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## China and UN Environmental Policy: Institutional Growth, Learning and Implementation

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**Abstract:** The focus of this article is on whether, and to what extent, the major UN bodies for environmental issues – the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD), and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) – have had any impact upon how China addresses and approaches its environmental issues. The UN bodies seem to have had some degree of day-to-day influence in a range of fields. UNEP has provided assistance in terms of policy formulation, technical assistance, training of personnel, public awareness and networking. The CSD seems to have made fewer practical and concrete contributions to China's environmental policies; it serves as an arena for learning and discussion of environmental issues, rather than as a body for policy implementation. The GEF, on the other hand, has been shown to be an important source for the implementation of environmental policies in China. As to China's contribution to environmental issues on the global arena, China does not seem to give priority to the international level of environmental policies. It is an active participant and stakeholder in international bodies such as UNEP and the CSD, but it is currently not providing any leadership. This is in clear contrast to domestic policy, where environmental issues are becoming increasingly important, attracting the attention of the media, policy-makers and the public. The article concludes that should this trend consolidate, establishing the management of the environment and natural resources as major issues in Chinese politics, it is reasonable to expect that China will in the future aim to play a leading role in environmental politics at the international level.

**Keywords:** China, UNEP, CSD, GEF, impact, environmental issues, domestic policy, international environmental politics

**Abbreviations:** ADB – Asian Development Bank; CSD – Commission on Sustainable Development; EPBs – Environmental Protection Bureaux; GEF – Global Environment Facility; IAs – implementing agencies; IBRD – International Bank for Reconstruction and

Development; MOF – Ministry of Finance; NDRC – National Development and Reform Commission; NEPA – National Environmental Protection Agency; NPC – National Peoples’ Congress; SEPA – State Environmental Protection Administration; SETC – State Economic and Trade Commission; UNDP – United Nations Development Programme; UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme.

## 1. Introduction: Purpose and Scope

This article considers the significance of the UN system for the development of China’s environmental policies. Recognition of the country’s own growing environmental problems has certainly provided an impetus for the development of environmental policies in China (see Heggelund, 2004). In this article, however, the focus is on whether, and to what extent, the major UN bodies for environmental issues – the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD), and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) – have had any impact upon how China addresses and approaches its environmental issues. The topic of international actors’ possibilities to influence domestic policies is highly relevant in a world where environmental issues are increasingly dealt with at the international level, and where the links between global causes and local, environmental effects are increasingly apparent. The article evaluates whether and how these UN bodies have made a difference to China’s environmental policies and identifies some areas for further improvement.

After a brief review of economic and environmental aspects of today’s China, and its historical relation to the UN, we discuss the impact of the global environmental conferences, primarily in terms of agenda setting and institutional growth on China’s environmental policies. The fourth section of this article addresses China’s relation to UNEP, whilst the fifth deals with the CSD. Both sections focus on assessing the extent to which these institutions have made any difference to China’s environmental policies, and, if so, in what respect. As one intention of the article is to reflect Chinese attitudes the sixth section deals with China’s experiences and perceptions of the GEF in terms of implementation of climate change and biodiversity projects. In the concluding section, we briefly evaluate and summarise the significance that these UN fora combined have had for China’s environmental policies. Since China has been considered a developing country in the three decades covered here, it is logical to see what kind of *assistance* these institutions have provided. However, given the country’s rapidly growing political and economic power, it also makes sense to discuss how China is able to *influence* these arenas – at least in the more recent phase.

Apart from secondary sources in Chinese and English, the article builds on extensive interviews with Chinese decision-makers over a period of many years. This ensures a nuanced picture of the situation; however, using interviews as a source might have methodological consequences. All interviews were conducted with a flexible approach which, according to Thagaard (2002, p. 85), ensures that the questions are relevant for the interviewee’s position. We have sought to follow the advice of Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 135) “not to restrict or predetermine the responses but at the same time cover the research concerns”. As for the most sensitive issues, we tried to approach them as carefully and gently as possible, often introducing them in an indirect fashion, which, as Rubin and Rubin argue (*ibid*, p. 119), gives the interviewees the option of whether to discuss them or not. Respect for the cultural norms of Asia has required us to ensure that nobody would ‘lose face’ if they were unwilling or uncomfortable about discussing a topic. The approach is hence appropriate, but with methodological implications that might render our findings less reliable. We took notes during the interviews, which were transcribed later. Recording the conversations would have

made the data more reliable, but the sensitivity of the issues made this difficult. Interviewees have been allowed to remain anonymous, for the same reason. This represents a dilemma: anonymous sources reduce the reliability of the data, but ethically sound research must protect the identity of the interviewees when the information they provide might be used against them (Thagaard, 2002, p. 24). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, we have accepted this as a necessary precaution to protect the persons we have met and talked with.

The article addresses the extent to which international (UN) institutions have contributed to increased environmental awareness and institution building in China – and whether they have ultimately contributed to a reduction of environmental problems. This of course touches upon the question of *effectiveness* of institutions (Miles et al., 2002). However, we will not enter into the methodological and theoretical discussions relating to causality, measuring effects etc., because the purpose of our article is to account for the situation in China, not to illustrate a theoretical concept.

## 2. China's Economic Growth, the Environment and the UN

### 2.1 ECONOMIC GROWTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Since the late 1970s and the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's new economic policy, China has been engaged in poverty alleviation through its policy of the Four Modernisations.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the lives of millions have been improved, as is evident in rapid economic growth and higher living standards. The country has succeeded in reducing the number of poor from 230 million in 1978 to 30 million in 2000.<sup>2</sup> For the first time, in 2003 per capita GDP in China exceeded USD 1,000, using the official exchange rate (China Statistics Press, 2005).<sup>3</sup> Per capita GNI amounted to USD 1,500 in 2004,<sup>4</sup> whereas in 2005 GDP per capita was Yuan 13,943, which is the equivalent of USD 1702.<sup>5</sup> However, average income is a misleading figure for describing the situation of the entire population. More than 135 million people in China still live on less than one US dollar a day (World Bank, 2006). Income disparity is increasing between the urban areas and more developed coastal provinces on the one hand, and the rural areas and the interior provinces of the west. The rural poor have an annual per capita income below USD 78.<sup>6</sup> They also often lack access to basic social and infrastructure services, which are typical components of development dilemmas. China's leadership is increasingly aware of the growing inequalities between the coastal and interior regions, and between urban and rural

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<sup>1</sup> The Four Modernisations: agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology.

<sup>2</sup> Chinese official figures for the population living below the Chinese poverty line (Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> However, the estimated level of income using purchasing power parity (PPP) is much higher. According to the CIA World Factbook, GDP per capita (PPP) amounted to USD 6,800 in 2005. See [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html).

