hardly versatile. What is more, the lack of concentration between them leaves some important issues apart.

The case of the bamboo culture park and the bamboo industry is very interesting as it represents an excellent example of sustainable development. Indeed, because the bamboo plant is part of the traditional society in Taiwan, the preservation of its culture and transformation ensures that this heritage will pass through next generations. Also, its culture is respectful of the environment and the products made from the transformation of bamboo can

replace products made from chemicals. The processing of bamboo and the added value products enable the Taiwanese bamboo industry to compete and survive on the international market and what is more, this is a labour intensive industry. In fact, the value is added by the processing as well as the art work produced by local people. Finally, the survival of this industry in Taiwan was made possible by the technology transfer from the research institute (Industrial Technology Research Institute – Material Research Laboratories) to the local producers with the help of a development association (Eco-Carbon Development Association of Taiwan), with the collaboration of a government division (Forestry Bureau – Council of Agriculture). This kind of social economy shows how the collaboration of various agents can ensure sustainable development.

In regard to the village renewal, the project of village renewal in Song-Ya, Taichung County, conducted by Land Readjustment Engineering Bureau (LREB), Ministry of Interior is a good example of how an institution mostly aimed to do engineering, zoning and urban development can not pursue sound rural development. Indeed, this experience is considered as a success story by the public agents and the population, however the village lost its traditional style, did not seem vibrant and did not seem to have any kind of economic activity. The living conditions improvement with the new infrastructures does not guarantee a vital and sustainable living environment, and is not a synonym of rural development.

Conclusion

This experience was both unique and fulfilling. It showed us that the government divisions and the populations are dedicated to the rural development and that various efforts were successful. However, the intervention of the government should be more coordinated and the population more consulted. In this regard, joint committees on sustainable rural development could be institutionalized, for example. They could include various representatives from the government and the civil society, such as the Ministry of the economy, the Council of agriculture, the Ministry of interior, the development and the farmers associations, etc. Joint committees would ensure an integrated rural development and also be a clear signal from the Taiwanese government that it truly believes in the role of the rural area in the sustainable development of the Island as a whole. However, sustainable development requires citizens' environmental awareness. This level of consciousness can be reached with an extended program of education for sustainable development at all levels, from the kindergarten to the retirement home. With the participation of all actors and citizens, sustainable rural development can be achieved.

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