

## Editor's introduction

By **Sven Grimm\***

*Centre for Chinese Studies  
University of Stellenbosch, South Africa*

The concept of *sustainability* is gaining importance, not least in discussions about the succession to the Millennium Development Goals that have a timeline until 2015. While sustainability is a widely accepted leitmotif, the practical reconciliation of environmental protection and conservation with economic and social development remains a challenge for developing and developed countries alike.

“Sustainability” implies the inclusion of a long-term perspective; additionally, it requires attention from various angles. Environmental protection can be regarded as a value in itself. Sustainability, in this understanding, is a survival imperative and a somewhat religiously justified moral obligation of humankind to “protect creation”, including aspects of cultural resources. Secondly, a market rationale also gives good reasons for environmental protection and the aim towards sustainability. Negatively speaking, pollution inflicts costs and has negative impacts on economic growth, as has been calculated for China, for instance (as illustrated by Burgess and Esterhuysen in their Forum contribution in this issue). Additional to the economic costs, political costs are inflicted, as the lack of protection against pollution can be undermining state legitimacy. This cost-related rationale, in fact, also provides for reasons to engage in conservation efforts, as a healthy and di-

*\*Sven Grimm is the Director of the Centre for Chinese Studies at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. He is also the Editor-in-Chief of the journal African East-Asian Affairs*

---

verse environment provides a wealth of yet unknown treasures (for medicinal or agricultural or other uses) that needs to be preserved for future challenges. Thirdly, policies for environmental protection can work as incentives for innovation and new technology, guiding economic activities towards a greater good, but also stimulating competition of ideas for the best solutions. Some of these changes in thinking about environmental protection are taking place within China.

The debate on the environmental dimension in relations between Africa and China has several dimensions. First, there is a domestic Chinese angle to the discussion: what level of importance is attributed to environmental protection? How much is concern for the environment part of other policy decisions and go beyond “mere” conservation efforts? Environmental concerns might or might not have an impact on economic policies, including energy policy. And it certainly also has potential implications for the foreign relations of a country that is an investor abroad; how much does this feature in China’s external relations with African states? Secondly, the African setting needs to be looked at with regards to domestic legislation, but also with regard to law enforcement; the latter more often than not, is the weak point, while legislation might be up to international standards. Thirdly, the international dimension of global norms and their “localisation” is important for discussions. How are norms accepted? Are they developed any further to fit the local context without being compromised? This special edition of *African East-Asian Affairs* aims to shed a light on some aspects of the debate, exploring the international dimension, local policy considerations in China, and the socialisation of norms and reconciliation of tensions between somewhat conflicting norms.

\*\*\*

Environmental awareness requires a longer-term vision – and is under enormous pressure when fast-increasing populations demand quick improvements to their living situations. However, environmental thinking is not for affluent societies only; those affected most by environmental degradation are usually poorer populations. Changes in climate with local effects, which is also a consequence of global

---

greenhouse gas emission, make adaptations to ways of life necessary. Climate change often exacerbates existing problems on the ground. Besides factors such as climate change due to greenhouse gas emission, demographic pressure is one driver for environmental degradation. Population growth means that more food needs to be produced from scarcer resources such as land and water. If scarce resources additionally become unusable because of pollution, the long-term perspectives for societies deteriorate. The challenge is thus to find quick-fix solutions to immediate problems that do not have an irreversible negative impact on future generations. This is, indeed, one definition of sustainability.

We can expect the emphasis and political dimensions in the internal discussion on environmental effects in developing countries to be different from industrialised societies for various reasons. First, the sense of urgency in economic growth is much more pronounced, job and wealth creation are an immediate need for large parts of the population (as illustrated in the research by Sternäng and Lundholm, 2011). Similarly, the need for secure energy supply is crucial for emerging economies with their developing industries. These aspects are often used as the guiding principle for governments' actions. Quite a substantial part of the debate on Chinese engagement in Africa and elsewhere regard the need to ensure the supply of commodities and energy as a major driver. Not least so, the discussion often includes references to historical milestones such as 1993, when China became a net oil importer, and 2007, which marks the year in which China became a net coal importer. Besides and beyond car traffic, the dependence on coal for energy production has large effects on environmental pollution in cities. Pollution levels present some pressure on the Chinese government to address health problems and compromised quality of life in Chinese cities (Burgess, 2012a; Li Wanxin et al, 2012). Chinese experiences with its unsustainable economic model could also give some clues on the effects of ignorance or denial towards mounting environmental challenges – and about changing perceptions. Nowadays, policies in China take environmental concerns into account more often than at earlier stages of development, including turning more attention towards the implementation level and cre-

---

ating incentives for provinces and municipalities to address environmental concerns (Esterhuysen, 2012a). The environmental awareness in China is mostly researched amongst students, showing an increasing awareness – with optimism waning. Expectations for the immediate future are dimmed and the hope that life will only get better is no longer there with regard to the environment (Wong, 2003).

