

China's Sustainable Development in the Shifting Global Context

WANG Yi

(Institute of Policy and Management, Chinese Academy of Sciences)

Significant changes have taken place with regard to the global environment and development since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, when the international community reached a consensus on sustainable development. On the one hand, some progress has been made in advancing sustainable development worldwide and in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Especially the rise of China and other emerging economies is changing the global patterns of political, economic, resource and environmental security, thus calling for even closer linkage between China and the world. On the other hand, achieving sustainable development will remain a great challenge due to such problems as rapid population growth, untamed poverty trend, global warming, severe regional environmental pollution, imbalanced supply of and demand for strategic resources and energy, and new dilemmas posed by the equity and fairness with regard to environment and development.

The green economy is emerging in spite of the haunting impact of the global financial crisis. The “green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication” is set as one of the two themes of the UN Conference for Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012, aiming at further eliminating poverty, changing unsustainable production and consumption patterns, and protecting and managing natural resource basis for economic and social development by promoting green economy and institutional framework for sustainable development. Therefore, it is necessary to review the process of sustainable development, identify the gaps, and summarize the experiences and lessons learnt from a global perspective in order to formulate an effective strategy that is country-specific, long-term oriented, and enabling to grasp opportunities, thus making joint efforts in shaping a sustainable future that would be resource-efficient, environment-friendly, green and low carbon, fair and inclusive, and more competitive.



Prof. Dr. Wang Yi is the team leader and chief scientist of the CAS Sustainable Development Strategy Study Group, and Deputy Director of the CAS Institute of Policy & Management (CAS-IPM).



Global Process of Sustainable Development: Transition, Opportunity and Uncertainty

The concept of sustainable development has been evolving. It was defined in “Our Common Future” that “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). Broadly speaking, the sustainable development strategy is aiming at promoting the harmony between human beings and nature; from a narrow view, the sustainable development implies the sustainability of nature, *i.e.* the inter-generational fair distribution in resource supply and its costs and benefits, including the intra-generational fairness between regions. As a matter of fact, the concept of sustainable development with more philosophical connotation has triggered a widespread debate mainly focusing on the difficulty of implementation — being hard to give a clear definition and explanation, on one hand, and no unified theory and methodology for measure, on the other.

Nevertheless, sustainable development as a strategic framework was accepted by the international community at UNCED in 1992. Afterwards, it was explained to include the three inter-dependent pillars of economic development, social development and environmental protection at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002. Though many countries have developed sustainable development strategies and national action plans with some progress in certain sectors, as the concept is further extended and generalized without key points, sustainable development has become a political slogan in many cases. It has even been utilized or distorted by some interest groups as a “cover” to seek local interests or objectives due to the absence of legally binding multilateral agreements and compulsory domestic implementation mechanisms, thus distracting people from the essence and true objectives of sustainable development (Victor, 2006; CAS Sustainable Development Strategy Study Group, 2008).

Fortunately, after the 2008 global financial crisis, developing green economy has been becoming an option of consensus to address the multi-challenges facing each country, and the new opportunity and carrier of realizing global sustainable development and green transformation (CAS Sustainable Development Strategy Study Group, 2010; CAS Sustainable Development

Strategy Study Group, 2011). Under the active advocacy of UNEP, OECD and other international organizations, the green development strategy has been formulated in many countries and regions. For example, the European Commission has presented roadmaps towards a low carbon economy, resource efficient Europe, and a secure, competitive and decarbonized energy system (European Commission, 2011a; European Commission, 2011b; European Commission, 2011c); Korean government promulgated the Basic Law of Low Carbon and Green Growth; China presented the green and low carbon development in its *Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan on National Economic and Social Development*.

In essence, the green economy is not a new concept and has the same connotation as sustainable development. The presentation of green economy at present is mainly derived from the financial crisis with some international organizations and experts calling for addressing financial crisis and climate change by implementing “green governance” and developing green economy, thus advancing, rather than delaying, the relevant multilateral negotiation processes (UNEP, 2008; Edenhofer *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, though without a unified definition, the green economy at present is more aiming at such objectives as developing green emerging industries, increasing green jobs, and enhancing green competitiveness, and thus promoting the green transformation of global economy towards sustainable development.

