

Sustainable Development

Kěchíxù fāzhǎn 可持续发展

The constitution of the People's Republic of China includes a section on sustainable development that stipulates: *Development must use natural resources in a manner that takes future generations into consideration. China's goal is to restructure the economy to one of low consumption and low pollution, while addressing the needs of the world's largest population, much of which is uneducated, poor, and aging.*

Sustainable development—a use of natural resources that meets human needs while preserving the environment so that those needs can be met not only in the present but also in the future—is one of China's state strategies. Ever since the term entered China's public policy vocabulary after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, sustainable development has been accepted as a must for China in its modernization drive.

Guideline

China's basic sustainable development strategy gives priority to peoples need and interests; it aims to coordinate efforts to improve and develop the economic and political aspects of the country, in part by balancing growth among urban and rural regions, and to improve the spiritual

quality of life in China by fostering harmony between humans and nature. This guideline, known as the “Scientific Outlook on Development,” has been written into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China.

The “Scientific Outlook” guideline emphasizes sustaining development by taking into consideration the needs of both this and future generations. It aims to build on existing economic and political strengths and lay down a solid foundation for China to rank among the medium-developed countries by the middle of the twenty-first century.

China's sustainable development strategy specifically aims to: restructure the national economy from the old mode of growth characterized by high consumption of resources, high pollution, and low efficiency to a new pattern of low consumption, low pollution, and high efficiency; justify the utilization of resources and alleviate pressures that would deplete resources and the harm the environment; bridge regional gaps in development and narrow the urban-rural divide; eliminate poverty and improve the overall quality of the destitute population; and build up a national economic system that is environmentally friendly.

Population

Because of its size and impact on both resources and development, population constitutes a key concern in China's sustainable development strategy. Although the world's largest population of 1.33 billion could be a resource in itself, the limited educational level in China



Students listen attentively during an International Law class at the Beijing City Glass Institute. China's basic sustainable development strategy gives priority to peoples' needs and interests; it aims to coordinate efforts to improve and develop the economic and political aspects of the country. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

often works to the country's disadvantage. Adult literacy has increased from less than 20 percent in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, to reportedly more than 90 percent at present, but the average time spent in school for those older than fifteen remains low at 8.3 years. According to Niu Wenyan, principal investigator of the sustainable development strategy project with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, any trifling problem in China can be enormous if multiplied by 1.33 billion, whereas any achievement, however brilliant, will pale if divided by the same figure. China's annual 10–12 million net new births may cost one-fifth of the increased gross domestic product (GDP).

China has succeeded in bringing down its population growth rate from 2.3 percent in 1990 to 0.6 percent in 2005 and has shifted from the reproduction pattern of high birth rate, low infant mortality, and high growth rate

to the pattern of low birth rate, low infant mortality, and low growth rate. But the lowered growth rate has changed the age structure of the population, and senior citizens at or above sixty years old have surpassed 10 percent of the total population, meaning that the developing country is also an aging society.

That change may explain why human resources development is placed high in China's sustainable development strategy. The country needs to control the population growth to alleviate the pressures on resources and the job market. The need to control the population growth has generated a series of policies to facilitate fewer births; improve people's living quality with adequate food supply, housing, and better health care; guarantee full employment and support of the old; and provide education for all to maintain a competent labor force. Policies favor parents who practice family planning in rural areas. For

example, they receive priority in loans and in their children's education and employment. Such policies have helped refute the traditional concept of "more children bringing about greater fortunes."

An important goal of China's population policies and sustainable development strategy is to alleviate and eliminate poverty. Statistics shows that 23 million rural people

still live below the poverty line of an annual per capita income of 700 yuan, and nearly 50 million barely have adequate food and clothing, in addition to 28 million who are impoverished in urban areas (2006). By the United Nations poverty standard of daily per capita consumption of \$1, China's poor population may exceed 200 million.

Most of the rural poor live in western China, an area

An old man holds his grandchild. While China's one-child policy has helped to slow the rate of population growth, it has resulted in a disproportionately large population of elderly Chinese. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



in which the populations typically suffers from remoteness, poor accessibility, primitive modes of production, low grain yields, and meager sources of income. China established the Leading Group on Poverty Alleviation and Development under the State Council in 1986 to eradicate poverty. Such programs focus on increasing people's competence so that they can subsist on their own. While increasing government budgets to alleviate poverty, China also has mobilized the whole society to join the effort. The Chinese Academy of Sciences, for example, dispatches researchers to assume official posts in some poverty-stricken counties in Inner Mongolia, where the researchers introduce appropriate technologies to local people with which they can reduce desertification and become more prosperous. This transformation, however, is not without its challenges.

Environmental Protection

A population's ever-increasing demands for material and cultural riches can easily take its toll on resources and the environment. As China has accelerated the pace of industrialization and urbanization since the 1980s to respond to pressures imposed by a rapidly growing population, deterioration of the eco-environment has become an increasing problem for China's sustainable development strategy.

