China: call to improve climate policies

With an energy consumption almost 5 times greater than the European Union, China is predicted to become the world’s largest greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter by 2010. Environmentalists suggest that it will be impossible to limit global warming if China does not make a formal commitment to emissions reductions. A new study points the way forward for China, suggesting ways to reduce China’s GHG emissions through national policies and measures and improve its environmental performance.

Population and economic growth since the 1990s mean that China has become a major GHG emitter, with a 14.7 per cent share of global emissions. But researchers from the Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik in Bonn, Germany found that Chinese GHG emissions policies have largely been the by-product of energy and transport policies.

In 2007, China took a major step towards tackling climate change by adopting a national strategy on climate change. The findings of this German study have implications for the implementation of this new strategy.

The key aim of Chinese energy policy is to cut energy costs and increase energy security, in order to overcome the negative effects of energy scarcity on economic growth. Although this leads to measures to increase energy efficiency and renewable energy supplies, these are not the main focus of the policy. The research suggests that improvements in environmental performance could be achieved by focusing on energy pricing and enforcement of the regulations. For example, the price of energy is disproportionately cheap, which weakens efforts to conserve energy.

China aims to produce ten per cent of its energy from renewable sources by 2020. However, China’s vast coal reserves are predicted to be a key source of energy for the next 160 years. Currently, coal provides 70 per cent of China’s electricity, and the vast reserves could marginalise the role of renewable energy sources. China’s heavy reliance on coal means that carbon capture and sequestration technologies could play a large part in reducing China’s CO₂ emissions.

China has strong national-level Government authorities dealing with climate-related policies. But a significant share of China’s GHG emissions originate from small-scale power-plants and industrial operations. Central authority control over policy implementation at the provincial or local level is weak due to insufficient incentives and conflicting interests. The Government and the private sector must introduce new forms of consultation and cooperation to improve environmental performance at the local level.

Public awareness of environmental issues is increasing, particularly in urban areas and increasingly the public are expressing their views on the environment. The government is encouraging media coverage of environmental issues, and events such as commitments to raise environmental standards in the run up to the 2008 Olympic Games are further raising awareness. However, the influence of public opinion on policy is still estimated to be low.

Short-term environmental degradation for economic gains is not sustainable, jeopardises stability and will hinder China’s longer-term growth. However, economic development and poverty alleviation are taking priority over environmental protection and climate policy. This research shows that there is considerable scope to further strengthen China’s climate governance.


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