<sup>4</sup> China is in the category of lower-middle-income economies (USD 876 – USD 3,465). The World Bank uses the Atlas method to measure gross national income (GNI – formerly referred to as GNP). The purpose of the Atlas conversion factor is to reduce the impact of exchange rate fluctuations in the cross-country comparison of national incomes. See [www.worldbank.org/](http://www.worldbank.org/) and World Bank, World Development Indicators database, 1 July, online at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS/0,,contentMDK:20535285~menuPK:192694~pagePK:64133150~piPK:64133175~theSitePK:239419,00.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The equivalent of USD 1702 is obtained using the average exchange rate of the 2005 period. Data from the Asian Development Bank, Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries, China, People's Republic of: [http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Key\\_indicators/2006/pdf/PRC.pdf](http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Key_indicators/2006/pdf/PRC.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> RMB 625, Office of the UN Resident Co-ordinator, Millennium Development Goals.

areas. This is illustrated by the leadership's decision following the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 to focus on the rural poor in the country.<sup>7</sup> Economic growth, social stability and development are main priorities for China's policy-makers. In order to meet the challenges, the Chinese leadership redefined the national development policy goal in 2003 and emphasises the need to build a moderately prosperous (*xiaokang*) society for all by 2020 (UNDP, 2005), in which the wealth created by economic development is broadly distributed.

The Chinese economy has been among the fastest growing in the world for quite some time, and China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. Nonetheless, economic growth over the past three decades has not come without sacrifice: in the late 1980s, estimates of the cost of environmental destruction ranged from 8% to 13% of China's total GDP (Harrington, 2005, p. 108) and it has been argued that economic growth is largely to blame for the continuing degeneration of the country's environment and depletion of natural resources. Overall, China appears to be most preoccupied with economic growth. Literature about China and its environment is plentiful: on environmental policy-making, implementation of environmental policy, description of pollution problems and the effects of this on nature, society and the economy (Smil, 1993; World Bank, 1997; Shapiro, 2001; Economy, 2004) and environmental regulation and enforcement (Ma & Ortolano, 2000). The literature has often painted a gloomy picture of the state of the environment in modern China and has shaped the image of its environmental attitudes. Chinese leaders, increasingly aware of the need to halt the negative trend, have set up a large environmental apparatus for that purpose. Environmental laws and regulations are frequently issued. Enforcement is lax, however, and this, in addition to the general low environmental awareness among the people at large, is a major reason for the lack of success so far (Heggelund, 2004).

## 2.2 THE ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION-MAKING SYSTEM IN CHINA

China has established a large bureaucracy within the various commissions and ministries involved in environmental policy-making. The State Council – China's cabinet – consists of representatives from all the ministries, commissions and administrative agencies. Its main role is to implement the laws and policies of the National Peoples' Congress (NPC), also called China's Parliament. However, the State Council also drafts bills and forwards them to the NPC for approval. After the NPC Standing Committee passes a law, the State Council issues administrative edicts that provide specific details necessary for implementation.<sup>8</sup> China also has a number of environmental laws and regulations.<sup>9</sup>

The State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the key bodies involved in environmental policy-making in China that are also relevant to UN bodies discussed here.

The *State Environmental Protection Administration* (SEPA) is the main administration in charge of environmental policy-making and implementation. SEPA suggests environmental policies that are generally legitimised by being included into statutes or legally binding

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<sup>7</sup> Wen 2003.

<sup>8</sup> In addition, national departments can issue 'measures' and 'notifications' in order to clarify a law. Examples used to clarify environmental laws include regulations (*fagui*), decrees (*guizhang*), orders (*mingling*), provisional measures (*zhanxing banfa*), measures (*banfa*), decisions (*jueding*), resolutions (*jueyi*), directives (*zhishi*), notifications (*tongzhi*), and administrative circulars (*tongbao*). (See Ma & Ortolano, 2000, footnote 6, p. 31.)

<sup>9</sup> There are basically four important actors in the environmental law-making arena in China: SEPA, the NPC, the State Council (SC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). (Ma & Ortolano, 2000, pp. 13–18.)

administrative regulations. It emerged strengthened from the restructuring process in 1998, when it was raised from agency to administration and received a large increase in its responsibilities<sup>10</sup>. SEPA is still not a full ministry, nor a full member of the State Council, but the SEPA administrator has nevertheless been given ministerial status. The agency is in charge of *biodiversity* work in China under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and works closely with UNEP. The locally based Environmental Protection Bureaux (EPBs) are important players in the provinces, municipalities, districts and counties, as their main task is to implement environmental regulations. EPBs are subordinate both to SEPA and the provincial, municipal and district governments, and conflicts of interest may be a consequence of this dual relationship. Environmental policy instructions are issued by SEPA, while their main source of funding comes from polluting discharge fees as well as from the governments at their respective levels (provincial, municipal, district and county).

The *National Development and Reform Commission* (NDRC) is the commission in charge of economic development policy in China and holds responsibility for developing and implementing the Five-Year Plans.<sup>11</sup> A key body with regard to incorporating sustainable development policies into overall policy-making in China, it is also responsible for developing energy and climate policies related to issues of economic development. NDRC representatives participate in the CSD sessions; in 2005 vice-chairperson Du Ying of the NDRC headed the delegation. In 2006, the former head of SEPA, Xie Zhenhua, was appointed vice chair of NDRC. Xie, on the ministerial level, will oversee the environment and energy conservation portfolio.

The *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* is in charge of China's foreign policy, and is responsible for work relating to international organisations and agreements through the Department of Treaty and Law. It ensures that China's political and economic interests are served in international negotiations, and representatives from the ministry participate in sessions of the CSD.

The *Ministry of Finance* (MOF) with its Department of International Co-operation is a window through which much of the international funding for environmental work goes. The Department of International Co-operation manages technical assistance from multilateral development banks (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc.) as well as foreign flows of funds from multilateral and bilateral sources. The MOF is the political and *operational focal point* for the GEF in China: it is in charge of GEF funding activities and monitors the performance of all GEF projects in the country. Under the technical guidance of SEPA, it also sets GEF priorities/criteria (Heggelund et al., 2005).

Other important actors in environmental work in China are the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, and the State Forestry Administration.

#### IMPORTANT POINTS REGARDING CHINA'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE UN

The relationship between the UN and China has gradually evolved and matured after China took its seat in the UN Security Council in 1971. In the beginning, China identified with developing countries through the similarities in their historical experiences and common challenges, but it has over time increasingly emphasised its role as an important country

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<sup>10</sup> SEPA took over responsibilities from the abolished Ministry of Forestry (which became the Forestry Administration) for biodiversity, nature reserve management, wetland conservation; received increased rights to control marine pollution two miles from shore from the State Oceanographic Administration; as well as for effects from mining, and assumed a more important role in influencing nuclear energy developments. (Jahiel, 1998, p. 774.)

<sup>11</sup> The Five-Year Plan (*jihua*) is now called the Five-Year Programme (*guihua*), which indicates that the targets should be considered more as guidance than as mandatory goals, and more in line with a market-based economy.

within the developing world (Choedon, 2005, pp. 39-40). Since the 1980s, China has joined a large number of international organisations, and signed several international treaties. This indicates that China intends to play by the rules of international diplomacy, and is keen to be regarded as a responsible member of the international community (Chan, 2005, p. 61; People's Daily, 2002, September 30). This is related to the country's rising status in the world, in both economic and political terms. Both the scope and the depth of engagement have increased in recent years, as a result of this and of China's entry into other, related fields of global politics.