While environmental challenges often have very profound local impacts, causes for environmental degradation *and* their effects are often beyond the local. Environmental protection and the reaction to environmental change are areas for international co-operation. China-Africa relations are to be included in this consideration. There are several dimensions to this: first, China's regulation for activities abroad, in other words, Chinese uni-lateral concerns. Secondly, bi-lateral relations also have an explicit environmental co-operation angle. And thirdly, multilateral engagement includes interactions in organisations with an environmental mandate.

At the uni-lateral level, environmental issues are also increasing in relevance in China's international relations, not least in its stance on climate change (see, for instance, Wei Liang, 2010), but also in debates about standards applied in co-operation. Besides the new opportunities for African countries and societies, much like any other outside assistance and co-operation, the Chinese contribution to development comes with challenges that need to be managed and mitigated. The challenges evolving from the engagement of Chinese actors, however, will be specific to the Chinese setting and have a lot to do with the development paths chosen in the "Middle Kingdom". China EXIM Bank, for instance, has introduced environmental standards in its lending practice. The environmental policy of EXIM Bank was already established in 2004 and it is publically available; it can thus also be used as a tool in advocacy by NGOs. Since 2007, environmental impact assessments are necessary in lending for Chinese infrastructure projects. Additionally, corporate social responsibility gets increasing attention from larger Chinese companies (Bosshard, 2008; Compagnon and Alejandro, 2013). The key challenge is thus not the lack of policy, but a lack of implementation or differences in interpre-

---

tation of what constitutes harmful behaviour and what does not. The onus to address environmental hazards is clearly predominantly on the African side; yet, China has responsibilities, being the more powerful element in the discussion (cf. Grimm, 2011).

With regards to the bi-lateral relations between African states and China, the environment also features in policies. Already in 2000, during the first FOCAC meeting in Beijing, environmental co-operation featured in the agreed action plan. Environmental co-operation between China and Africa's states was agreed upon in areas including pollution control, biodiversity conservation, protection of forests, fisheries and wildlife management. This general statement of intent, however, was not "operationalised" and not linked to specific targets. In all co-operation areas, problems have surfaced, be it in pollution control in the mining industry, the poaching of abalone and illegal fishing operations off the African coast, debates on rhino poaching and the role of Chinese criminal groups in it, or the accusation of illegal logging in African rainforests (cf. The CCS Weekly Briefing, various issues, also: Burgess, 2012b). Illegal activities by individuals do not devalue the overall partnership; doing so would indicate the use of different standards, as we do see weapon sales or oil exploitation or non-sustainable fishing by Europeans and North Americans. The value of a relationship, however, is in the way of handling those activities that are not covered by it. Nationally and internationally accepted standards need to be effectively policed and implemented. Specific international actions and multilaterally agreed targets help in formulating and focussing policies, not unlike the idea behind the Millennium Development Goals.

Undoubtedly, there is scope for mutual learning, including learning from negative examples in China (experiences that Chinese would probably also flag as things to learn *not* to replicate). There are, however, also examples from African countries that can provide inspiration for the Chinese side. African policy-makers can learn from China – and Chinese policy-makers can learn from experiences in African countries in terms of environmental protection, making the slogan of mutual learning and mutual benefit a real option in this topic area. Knowledge needs to be

---

---

broadened, if lessons are to be learned from another society's development trajectory.

\*\*\*

Thus far, development is fundamentally understood as being about human control over the environment. The very concept of development is that humankind is shaping the environment, making people less subject to natural hazard. In this rationale, it is logical that in many societies, a "natural state" is perceived as the situation to be overcome. Non-industrialised, agrarian societies base their livelihood on a life dependent on natural cycles and thus sensitive to environmental factors (which are sought to be somewhat managed, nevertheless). Contrary to this, early industrialisation seems to come with a "can do" attitude that rather sees environmental issues as yet another managerial challenge, thus posing problems with policies and perceptions (Hong Jiang, 2010). This was the case in industrialising Europe in the late nineteenth century (Birnie *et al*, 2009: 589), and seems to also be a pattern in today's emerging economies. In the post-industrial societies, environmental concerns are revived again and are linked to evolving value systems and matters of quality of life – and yet, these concerns in a post-industrial society are often concerned with a "repair" of the already lost natural riches. In some instances, however, the environmental pressure precedes any industrialisation efforts and thus comes more to the fore in policies.

Desertification and specific pressure on increasingly scarcer water resources in the African Sahel – and in some parts of North-eastern and Southern China (Esterhuysen 2012b) – are more immediate and are effects of changing climatic conditions. The contribution of Alioune Thiam in this edition of *African East-Asian Affairs* explores the challenges in combating desertification and looks into possible avenues for co-operation between China and African states. The contribution somewhat indirectly also addresses China's international responsibilities with at least two elements. First, China is considered a partner, given that it is a technologically more advanced partner than other developing countries. And secondly,

---

the international commitments, not least through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, are promises to deliver on. The article by Alioune Thiam on combatting desertification does not simply demand more finance and includes support for international mechanisms and for technological transfers.