While pursuing sustainable development as an inevitable strategic choice, China has taken the official line that, for a developing country such as China, economic growth is the precondition for sustainable development. "Only when the economic growth rate reaches and is sustained at a certain level can poverty be eradicated, people's livelihoods be improved, and the necessary forces and conditions for supporting sustainable development be provided," states the *White Paper on China's Population, Environment, and Development in the 21st Century* issued by the State Council Information Office in 1998 (State Council Information Office, Chapter 2).

But domestic and international lessons learned have convinced the Chinese that neglecting the environment can offset achievements made in economic development. As stipulated by China's eleventh Five Year Plan (2006–2010) China aims to decrease energy consumption annually by 8 percent per unit of GDP, but by mid-2008 had

only achieved a 5.7 percent reduction (Kirk 2009). Environmental protection is commonly recognized as vital to China's sustainable development.

China began to promote environmental protection after the first world conference on the environment, the United Nations Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972. Environmental protection policies aim to rationalize industrial structures in favor of those that save energy or use clean energy, develop environmentally friendly high-tech industries and tertiary services (the sector of the economy other than manufacturing or agriculture, such as insurance or banking), improve management of enterprises and the environment, integrate pollution prevention and control, and commit polluting enterprises to bear the cost of recovering wastes and controlling pollution. Along with a quota system for waste discharge, legislation can close plants that use outdated equipment and are small in scale but high in energy consumption and environmental pollution.

Environmental protection has been incorporated into national and local programs for economic and social development. With regard to environmental problems caused by unwise planning of projects, often approved through officials' preference and intervention, China enacted the Law of Environmental Impact Assessment in 2002. This legislation aims to define the government administration responsible for construction project approval, control the irrational sprawling of destructive development, and prevent hazards to the environment caused by faulty planning by project owners. Environmental impact assessment has been applied to some key construction projects, including the Qinghai-Tibet Railway (completed in 2005), where results are considered positive because the impact on the environment is minimal.

Changing Viewpoints

Another challenge to China's sustainable development strategy is changing the viewpoint of its officials, who have traditionally identified development as the growth rate of GDP and used that increase as a tool for self-promotion. As a result, social development lagged behind rapid economic growth in many places.

A pivotal moment in changing the viewpoint of Chinese policymakers came in 2003 after the epidemic of



An environmentalist studies stream ecology at the Jianfengling rainforest. China began to promote environmental protection after attending the United Nations Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972. Recent legislation in China levels fines on industrial polluters. PHOTO BY WEN BO.

SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), which killed 791 people out of 8,300 infected cases in some thirty countries and regions worldwide, with a death toll of 348 in the Chinese mainland. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the epidemic cost China \$11.3 billion, or 0.8 percent of its 2003 GDP. Two high-ranking officials—the mayor of Beijing and the minister of health—were sacked for dereliction of duty at the outbreak of the SARS epidemic.

Heeding calls in the wake of the SARS epidemic to balance economic growth with social development, the Chinese government increased funding to overhaul the

country's long-neglected health system, earmarking \$822 million for the central and local centers for disease control and prevention to improve their capacity to handle the outbreak of infectious diseases. An additional \$1.38 billion was allocated to facilitate handling of infectious diseases in less-developed western China. Such action is in contrast to disproportionate government spending on public health in the previous two decades. From 1991 to 2000 the proportion of overall medical costs in China's GDP increased from 4.11 percent to 5.3 percent, with the annual sum rising from \$11 billion to \$59.5 billion. Yet the proportion of government spending on public health in

overall medical costs dropped from 22.8 percent to 14.9 percent, while the share of individual spending rose from 38.8 percent to 60.6 percent.

China has yet to produce a set of statistical tools to take into account the utilization of resources and costs of environmental damage in its GDP, but policymakers are abandoning the conventional practice of measuring the quality of governance with the GDP growth rate only. For example, in 2005 the provincial government of Qinghai removed GDP as a criteria in the assessment of officials working in the Tibetan autonomous prefectures of Yushu and Guoluo, where the Yangzi (Chang), Huang (Yellow), and Lancang (Mekong) rivers have their sources, so that they could concentrate on the conservation of the nature reserve, which is the largest in China.

Public Participation

The deteriorating environment has increased people's awareness of the need for sustainable development, and public participation has become indispensable in environmental protection. The Law of Environmental Impact Assessment allowed public participation for the first time in China's legislative history, and the country's burgeoning civil society is playing a more active role in the decision-making process on projects with considerable environmental impact and in monitoring enterprises to assure they abide by laws on environmental protection.

Based on officially released data, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, a Beijing-based non-governmental organization (NGO), produced a list of polluters and their products. Twenty-one environmental NGOs from across China then sent out a petition in March 2007 to consumers nationwide asking them to boycott these products. The action forced a number of offenders to control their pollution and to make an apology to Chinese society through the media. Actions such as the boycott put data released by the government to good use and exert a "healthy supervision" over the government while putting social pressure on polluters, said Mou Guangfeng, an official in charge of

environmental assessment at the State Environmental Protection Administration.

Sustainable development in China is a long-range undertaking that will require consistent effort for generations. The government's openness to public participation is promising for the success of China's sustainable development strategy.

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