However, China scholars generally agree that the country has been sceptical to international regimes (Economy, 2001), and has been cautious towards any policies that might infringe national sovereignty or questions that concern the internal affairs of states. The government seems determined not to engage in actions that may allow other actors to enter the domain of China's domestic affairs in any sense. This is illustrated both by its attitudes towards UN peacekeeping operations, where China prefers a traditional model based on separating forces, monitoring ceasefire, and discouraging hostilities, rather than more complex tasks like restoration of government and transition to democracy (Choedon, 2005, p. 42, 44); and by its attitude towards the UN Convention on International Watercourses, where China and a few other upstream states were "evidently reluctant to surrender whatever leverage their position on an international watercourse conferred upon them" (McCaffrey & Sinjela 1998, p. 104). Respect for sovereignty has been an important guiding principle for China in international politics and within the UN.

### **3. The Significance of the Global Conferences on Development and Environment**

There can be no doubt that the three UN global conferences – Stockholm 1972, Rio 1992 and Johannesburg 2002 – have fuelled growing environmental awareness in China, providing much of the impetus for environmental policy-making in the country. China's participation at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 introduced the country to the global environmental discussion and marked the beginning of environmental discourse at the policy level in China.<sup>12</sup> Its position at that conference was defensive, laying the blame for the problems on the West. China did not take part in the voting that affirmed the consensus of the final declaration of the conference (Ross, 1998, p. 811). However, there was also recognition of China's own growing environmental problems, and consequently the first national conference on the environment was convened in 1973. The meeting concluded that China must immediately begin to pay attention to environmental protection. The State Council later approved the suggested regulations from the meeting, which for the first time set out guidelines for environmental protection. These regulations formed the basis for the initial phase of environmental work in China, and environmental protection agencies were created at both central and local levels. Still, the state of the environment continued to deteriorate rapidly. Even though increased attention was being paid to environmental issues, the environment was by no means a priority. China's open-door policy and economic reforms of the late 1970s exacerbated pollution rates and hiked the consumption of natural resources in the country. In short, it seems clear that the Stockholm Conference had an agenda-setting effect and spurred institutional growth in China, but in

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<sup>12</sup> According to Qu Geping, former administrator of NEPA, the Conference marked a turning-point in China's environmental record. See *China Environmental Yearbook* 1990.

practice this was primarily a matter of curing immediate problems that imposed health hazards for people (Jahiel, 1994, p. 79), rather than establishing an extensive policy area.

The 1980s saw continued environmental awareness as well as institution building, although other factors than the global conferences were involved here. Still, as we will discuss later, the role of UNEP in creating awareness about environmental problems and providing assistance as well as increased understanding may certainly have had an effect. For example, Kaniaru (2000, p. 235) suggests that the UNEP guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) have been used as a foundation for the Chinese EIA in the Environmental Protection Law from 1989. The important point is that the process had by then gained momentum and China's leaders started to realise that this was a real problem – putting all the blame on the Western capitalist system did not help much to alleviate their own very real environmental problems (Heggelund, 2003).

The 1992 Rio UNCED can be seen as an environmental turning-point for China. In an interview in 2002, the director of the Administrative Centre for China's Agenda 21 stated: "China is a beneficiary of the Rio 92; the concept of sustainable development has been good to China." There is hardly any doubt that the view of the environment and development as two sides of the same coin made it easier for China – as well as the rest of the G-77 – to take a more constructive position. As remarked by Najam (2005), from Stockholm to Rio for the South was a step from "contestation to participation." Positioning itself prior to the conference as a 'leader' and spokesperson for the developing countries China hosted a ministerial conference from which the *Beijing Declaration* was issued.<sup>13</sup> The most important outcome from the ensuing UNCED was that China integrated Agenda 21 into its Ninth National Five-year Plan and adopted the sustainable development concept as a national policy at all levels of government. It set up an administrative centre (ACCA 21) in 1993 to implement Agenda 21, and a top-level advisory body – China Council for International Co-operation on Environment and Development (CCICED) – in 1992, "to further strengthen co-operation and exchange between China and the international community in the field of environment and development."<sup>14</sup> In addition, UNCED participation was a way for China to regain acceptance within the international community, as it had become somewhat isolated following the crack-down on the student demonstration in Tiananmen in 1989 (Harrington, 2005, pp. 110–112).

The long-term effects on China of participation in the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 remain to be seen. Respondents state that follow-up work has included a greater focus on safe drinking water, and prevention of HIV and AIDS. China was highly critical to the lack of implementation of Agenda 21 and what were seen as broken promises in terms of both technology transfer and development assistance, and underlined "the common but differentiated responsibilities" of the North and the South. Still, China stressed that all countries must assume responsibility and work together, confirming their stronger *engagement* over time (Heggelund, 2003; Najam, 2005). The process of preparations also illustrate that China takes these Conferences seriously. The preparatory process involved 16 ministries, and academics and green NGOs were also consulted. Although the role of the latter may have been more symbolic, it indicates that the Chinese learn from the practice of

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<sup>13</sup> The Beijing Declaration asserts that poverty, underdevelopment and overpopulation are the main causes of environmental degradation; the developed countries have the main responsibility for the environmental problems facing the world; the developing countries have the right to develop.

<sup>14</sup> On the China Council are Ministerial or Vice Ministerial officials, several eminent Chinese experts and senior international figures. The Chairman is Zeng Peiyan, Vice Premier of the State Council. In addition, several task forces have been established, with both Chinese and international experts (<http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/dlam/>).

other states. Chinese officials have stated in recent years (in interviews) that it is desirable to include more NGOs in the sustainable development work of the country. China was well represented at WSSD with a delegation of more than 200 persons, and about 50–100 participants came from environmental Government-Organised NGOs (so-called GONGOS) and NGOs (Wang Yongchen, 2002). For the environmental NGOs, participation at the WSSD proved useful in several ways not least experiencing the open debate between ministers from different countries was an eye-opener for some. They also learned about the importance of being informed, and the working methods of NGOs from other countries. China's NGOs have expanded their agendas from focusing mainly on environmental awareness rising, and have become engaged in infrastructure projects like the dams to be constructed on the Nu River in Yunnan province.<sup>15</sup> Chinese leaders also stress the importance of the *Programme of Action*,<sup>16</sup> the policy document that emerged following the WSSD. This document is more binding than the White Paper issued after UNCED in 1992 and stands as the blueprint for future work on sustainable development in China.<sup>17</sup> When it became clear that environmental problems and depletion of natural resources were putting a strain on economic growth, the government began to take further action, reflected in the Programme of Action, a process that was doubtless also an effect of the international conferences on the environment.

In sum, even though the country's own environmental problems have provided a growing impetus for environmental actions by the Chinese leadership, in particular in the last decade, the international environmental conferences have spurred this process substantially. This conclusion is based upon statements by and interviews with high-level Chinese officials (Qu, 2002), Vice-minister Wang Yuqing, (SEPA) as well as the literature (Jahiel, 1994; Jahiel, 1998). Respondents have opined that the conferences should continue, as they are viewed as the only way to solve global problems. To an increasing extent, China has become open to new ideas and various forms of assistance internationally. Thus, there can be no doubt that these conferences have been instrumental in creating more awareness as well institutional growth, thereby contributing to enhance the significance of global issues. China is starting to realise that it is in its own interest to address these issues as well. In this sense Stockholm was the agenda setter, UNCED has been described as a turning point, and perhaps the most important long-term effect of the WSSD for China was the more open and inclusive attitude towards civil society.