Though important are the negotiation on green economy and the “Rio + 20”, the expectation of the international community for them is not high. The 2009 Copenhagen climate conference failed to reach any agreement. Although the Durban climate conference passed the package, the perspective of reaching a long-term carbon reduction framework and recovering from the financial crisis remains uncertain. All of these have lessened people’s attention to addressing climate change and cooled people’s enthusiasm for green low carbon economy. Lacking strong and effective leadership allows a wait-and-see strategy and pragmatism to prevail. Countries are reconsidering their strategies and taking relatively pragmatic and comprehensive long-term countermeasures. In view of the deep divide on such issues as fund, technology, and equity,

it will require great efforts and wisdom to gain some substantive progress at Rio (Kuper, 2011; Wang Yi, 2011b). Similar to the climate negotiation, the negotiation around the theme of “green economy” will encounter following key issues and conflicts:

- First, responsibility, equity, and political commitment. The “common but differentiated responsibilities” principle established 20 years ago has been at the center of issues in question. Because of the prolonged debate on this principle, the funding and technology transfer commitment made by developed countries to support implementing sustainable development and addressing climate change in developing countries has been far from in place, thus making many developing countries hard to meet MDGs and without guarantee for the right to develop. There is the issue of equity also in developing green economy. Therefore, without explicit political commitment by developed countries, it is unrealistic to develop the common goals, time frame, and roadmap for green economy. However, there is an increasingly high voice calling China to undertake more international obligations and increasingly great pressure on China to reduce emissions, showing even more diversified conflicts of interest.

- Second, a divide in understanding green economy and its definition. Developed countries put the carbon emissions reduction at the center of green economy because they have basically solved the conventional environmental issues. However, it is more urgent for developing countries to improve resource efficiency and address conventional environmental issues due to the broad development and environmental issues they are facing. Thus there should be diverse goals, technologies, paths, and roadmaps in developing green economy in different countries, depending on their specific development stage, national circumstance, regional environment, and international responsibility. Setting goals alone cannot solve the issues but rather an integrated solution.

- Third, green trade conflict. It can be predicted that,

in view of the impact of the financial crisis, increasingly improved competitiveness of emerging economies, and the lacking of legally binding power of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), some countries, especially some developed ones may establish “green trade barriers” and “IPR barriers” by employing such measures as tariff, WTO trade rules, IPR protection, and trade protectionism, thus affecting the trade of environmental goods and services and the diffusion of green and sustainable technologies. The conflict resulted from EU decision of extending the reach of its Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) to foreign airlines, “301” investigation and “anti-dumping and anti-subsidy” investigation by U.S. against Chinese clean energy enterprises, and the litigation by U.S. and some European countries against China for its export control on some raw material are just the beginning, the “green trade war” will become increasingly severe.

There will be various new challenges in the process of developing green economy. In the next one or two decades, about 2-3 billion people will embrace a development period of industrialization and modernization, and they may face the legally binding constraint on carbon emission cap and quantified emissions reduction. A great challenge facing emerging economies and other countries is how to appropriately grasp the opportunity, share and utilize the limited resources, energy, and emission space in a rational and equitable manner in order to accumulate wealth and realize modernization, as well as obtain the first mover advantage and occupy the commanding heights of competition. In this context, a cooperation framework for global green economy development should be established by consensus, under which concrete actions are taken, obligations are born fairly, the right to develop and best practices are shared, various conflicts and pressures will be alleviated by improving resource efficiency, developing clean energy, investing in green innovation, and changing unsustainable development and trade patterns, thus materializing the common vision of sustainable development of human beings.

China's Contributions to Sustainable Development: Practice, Experience and Global Challenge

In the past two decades, China's practice in sustainable development has been enriching the idea of sustainable development and contributed to the global sustainable

development, which can be shared by others.