The need for finance is an important aspect in international negotiations on combatting human contributions to climate change mitigation, and, increasingly importantly, supporting the adaptation to changes of the climate. Increased efforts in mitigation as well as adaptation to a changing climate are needed, as just recently illustrated by the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report discussed in March 2014. This also requires international finance for the poorest countries. Finance for climate change is an issue where China, too, faces increasing demands from third countries that are affected by climate change. A more detailed exploration of the international climate finance is provided by the contribution by Ye Yu. She is exploring the different financial channels and their shortcomings and looks at China's role in the international finance for climate change, both in bi-lateral and multi-lateral settings. Her conclusion is that "as a big emerging economy, China has to think and behave more globally earlier than others", which relates to responsibilities that are attributed to Beijing, whether Chinese officials agree with all the underlying assumptions or not. Globalisation is a factor to consider for both small and large developing countries, just as it is for developed nations.

Thirdly, Susan Keitumetse's contribution adds the dimension of community engagement to the need for conservation efforts. With the overall concern often focussing on economic growth and the control and exploitation of natural wealth, concerns of smaller and immediately affected groups, at least initially, might be regarded as less pressing. This is a challenge to any political system, whether it is authoritarian top-down or follows a basic democratic rationale; the challenge is particularly stark in the latter system if democracy is (wrongly) simply understood as majority rule, without respect for individual human rights or guarantees for minority groups and their specific beliefs or way of life. In the broader 'rush' towards

---

---

higher income for the general population, these minority groups can even be accused of holding society as a whole hostage with what will be attacked as “backward thinking” and preventing the majority to reap immediate gains from changes. As development changes are expected to be quick, the inclusion of communities thus arguably requires a particularly effort in developing countries.

\*\*\*

Sustainability – in the sense of respecting environmental limits to human activities – will have to be increasingly included in the co-operation between China and Africa. The interest in sustainability is driven by the Chinese government’s own interests of managing the reputation of Chinese actors in African states, which is linked to their contribution to the well-being of the population and the respect for local legislation. There are, however, also motives stemming from domestic political interests in China (for example addressing grievances of the population) and economic drivers for innovation. With this diversity of factors, more importance can be expected to be attributed to the topic.

## **Bibliography**

- Birnie, Patricia, Alan Boyle, and Catherine Redgewell (2009) *International Law and the Environment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bosshard, Peter (2008) “China’s Environmental Footprint in Africa”, *SAIIA China in Africa Policy Briefing*, No. 3, April 2008. Available at <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/academics/regional-studies/africa/pdf/BosshardWorkingPaper.pdf>
- Burgess, Meryl (2012a) “Thick air in Beijing – air pollution as a political issue”, *CCS Commentary*, 2 April 2012. Available at [www.sun.ac.za/ccs](http://www.sun.ac.za/ccs)
- Burgess, Meryl (2012b) “Rhino poaching and East Asian policies: Facts and debates”, *Policy Briefing*, December 2012, Stellenbosch: Centre for Chinese
-



## Studies.

- Compagnon, Daniel and Audrey Alejandro (2013) "China's External Environmental Policy: Understanding China's Environmental Impact in Africa and How It Is Addressed", in: *Environmental Practice* 15 (3): 220-227.
- Esterhuysen, Harrie (2012a) "Getting China's environmental policy moving stick by stick – now it is time for the carrot", *CCS Commentary*, 24 September 2012. Available at [www.sun.ac.za/ccs](http://www.sun.ac.za/ccs)
- Esterhuysen, Harrie (2012b) "Climate change in China: risks and responses", *Policy Briefing*, November 2012, Stellenbosch: Centre for Chinese Studies.
- Grimm, Sven (2011) "China as Africa's Ambiguous Ally – Why China has a responsibility for Africa's development", *Discussion Paper 1/2011*, Stellenbosch: Centre for Chinese Studies.
- Hong Jiang (2010) "Desertification in China: Problems with Policies and Perceptions", in: Kassiola, J./ Sujian Guo (eds): *China's Environmental Crisis – Domestic and Global Political Impacts and Responses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Li Wanxin, Jieyan Liu and Duoduo Li (2012) "Getting their voices heard: Three cases of public participation in environmental protection in China", *Journal of Environmental Management* 98: 65-72.
- Sternäng, Li and Cecilia Lundholm (2011) "Climate change and costs: investigating students' reasoning on nature and economic development", *Environmental Education Research*, 1-20.
- Wei Liang (2010) "Changing Climate? China's New Interest in Global Climate Change Negotiations", in Joel Kassiola and Sujian Guo (eds) *China's Environmental Crisis – Domestic and Global Political Impacts and Responses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
-

Wong, Koon-Kwai (2003) "The Environmental Awareness of University Students in Beijing, China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 12 (36): 519-536.