#### **4. Arenas for Learning and Assistance – but Increasingly also for Influence?**

##### **4.1 ORGANISATION OF UNEP-RELATED WORK IN CHINA**

SEPA is the focal point for UNEP in China. UNEP's major function is of course to assess and monitor global situations and formulate policies. However, it also has an important function in assisting developing countries to formulate policies, as well as providing assistance in connection with other specific environmental problems. SEPA has taken most of the responsibility with UNEP, and other relevant agencies in China are intended to communicate with UNEP through SEPA. According to the opinions of our respondents, this was considered

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<sup>15</sup> Chinese environmental NGOs have been actively lobbying the government to stop the construction of dams on the Nu River.

<sup>16</sup> *China's Programme of Action for Sustainable Development in China in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century* was approved by the State Council in January 2003. (See Heggelund, 2003.)

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with SDPC (now NDRC) official, October 2002.

to be an effective way of organising the work.<sup>18</sup> On the whole, our respondents claimed that there were no significant coordination problems among the actors involved.

## 4.2 MAJOR IMPORTANCE OF UNEP FOR CHINA

On the basis of our interviews, we feel that China has a generally good relationship with UNEP, and this has been so since UNEP was established in the early 1970s. It may well be that especially in the early period one reason for this good relationship was that UNEP was located in Nairobi, which served to boost the legitimacy of UNEP as well as environmental issues in China and other developing countries (Najam, 2005). As noted above, the Stockholm Conference was important for the environmental agenda in China, as there had been no environmental protection apparatus in existence before then. China was quick to establish a foreign mission in UNEP, and there is no doubt that UNEP played an important role – both through lawyers and through scientists – in establishing subsequent domestic environmental institutions in China. UNEP also appears to have contributed to strengthening SEPA's position within the Chinese government. The creation of a national framework for biosafety, which has been sponsored by the GEF and UNEP and has been running since the late 1990s, allowed SEPA to challenge the dominance of other ministries, especially the Ministry of Agriculture, in domestic regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMO). SEPA took a leading role in the framework drafting process, although it has not been able to establish itself as a lead regulatory agency for GMO (Falkner, 2006, p. 19). As the main coordinator between UNEP and other ministries, SEPA's leverage is increased and its position strengthened vis-à-vis other ministries, which somewhat counterbalances its lack of formal ministerial status. Also other international environmental agreements, such as the Montreal Protocol, have enabled SEPA to extend its domain (Zhao & Ortolano, 2003, p. 717).

The following functions of UNEP have been mentioned as particularly useful to China.

### 4.2.1 *Training of Personnel and Policy-making*

UNEP has given strong support for training of personnel as well as guidelines for policy-making. Interestingly, however, China has benefited most from the UNEP division in Paris, in particular in relation to its heavy industrial pollution. This UNEP branch appears to be considered among the most effective of the various UNEP institutions (Andresen & Rosendal, forthcoming 2007). UNEP also co-organises events with SEPA: for instance, the two hosted a workshop on the phase-out of methyl bromide in September 2003, where a national plan for the reduction of its use was released (see People's Daily Online, 2003, 18 September; Asia Pulse/XIC, 2003). According to Zhao & Ortolano (2003, p. 713), the national plan, or 'China's strategy framework for methyl bromide control', was worked out with the support of UNEP, but, as China has not ratified the Copenhagen Amendments to the Montreal Protocol, it is not eligible for further financial assistance for demonstration projects. In 2001, Chinese and UNEP scientists jointly formulated a plan to reduce the risk of severe floods on the Yangtze River (see People's Daily Online, 2001, October 14), and UNEP has carried out studies on the river after the devastating floods in 1998. In 2002, UNEP and the GEF sponsored the implementation of the National Biosafety Framework with approximately USD

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<sup>18</sup> This is a common way to organise work in China: for example, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) is in charge of climate change, coordinating the work and input of the many other institutions involved.

1 million (see People's Daily Online, 2003, October 30). UNEP thus appears to play an active part in the formulation of specific policies in China.

#### 4.2.2 *Public Awareness*

Again, the global conferences are important, but these are short-term events and the effects may evaporate swiftly. However, it appears that UNEP has been able to sustain and strengthen this momentum in China through various mechanisms, including high-level visits from UNEP to China as well as from China to UNEP. As an illustration, in 2005 high-ranking UNEP officials visited China three times. This of course increases the visibility of UNEP as well as of environmental issues, particularly among Chinese leaders. Interviewees also pointed out that some government agencies use a 'foreign voice' (like UNEP and other multilateral institutions) to increase attention to domestic issues. It appears that this has been helpful in obtaining multilateral funding as well as directing attention to critical issues.<sup>19</sup> One concrete example is the 1997 World Bank Report, *2020: Clear Water, Blue Skies: China's Environment in the New Century*, which released the information that China's economic losses amounted to 8% of GDP due to environmental degradation (World Bank, 1997). SEPA wished to make this figure known, but since it was only an agency (NEPA at the time), attracting the same amount of attention would have been difficult without the authority and legitimacy provided by the World Bank.

Some of our respondents pointed out that environmental awareness is still far too low at the local level. However, UNEP also recognises the advances in environmental issues that have been accomplished in China, and creates publicity for these achievements. For example, the former director of SEPA, Xie Zhenhua, was awarded the Sasakawa Prize in 2003 (Xinhua, 2004),<sup>20</sup> and Shenzhen City was among the winners of the 'Global 500' prize in 2002 (People's Daily Online, 2002, June 5). Aohanqi County in Inner Mongolia was also awarded the same prize that year. In 2003, China, amongst others, was awarded the UNEP National Ozone Unit award for its efforts to meet the requirements of the Montreal Protocol (see UNEP, 2003). In this way, UNEP not only provides advice and direction for environmental policies of China, but also acknowledges achievements made at the local as well as national level, thereby helping to raise public awareness of environmental issues and of China's efforts to combat the problems.

#### 4.2.3 *Technical Assistance*

China has also received some technical assistance for projects from UNEP. Although it is not a funding agency, sometimes money has been made available to organise small-scale projects. For example, UNEP and SEPA have set up a Joint Centre for an Environmental Information Network intended to take on several important roles, including a Millennium Ecosystem Assessment for western China, where also the Yangtze originates (see People's Daily Online, 2001, October 14). In 1993, the China Ozone Information Clearinghouse, a body within SEPA (then called NEPA), was created partly with UNEP funds. Zhao and Ortolano (2003, p. 719) suggest that the Clearinghouse "greatly improved data management and reporting

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with government official Beijing, November 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Xie Zhenhua had to step down in December 2005 following the chemical spill accident in the Songhua River. Zhou Shengxian, former director of the State Forestry Administration, was appointed new SEPA minister. (Li, 2005 and Xinhua, 2005)

systems, and enhanced information exchange within China and between China and international organizations.” UNEP also offered assistance to China after the pollution disaster in the Songhuajiang River in Harbin (Martiniussen, 2005).

#### 4.2.4 *Networking*

Due to its long-standing good relations with UNEP, China has been able to use UNEP as a networking agent towards other relevant international environmental institutions. Considering the magnitude and complexity of this web of institutions, this has certainly been useful to China – especially before it became a major actor on the international scene.