China had engaged in the discussion and drafting of the report of “Our Common Future”, being one of the



first countries formulating and implementing sustainable development strategy. The Chinese government defined environmental protection as a basic national policy in 1982 and signed the “Rio Declaration on Environment and Development” and the “Agenda 21” in 1992. In 1994, China took the lead in issuing a national agenda: “China’s Agenda 21 — White Paper on China’s Population, Environment and Development in the 21st Century”. In 1996, the sustainable development was officially set as one of the basic national development strategies, thus translating the sustainable development from a scientific consensus to an important task and action of the government, including works on institutional building, policy measures, organizational management, resource saving and environmental protection projects, and pilot green and low carbon program, *etc.* China’s main contributions to global sustainable development include theory innovation, project implementation, and institutional guarantee:

- Implementing large-scale projects on ecological and environmental protection, and energy conservation. Since 1998, China has made large-scale input into ecological conservation programs and environmental protection infrastructures. Especially for the former, the input was more than the total of the previous two decades. In the “10th Five-Year Plan” period alone, China put 700 billion yuan into six key forestry programs including “natural forest protection” and “grain for green” projects (Deng Huaning, *et al.*, 2005). These projects have been implemented for more than ten years and got significant results. After 2004, the Chinese government has launched engineering projects and pilot projects one after another related to circular economy, resource conservation and renewable energy. Since 2008, the energy conservation and emissions reduction as well as ecological environment construction have been identified as main areas of economic stimulus plan, thus greatly improving China’s environmental infrastructure.

- Presenting a series of sustainable development ideas. In the 21st century, with its accession to WTO and entry into a development stage characterized by the growth of the heavy industry and the chemical industry and rapid urbanization, China has rapidly become a “global manufacturing center” and the second largest economy in the world. At the same time, the overall tension on resources, energy, and the environment began to appear in

China in 2002. To address the issues of environment and development, the Chinese government has presented a series of new ideas pertaining to sustainable development, and materialized these ideas by taking some concrete actions, thus enriching the sustainable development practice with Chinese characteristics. These new ideas include: new path of industrialization (2002), scientific outlook on development (2003), circular economy (2004), resource-efficient and environmentally-friendly society (2004), harmonious society (2005), innovative country (2006), ecological civilization (2007), green economy and low carbon economy (2009), transformation of economic development patterns (2010), and green and low carbon development (2011). Some of them are presented and developed based on China’s own practice and cognition; some are based on international experiences; and many others are presented in parallel with the world and even taking the lead.

- Formulating China’s sustainable development strategy for the new era with the legally binding “energy conservation and emission reduction” targets at the core. For the “11th Five-Year Plan” period, the Chinese government set the binding targets of 20% increase of energy efficiency and 10% emissions reduction of major pollutants, and developed corresponding working schemes and key programs, which were implemented by taking integrated legal, administrative, economic and technological measures. In 2009, addressing climate change was incorporated into the energy conservation and emission reduction strategy with China making a voluntary commitment to reducing carbon intensity and increasing forestry carbon sink. During the “12th Five-Year Plan” period, following the policy direction of the “11th Five-Year Plan” period, the Chinese government proposes that changing the pattern of economic development should be the primary line of work, adding the share of non-fossil fuel as a binding target, presenting such new policies as rational control of total energy consumption, gradually establishing carbon emission trading market, *etc.* in order to promote China’s green and low carbon development and transformation, thus opening up a sustainable development road with Chinese characteristics in terms of both idea and practice.

- To implement the sustainable development strategy and energy conservation and emission reduction targets, the Chinese government has made a series of institutional

arrangements, including the development of the Cleaner Production Promotion Law (2002), Environmental Impact Assessment Law (2002), Water Law (2002), Renewable Energy Law (2005), Circular Economy Promotion Law (2008), and the amendments to Energy Conservation Law (2007) and Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law (2008). It has also launched the National Program on Climate Change (2007), and established the national leading group for climate change and energy conservation and emission reduction and a special management body for climate change (2008). In addition, the National People's Congress made a "Decision on Actively Addressing Climate Change", thus providing the legal guarantee for the implementation of above-mentioned measures.