However, it should be noted that UNEP is not only important to China – China is important to UNEP too. The opening of a UNEP Beijing Office indicates that China is a priority area for UNEP involvement, since China and Russia are the only two countries where UNEP has established offices. At the signing of the Agreement in May 2003, UNEP’s then Executive Director Klaus Topfer said that “UNEP has been continuously paying great attention and rendering concrete support to China’s environmental protection” and described the office as “a very important step” to advance the cooperation between UNEP and China (see People’s Daily Online, 2003, May 30). The establishment of the office signals that UNEP recognises the importance of China’s environmental protection work as well as the significance of China’s actions for the rest of Asia. According to a press release (UNEP, 2003), the office is to work together closely with SEPA as well as other ministries, international agencies and NGOs, and it will contribute to the implementation of “programmes in environmental assessment, law, education and training, management, technology transfer and innovation and natural disaster prevention.” It seems as if the office, and thereby UNEP, is intended to have a significant and influential position in connection with China’s environmental policies, and serve not only as an advisory body but also implementing and managing projects.

The significance of UNEP in providing advice and assistance through its expertise and experience was also emphasised by our interviewees. In the past China has usually been provided such assistance through bilateral relations, but more recently emphasis is also paid to multilateral channels, and UNEP is important in the gradually more open Chinese society. It was stressed that UNEP is the leading agency in the UN system for the environment. As an emerging big power on the international scene, China also wants to play a more significant role in such international forums. No longer satisfied with the role of being only a *recipient*, to an increasing degree it also wants to be heard and have more *influence* on events internationally. This was seen in the context of opening up to the outside world through the process of globalisation, making China much more involved in the international community.

### 4.3 THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: SHORTCOMINGS AND REFORM

One major purpose of this article is to reflect China’s perceptions of UNEP, the CSD and the GEF. From being an observer and a somewhat passive nation in a learning process, China has increasingly come to see itself as a stakeholder in international organisations such as UNEP and the CSD. And that means it has also developed views on how UNEP, the CSD and the GEF function. These perceptions illustrate that China takes the UN organisations seriously. In this article we wish to convey some of the respondents’ reflections on UNEP, the CSD and the GEF. It is essential to make known the attitudes of key Chinese actors, as we believe that China will take on a more proactive role in global environmental affairs in the future. The

sections on the UNEP, CSD and GEF therefore report from the interviews directly, as we consider the interviews to have intrinsic value. Further analysis of these responses in relation to the UN influence on China will be carried out in forthcoming work on these issues.

Although UNEP is *formally* the leading agency in the UN system for environment, our respondents felt that today's UNEP cannot meet the challenges of global environmental issues very effectively: reform of UNEP is therefore necessary. One suggestion for reform is to make UNEP into a *specialised agency*. The idea is that this will strengthen the role and authority of UNEP, and perhaps also strengthen its financial basis. When asked about this, our interviewees replied that opinion differed, but that China in principle is not against the idea. However, most indicated that more time was necessary before making any final decision. On the issue of an overarching UN reform, it was similarly stressed that thorough discussions would have to take place before far-reaching decisions were taken. Benefits and potential costs would have to be identified. Respondents also stressed: "We don't need a drastic change." Thus, it did not seem that the Chinese were in a hurry on these questions – probably much to the disappointment of Norway and other 'pushers' who also support the formation of a World Environmental Organisation (WEO).

The interviewees suggested that there are several factors that currently reduce the significance of UNEP in global environmental affairs. Not surprisingly, they stressed that UNEP does not have enough financial resources compared to other relevant UN organisations. More specifically, they underlined UNEP's weak and uncertain financial mechanisms. The current trend in UNEP financing is shrinking regular budget, stagnating level of the Environment Fund, and increasing earmarked trust fund contributions (see Engfeldt, 2001, p. 19). This financing was, according to our respondents, not sufficient to support the broad mandate of UNEP. They agreed that as a specialised agency it might get more funding – but, interestingly, interviewees also voiced doubts that turning it into a specialised agency, or even a World Environmental Organisation, and getting more funding, would necessarily solve all UNEP's problems: it was not adequately equipped to deal with the pressing environmental and development problems of the developing countries. Some interviewees drew a parallel between UNEP and the discussions on making China's SEPA into a full ministry, and expressed the need for greater political will as the key to solving some of the issues that plague both UNEP and SEPA. Others stressed that it was more important to implement the Rio principles: all countries should realise these commitments, although the differing concerns of North and South were emphasised. Also China's solidarity with the G-77 was pointed out as an important factor for its stance on a World Environmental Organisation, as most of the G-77 countries are opposed to the idea.

Some interviewees also claimed that UNEP's Nairobi location was a factor that may have contributed to lack of qualified personnel. Moreover, further reform of UNEP's working structure was listed as one of the key challenges ahead. It was suggested that UNEP should concentrate on a few areas only: currently the range of issues is too broad, so UNEP is not able to deliver well on all of them. They also stated that the typical 'UNEP's weakness' is not something that concerns only UNEP. Rather, it was regarded as a general weakness of the UN system, and so China supports reform of the UN system. This was one reason why, at present, bilateral cooperation is considered more effective than multilateral cooperation. Rather directly, one interviewee declared: "the UN is viewed as a talking mechanism, and the way of functioning is not efficient enough."

In clarifying and narrowing its mandate, UNEP should tailor its working programme to be more closely related to the urgent needs of the developing countries. As it is now, developing countries are not sufficiently integrated into the decision-making process, according to our respondents. In general it was claimed that there is a need to improve the decision-making process at UNEP, as the perception is that it is difficult to get sufficiently

thorough discussions on important issues in the Governing Council. The Council must be made into a real policy-making body in which member-state participation is more meaningful. The then upcoming selection of the new Executive Director of UNEP was viewed as a challenge, but our respondents did not wish to comment specifically on the candidates.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. The CSD: A Mixed Picture

The contact point in China for the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) is the ACCA 21, China's Administrative Centre for Agenda 21. Key bodies are the NDRC and the Ministry of Science and Technology, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a key supporting agency, and is also part of China's delegations to sessions of the CSD. After the year 2000 a lead group was established in the NDRC in order to elaborate a Chinese CSD strategy. Other relevant agencies have provided input to this process.

Perceptions concerning the CSD were somewhat mixed, and both its strengths as well as its shortcomings were underlined. On a more positive note it was seen as a good opportunity to interact with other countries. China prepared a report to the CSD-14 in May 2006, and the preparation and compilation of the report was viewed as very useful. More generally, the CSD has reinforced the sustainable development approach introduced in Rio. The CSD is also seen as a good balance point between the three pillars stressed at the WSSD (social, economic and environment). The interviewees were in favour of strengthening the CSD to enable it to play a more important role in enhancing environmental cooperation. Interviews mentioned the method of alternating the themes of the meetings was seen as positive, and that the changes in the process result in the CSD attracting more attention than before. It was also considered positive that the CSD does not have to get into the details of discussing texts, as is the case in traditional negotiating processes. The more informal atmosphere implies that different voices can be heard, and this in turn is seen as an opportunity for China to learn, and to state its opinions. Thus, even though CSD documents are not legally binding, the CSD was seen as a good forum for learning, for promoting the consolidation of international community, as well as for communicating the 'special circumstances' of China to other countries.

However, also more negative viewpoints emerged. Respondents suggested that the CSD has too many missions, resulting in fewer achievements. Moreover, it was pointed out that the procedures hamper the efficiency of the CSD, with lengthy negotiation on governance and language, the need for everyone to agree on a paragraph and the long time it takes to reach agreement, and the negotiations every second year. Respondents were also critical to the new seven two-year cycles in the CSD where the topics are decided for the coming decade; this was deemed too rigid and did not allow for taking up new potential issues.<sup>22</sup> All in all, these factors make the CSD less dynamic than some desired. It was stressed that several

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<sup>21</sup> On March 1 2006, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced the shortlist of candidates for the position of UNEP Executive Director. The list included: Børge Brende, Norway's former Minister of the Environment; Carlos Manuel Rodriguez Echandi, Minister of Environment and Energy, Costa Rica; Shafqat Kakakhel (Pakistan), UNEP Deputy Executive Director; Rajendra Pachauri (India), Director-General of the Energy and Resource Institute; and Achim Steiner (Germany), then Director-General of IUCN. On March 15 2006, Steiner was appointed Executive Director of UNEP. See [http://www.iisd.ca/coming\\_goings/appointments.htm](http://www.iisd.ca/coming_goings/appointments.htm).

<sup>22</sup> At its eleventh session, the Commission on Sustainable Development decided that its multi-year programme of work beyond 2003 would be organized on the basis of seven two-year cycles, with each cycle focusing on selected thematic clusters of issues, as set out in the table on the CSD website. [http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd11/CSD\\_multyyear\\_prog\\_work.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd11/CSD_multyyear_prog_work.htm)

chairpersons have attempted to make the CSD more dynamic, but that they have had to follow procedures and had not really been successful in their endeavours.

In addition, much of the criticism concerned the rich states rather than the CSD as such. Since Rio, developing countries had agreed to join in global environmental cooperation according to the principle of common but differentiated responsibility. In the Chinese view, this means that poverty alleviation is still most important – but financial transfers were far too small and it was stressed that the industrialised/developed countries should take more responsibility. Respondents were disappointed that most countries did not meet the Rio commitments. In short, they were frustrated by the absence of implementation of Agenda 21, not least the lack of transfer of technology. Some also underlined that the CSD agenda was too broad and that the countries of the North tended to emphasise environment at the expense of development. However, they were reluctant to single out any specific developed country as being ‘negative’. It was acknowledged that implementation was a national-level responsibility, but assistance was too weak. The Montreal Protocol Fund was noted as a model to be used elsewhere as well –experiences with that financial mechanism had been very positive. On the other hand, mention was also made of problems among developing countries in the CSD. Although the importance of the G-77/China alliance was noted, it was also stressed that one reason for the problems facing the CSD were the considerable differences in the South in terms of level of development and therefore in their need for assistance.

## 5.1 CAN CHINA INFLUENCE UNEP AND THE CSD?

We also asked respondents about China’s influence on UN bodies, including UNEP and the CSD. In their opinion, China is still weak when it comes to influencing the UN bodies, for several reasons. One is ‘technical’: respondents opined that the language skills of diplomats/participants are weak, and they did not always comprehend the meaning of terminology used in texts. Moreover, Chinese officials have not generally had much in-depth study of global policies, and that influences their choices: they might feel that certain concepts are not good, but are unsure about how to change them. The authorities are aware of the changes and have provided training for staff in various ministries, for instance in public policy and management. It was said that China cannot rely on the G-77 to formulate its voice in UN, as that would not be compatible with the country’s scale. Some also stressed that China must be better prepared with regard to foreign policy issues.

However, there is a big difference between the attention paid to global environmental issues and national-level ones. UNEP is an example that illustrates this. According to our interviewees, China has not yet made any major efforts to influence the UNEP Governing Council. At present, the top priority for China concerns the UN Security Council, and issues such as peacekeeping and trade issues are given priority. In the context of foreign issues, UNEP is not seen as a priority, although interviewees thought this would change in the future. On the domestic side, however, UNEP and national-level environmental challenges have been given high priority.

## 6. Implementation: The Role of the GEF in China

While the global conferences as well as UNEP and the CSD have proven to be important elements for China in developing its environmental policies and institution building, most observers today agree that *implementation* is the key to global environmental governance. Thus far, the international community has devoted considerable political and institutional

energy to adopting ambitious goals and creating an ever-growing number of multilateral environmental agreements, known as MEAs, while less attention has been paid to the more costly and also complex process of implementation – clearly acknowledged at the WSSD. However, one main instrument has been established, the Global Environmental Facility, and it provides funding to meet the incremental costs<sup>23</sup> of projects in developing countries that promote sustainable development and benefit the global environment. Projects that receive GEF funding all relate to one or more of six complex global environmental issues: biodiversity, climate change, international waters, land degradation, the ozone layer, or persistent organic pollutants (POPs). GEF projects are managed by its three implementing agencies, IAs, UNEP, UNDP, and the World Bank, whilst there are seven so-called executive agencies that contribute to the management and enactment of the projects.<sup>24</sup> China is the biggest recipient of all GEF members. Altogether, the GEF has allocated nearly USD 467 million to China (Good, 2004),<sup>25</sup> divided among 42 entirely Chinese-based projects, of which 23 are related to climate policy (energy efficiency, renewable energy projects etc). The total number of projects with Chinese involvement is 55, including multinational projects.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, more than USD 300 million has been spent on climate change projects, accounting for 70% of all project funding. Biodiversity comes second with 15%, while the remainder has been channelled into projects on international waters and land degradation (Good, 2004, SEPA – GEF office). The important question, however, is whether the GEF has been useful when it comes to implementation of environmental policies in China – and if so, why or why not, and what are the major challenges? Here it should be noted that most of these observations are based on *Chinese perceptions*, and that the focus is mainly on projects related to climate and biodiversity, not enabling activities (see Appendix).

GEF funding has been important in dealing with some of China's environmental problems.<sup>27</sup> The GEF mechanism represents an opportunity for 'fresh' and earmarked funds, and applicants need not compete with other worthy causes for domestic Chinese resources. Our respondents indicated that the GEF has contributed to some extent in reducing environmental problems in China as well as producing global environmental benefits. Obviously, however, given the magnitude of the problems of biodiversity and climate change both in China as well as globally, the effects so far have been marginal. More importantly for China during this first decade of GEF operations, the GEF and its implementing agencies have contributed to raising awareness and to technology development, as well as job creation,

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<sup>23</sup> Incremental costs are additional costs associated with transforming a project with national benefits into one with global environmental benefits. See

[www.gefweb.org/Operational\\_Policies/Eligibility\\_Criteria/Incremental\\_Costs/incremental\\_costs.html](http://www.gefweb.org/Operational_Policies/Eligibility_Criteria/Incremental_Costs/incremental_costs.html)

<sup>24</sup> African Development Bank (AfDB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). See [http://www.gefweb.org/Partners/Exe\\_Agencies/exe\\_agencies.html](http://www.gefweb.org/Partners/Exe_Agencies/exe_agencies.html).

<sup>24</sup> [www.adb.org/Documents/Periodicals/NGO\\_Newsletters/2002/Vol2\\_Issue6.asp](http://www.adb.org/Documents/Periodicals/NGO_Newsletters/2002/Vol2_Issue6.asp);

[www.adb.org/Media/Articles/2004/5297\\_others\\_access\\_to\\_gef/default.asp](http://www.adb.org/Media/Articles/2004/5297_others_access_to_gef/default.asp).

<sup>25</sup> See also GEF's website, though it has not been updated recently. USD 452 million is the current figure ([www.gefchina.org.cn/assembly/file/Projects\\_in\\_china.doc](http://www.gefchina.org.cn/assembly/file/Projects_in_china.doc)).