China made substantial achievements in energy conservation and emissions reduction during the "11th Five-Year Plan" period thanks to the efforts mentioned above. The energy consumption per unit GDP decreased by 19.1%, and the total amount of chemical oxygen demand (COD) discharge and SO₂ emission reduced by 12.5% and 14.3%, respectively. The renewable energy has been utilized in a large scale. By the end of 2010, China's grid-connected wind power capacity was about 30 million kW, showing an average annual growth of 94.5% (State Electricity Regulatory Commission, 2011), and ranking the first place in the world in terms of the installed wind power capacity. In addition, China has reached the international advanced level in some areas of energy-saving emission reduction technologies and equipment manufacturing (e.g. clean coal power generation).

China's success in energy conservation and emission reduction strategy is not just reflected by those figures, but the comprehensive outcomes: significantly raising the awareness of government officials at all levels and the public on energy conservation and emission reduction; taking concrete actions in the priority areas; following the principle of "learning by doing" and implementing multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional pilot activities (circular economy, ecological industrial parks; low carbon, sustainable development pilot regions, etc.); accelerating the phase-out of outdated production capacity and making the industrial structure cleaner; greatly improving the innovation capacity and technological demonstration level, and substantially increasing the size of green and low carbon related industries. China may catch up world's advanced level in energy conservation and emission

reduction technologies, equipment manufacturing, project construction and management in major sectors in the decade from 2020 to 2030 if the energy conservation and emission reduction policy can be struck to in the next decade.

There no doubt remain some problems with regard to China's sustainable development, and energy saving and emission reduction strategies, which need further improvement in practice. The outstanding issues, including a top-down decision-making process and over dependency on administrative measures, have resulted in an inefficient use of various resources; interests of sectors and other special interest groups have hindered the deepening of reform, jeopardized the State interest, and resulted in duplications of work due to the lack of effective coordination mechanism. More importantly, with the rise of China in the world, the relationship between China and the world as a whole has changed dramatically. Almost all China's resource and environmental issues are of global significance and impact because of their great scale effect, for which both China and the world is not fully prepared.

The rapid rise of China makes the relationship between China and the world increasingly interactive, so that any action by China would not be insignificant. It has been 10 plus years since China's accession to WTO and implementation of "going out" strategy. It is pertinent to say that China's rapid economic growth is parallel with its engagement in the globalization process. Given its resource endowments, size of economy, and the status as world's manufacturing plant, China is increasingly dependent on foreign sources to get such key resources as oil, iron, copper, and potassium. Over 50% of its oil and iron ore is from foreign countries. China's carbon emission accounts for more than 20% of the world total and keeps increasing. With the increase of demand for foreign resources and the growth of overseas investment, there are two voices being heard: one considers that China should take the lead in green economy in the world by taking advantage of the momentum of energy conservation and emissions reduction; the other is thinking differently, saying that China is implementing the "neo-colonialism" and wondering about or "fearing" at that China is going to change the existing global rules of game. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that some Chinese enterprises engaging in business activities overseas are



not familiar with international practice, have not attached great importance to their social and environmental responsibilities, and have not paid appropriate respect to local culture, thus causing some damage to local resource and environment, even resulting in some social conflict. This not only results in the property loss of those companies but also jeopardizes the State interests of China. This is also a reason for the above-mentioned negative influence. Being aware of this situation, the Chinese government has developed some regulations in an attempt to regulate the environmental behavior and social responsibility of those enterprises and to avoid relevant risks. However, this is far from enough. It will need attention from higher level

and more sectors, and the formulation of relevant strategy and measures (State Forestry Administration, *et al.*, 2009; China Banking Regulatory Commission, 2012). The green economy is a global theme. Developing green economy and realizing sustainable development are not the matter of a single country but rather a matter associated with equity, competitiveness, and cooperation. To become a responsible country, we should start learning from “green”, learning inclusiveness and responsibility at all dimensions for both yourself and others. Achieving “green rise” needs more integrate strategy, historical and global visions, bearing more international obligations that are compatible with the growth of capability. There is still a long way to go.