<sup>26</sup> GEF's website states that, by the end of June 2002, China had received GEF grants of about USD 350 million (regional and global projects not included), which amounts to about 8% of GEF's total grants. Forty single country projects had been carried out, including 13 on biodiversity (USD 54.9 million), 22 on climate change (USD 278 million), 3 on international waters (USD 47.85 million) and 2 in multiple focal areas (covering different GEF focal areas) (USD 5.7 million). See [www.gefchina.org.cn/assembly/file/Projects\\_in\\_china.doc](http://www.gefchina.org.cn/assembly/file/Projects_in_china.doc);

[www.gefchina.org.cn/assembly/file/projects%20in%20china.doc](http://www.gefchina.org.cn/assembly/file/projects%20in%20china.doc);

[www.gefchina.org.cn/gef/english/more/details.asp?id=6#Projects\\_in\\_China](http://www.gefchina.org.cn/gef/english/more/details.asp?id=6#Projects_in_China).

<sup>27</sup> According to Chinese officials and academics we have interviewed.

while also boosting institutional capacity through participation in project activities and training, particularly at the central level. We have not made any effort to evaluate all the projects that have been initiated. From scattered evidence as to a few projects, some appear to have been quite successful, while others have not.<sup>28</sup> Most emphasis has been placed on climate change projects, and less on biodiversity; the former generally appear to have been somewhat more successful than the latter. Despite the positive effects of the GEF in China, Chinese stakeholders are also critical of its structure and procedures, which they see as rather politicised. Also, the complex and prolonged application procedures in the GEF bureaucracy (as well as within China) are viewed as challenges that need to be solved. In 2004, the GEF China office carried out a Country Assessment of GEF Activities in China for the Ministry of Finance, apparently the first such review undertaken by any country. This confidential Country Assessment draws lessons from the implementation of GEF projects in China, including general rules of thumb applicable to international collaboration. Of 42 GEF projects completed or ongoing in China, 27 were reviewed. Some of the issues discussed in the Country Assessment deal with the various requirements for a successful GEF projects, emphasising the need for clear objectives and management structure in projects, the sustainability of outcomes, public awareness and involvement, stakeholder consultation, private-sector involvement and collaboration with other projects. One conclusion is apparently that GEF projects have not contributed to technology transfer and development as much as anticipated (Sugiyama & Ohshita, 2006).

In implementing GEF projects, there are three implementing agencies that play important roles, albeit on different levels. The World Bank stands out as more effective than UNEP and UNDP. However, it appears to have less legitimacy, here understood as responsiveness to China's demands and needs, than the two others. To simplify somewhat, the perceptions of UNDP and UNEP are the opposite: lower in terms of effectiveness and higher in terms of legitimacy. Our study leads us to suggest that, given the short time-span, the GEF has achieved quite a lot in China, but there is certainly room for improvement.

Furthermore, how can we explain performance, and what does it take to enhance future performance? That is, what is the problem-solving capacity of the GEF and other involved institutions? Our study revealed several few bottlenecks and challenges. One of the difficulties facing the GEF system concerns the not always compatible interests and roles of the GEF itself, its IAs and the recipient countries. Whereas the GEF works to benefit the global environment, recipients tend to be more concerned with national and local benefits of various kinds. Considering the set-up and mandate of the GEF, it is difficult to see how this basic problem can be overcome, and the effectiveness of GEF projects may suffer as a consequence. The focus on 'local' issues as opposed to global may also account for the persistent use of international experts who know the GEF and the international situation well.

A few points for consideration by the GEF and the IAs in this regard: Firstly, might it be possible to use Chinese experts more extensively in order to ensure greater harmony between local Chinese issues and international ones? Moreover, it would clearly benefit the projects to have international experts on board who understand Chinese society and its challenges, and who were capable of working closely with Chinese experts to develop good, relevant projects for the country.

The affiliations of the international bodies do, as noted regarding SEPA and UNEP previously, have an impact on the relations with Chinese administrative bodies. The financial, administrative and political strength of the World Bank is reinforced by its close institutional

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<sup>28</sup> For examples of concrete projects in the energy sector see chapter 3 in Sugiyama & Ohshita 2006; Ohshita, Wiel & Heggelund 2006. See also Birner & Martinot (2005) for experiences from GEF project implementation.

links to China's Ministry of Finance, which is itself given a boost by this connection. Together, this powerful duo promotes the energy conservation and climate change agendas, but seems less occupied with other issue areas such as biodiversity. However, the China Biodiversity Programming Framework (CBPF)<sup>29</sup> under preparation may help to change this, as it has proven more difficult to make and 'sell' good biodiversity projects compared to climate projects. Should the World Bank decide to join forces with UNEP and UNDP to address China's biodiversity challenges, it would doubtless make the prospect of ample project funding far more conceivable.

In addition to the challenges at the international level, there are obstacles to smooth implementation within China as well. The Chinese system seems more streamlined than it actually is, and there are serious coordination problems both horizontally and vertically. This may well apply to a great many countries, but the problems are more severe in China due to population size and the differing levels of development among the various regions of the country.

Horizontally there are turf battles and problems of information sharing, and SEPA and the MOF sometimes have different priorities. Additionally, these two bodies differ in strength. The unwillingness of various government institutions to work together has a significant impact on the performance of GEF projects in China. It might enhance consideration of environmental problems if SEPA were accorded a more prominent position in operating GEF projects. Were the IAs to insist on smoother collaboration, and even force the institutions to work together, that might improve the situation. It seems that the World Bank, with its funding leverage, might perhaps insist on enhanced institutional collaboration. This is, to some extent, already happening, and the World Bank's persistence here may be one reason why government officials regard the Bank as being less receptive to China's views. Some World Bank experts indicate that solving China's institutional challenges in environmental management is more crucial than overcoming technical and economic challenges. Moreover, institutional problems are not always expressed as China's official needs, and are not made a priority in GEF projects. Perhaps they should be in the future.

As for the vertical dimension, severe problems are evident regarding financing as well as application procedures, but some improvements are underway for GEF application procedures. A new programmatic approach is applied in the UNDP-implemented China End Use Energy Efficiency Project (EUEEP). This programmatic approach modality<sup>30</sup> would provide longer-term financial support through country-based programmes.<sup>31</sup> However, this will have only limited impact unless also the Chinese side simplifies and improves its procedures. Even more important is the need to give more independence to regional and local authorities, where most projects are carried out. Their financial capacity to implement projects needs strengthening and more clout. This is a challenge not only for the Chinese authorities, but also for the implementing agencies. In sum, while the GEF and the Chinese authorities have a fairly good track record, there is room for improvement through separate as well as joint strategic thinking and evaluation.

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<sup>29</sup> For an overview of GEF biodiversity projects in China and more details on the China Biodiversity Programming Framework, see <http://gefonline.org/projectList.cfm>

<sup>30</sup> The *programmatic* approach, which aims to provide "phased and sustained support for the implementation of a multi-year (medium to long-term) programme that serves to better integrate global environmental objectives into national strategies and plans" (e.g. biodiversity strategies, sustainable energy plan, etc) (GEF, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> See the GEF project document on the China End-Use Energy Efficiency Project, <http://gefonline.org/projectDetails.cfm?projID=966>

## 7. Concluding Comments

This article has examined how the UN environmental bodies and conferences have influenced China's environmental policies, with particular focus on UNEP, the CSD and the GEF. There is no doubt that the UN conferences in 1972, 1992 and 2002 have had a profound influence on how China regards and addresses environmental issues, and have made major contributions to establishing the environment as a policy field in China, as in many other countries. The 1972 UNCHE conference in Stockholm served as an eye-opener to the Chinese authorities, and initiated the establishment of environmental policy and environmental bureaucratic bodies in China. The conference in Rio 1992, UNCED, served to consolidate the concept of sustainable development, but it also allowed China to re-enter the international arena through active use of international environmental issues, after the isolation that had followed in the wake of the Tiananmen incident in 1989. As for the most recent of the UN conferences, WSSD in Johannesburg in 2002, the long-term effects remain to be seen. In addition to initiating follow-up actions in several areas, it served partly to showcase how civil society may interact with government authorities, as well as providing important inspiration and examples for the growing number of environmental NGOs in China.

Moving from the international to the national level, the UN bodies seem to have a more day-to-day based sort of influence in a range of fields. UNEP has provided assistance in terms of policy formulation, technical assistance, training of personnel, public awareness and networking. It seems to be able to influence specific policy areas, such as the strategy framework for methyl bromide control. However, UNEP's influence and activities are limited particularly by its weak financial mechanisms, and it is perhaps not able to cover as many activities as desirable. On the other hand, our Chinese interviewees seemed to think that this was not a weakness characteristic of UNEP only, but that it could also apply to the UN system in general. Interestingly, some interviewees expressed a preference for realising the principles established at Rio 1992, rather than reforming UNEP. Despite these difficulties, it is clear that China is important to UNEP and indeed is a priority country. The opening of an office in Beijing demonstrates UNEP's ambition to advance environmental cooperation with China and indicates recognition of the significance of China's environmental performance for the rest of Asia.

The CSD seems to have made fewer practical and concrete contributions to China's environmental policies. It serves as an arena for learning and discussion of environmental issues, rather than as a body for policy implementation. Through setting the agenda and inspiring work on specific topics as the discussions move through the CSD cycles, it has provided more indirect input to the shape and direction of environmental policies in China. So far, we have not been able to identify any specific cases where the CSD has directly influenced Chinese policies.

The GEF, on the other hand, has been shown to be an important source for the implementation of environmental policies in China. It derives its strengths from the availability of funding and its project-based orientation, as accessible funds provide important inspiration for actors to become involved and take action for environment-related projects. The impact of GEF-supported projects tends to vary with the implementing agency. The World Bank may be more effective but appears to enjoy less legitimacy than UNEP and UNDP.

All three bodies have weaknesses when it comes to making policies effective, but there are also obstacles within China and in how its environmental bureaucracy is organised. Of major importance are coordination difficulties between vertical bodies and horizontal levels, and the low levels of commitment to more comprehensive environmental policies. This leads us to suggest that greater political will on the part of Chinese actors could enable the UN

bodies to make more effective contributions to both formulation and implementation of national-level environmental policies in China. Global environmental conferences and the UN bodies' active involvement in China's environmental affairs have clearly been instrumental in creating greater awareness in China as well institutional growth, and have thereby contributed to enhancing the significance of global issues. In addition, UN and multilateral bodies have served as important channels through which domestic information on environmental matters has been disclosed in order to direct attention to specific issues and increase project funding.

Even so, there is still a long way to go for China, and the most difficult part still remains: actual implementation of environmental policy. So far, China has been successful in creating an environmental apparatus and has issued environmental policies, laws and regulations. Where it has not been successful is in carrying out policies – there is still a big gap between words and action. Identifying mechanisms and policy tools to ensure efficient implementation of policies and enforcement of legislation should be a priority both for the Chinese authorities and the UN bodies engaged in environmental efforts in China.

What about China's contribution to environmental issues on the global arena? China does not seem to give priority to the international level of environmental policies. This does not mean that Beijing sends small or ill-prepared delegations to international meetings (quite the contrary!) but at present, China has limited resources for engagement in the international arena in general – and gives priority to fields other than the environment. Its limited human resources skilled in global politics might be due to the short time span that the country has been involved in modern global politics; however, this shortage of qualified personnel also implies that their possibility to influence the global environmental bodies is limited. China's views on important questions like reform of UNEP reflect that the country is not in hurry, and both needs and wishes to make solid investigations before committing itself to any particular policy direction. Global environmental issues seem to have a loyal participant in China, but it is currently not providing any leadership. This is in clear contrast to domestic policy, where environmental issues are becoming increasingly important, attracting the attention of the media, policy-makers and the citizenry. Should this trend consolidate, establishing the management of the environment and natural resources as major issues in Chinese politics, it is reasonable to expect that China in the future will aim to play a leading international-level role in environmental politics. There are forces within the country that wish to see its foreign policies develop along these lines. Today, China may be mainly a recipient of assistance from UN environmental bodies, but if its strength continues to increase, and the environment becomes established as an important policy field, this is likely to change. Becoming a leader in global environmental politics would be a great challenge for China, but also an accomplishment that would provide respect and prestige on the scene of international politics.

This article has shown that China has increasingly come to see itself as a stakeholder in international bodies such as UNEP and the CSD, and has developed definite views on their roles and efforts. Perhaps the future will see a China that aims not only to influence, but also to direct and lead the course of the global environmental policies?

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## Appendix on projects

The GEF section in this article draws on the following projects:

- Beijing Second Environment Project (ongoing), implementing agency: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) (World Bank Group). The Beijing Second Environment Project is the largest project in which the GEF has ever been involved in terms of total financing, work units involved and areas covered. It is closely connected to the environment improvements for the 2008 Olympic Games.
- Renewable Energy Development Project (ongoing) implementing agency: IBRD. The Renewable Energy Development Project is designed to substitute energy for power stations with much cleaner energy, like wind power and solar power. It is another big project that reflects the problems of collaboration between the GEF and China.
- Coal-Bed Methane Development Project (completed), implementing agency: UNDP. Coal-Bed Methane Development Project demonstrated, at three sites, various techniques and technologies that China's coalmines can employ to reduce atmospheric methane emissions and recover methane as a fuel. The project published a detailed assessment of China's coal-bed methane resources, and strengthened national capacity to conduct such assessments routinely.
- Sichuan Gas Development and Conservation Project (completed), implementing agency: IBRD. Sichuan Gas Development and Conservation Project was a programme to promote energy conservation and renewable energy, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions between 1990 and 2020. It project made an important contribution to increasing gas reserves and gas production capacity in Sichuan province.
- China Energy Conservation Project (ongoing), implementing agency: IBRD. This is a collaborative project organised and implemented by the Chinese government, the World Bank, and the GEF. The objectives are to improve energy efficiency, and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases as well as other pollutants. It involves the demonstration and dissemination of a new mechanism of 'Energy Performance Contracting'.

## Interviews 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006

GEF China office; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Finance; National Development and Reform Commission; SEPA GEF office; Project Management Office, World Bank/GEF China Energy Conservation Project; UNDP Beijing; UNEP Beijing. Interviews with GEF project managers were carried out; but we have chosen to keep the names of specific institutions anonymous. Interviews were conducted several times with some respondents.

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