Path towards the Future: Institutional Reform, Policy-driven Management, Fair Environment, and Comprehensive Transformation

In spite of some debates and uncertainties, there is no doubt about the general direction of the green economy and low carbon development. It is important for China to grasp opportunities, create enabling environment, master the pace, enhance innovation, make initiative, get win-win in cooperation, and even take the green lead at crucial times. We need to consider two aspects and take a sound and progressive green development path to gradually realize the overall green transformation. On the one hand, in view of the upcoming cap limitation on carbon emissions, the strategic choice for the next decade is very important. We need a trade-off between taking our traditional advantage and seeking green innovation. On the other hand, under the premise of securing national interests and the peaceful rising, we should actively participate in the restructuring process of global environment and development order, and develop global strategic space by conducting strategic cooperation and layout.

Developing China’s global resource & environment security strategy. First, identify the interests and will of the country in the field of resources and the environment through the participation of stakeholders; increase the transparency of resource and energy demands, effectively reduce the risks of information asymmetry, and protect our interests by political, diplomatic, economic, technological, and military means; second, strengthen learning and research, improve the capacity of assessing

the development trend of resources and energy, understand the dynamics of import & export of key resources and energy, and propose workable policy recommendations; third, starting from neighbors, develop long-term and stable cooperative relationships with foreign countries by implementing long-term cooperation projects, including the construction of infrastructures related to resource exploitation, technological assistance, and capacity building; fourth, conduct strategic acquisition of resource-energy related products and technologies, simplifying relevant approval procedures and encouraging state-owned and private enterprises to engage in equity and technology merge and acquisition of relevant resource companies and technologies.

Promoting institutional and mechanism innovation in the field of sustainable development. The severe sectoral segmentation in the field of sustainable development in China makes coordination between interests difficult and is not conducive to taking integral advantage and improving efficiency. Therefore, it is suggested, within the mega-ministry reform framework, to reorganize and establish following bodies:

- The Ministry of Energy and Climate Change, which will integrate existing government functions related to energy development, energy conservation, addressing climate change, and low carbon development and unifying the work of planning, policy making, supervision and

management in these two closely linked fields.

- The Ministry of Resource and Environment. This will need to integrate government functions related to resource and environmental elements. Especially the merge of water, forestry and environment departments should be implemented first in order to effectively address regional and river basin development issues in China.

- International Development Agency. It is imperative for a large rising responsible country to establish an independent agency. It will play important role in coordinating among multiple government departments in implementing the “going out” strategy, developing international assistance plan, improving the “soft strength” of the state, and guaranteeing the resource-environment security.

Identifying the key driving force of sustainable development policies. In terms of population, China should adjust its population policy in order to support the sustained economic growth, alleviate the negative impact of aging population, and provide new labor forces. Over the next 10 years, in the resource field, priority should be given to energy efficiency improvement and benchmark management. Efforts should be made to facilitate the “decoupling” of economic growth with resource consumption and environmental impact. And the resource and energy price reform should take precedence over other financial and tax policy reform. At the same time, the reform of land regime should be accelerated. In the field of environment, emphasis should be on developing the integrated scheme for addressing the environmental issues across administrative regions and river basins. In the area of climate change, energy conservation and low carbon policies should be struck to, taking caution in constructing the carbon emissions trading market, making sound top-down design and the underlying capacity-building, issuing relevant guidelines and regulations, avoiding blindly plunge and a waste of money and resources.

Changing foreign economic cooperation strategy and enhancing corporate social responsibilities for overseas development. In view of the growing concern of the international community on the rise of China, it is necessary to change China's foreign economic cooperation strategy in accordance with the new situation. Currently there are three priority aspects: 1. Developing an overall strategy of foreign economic cooperation for the new era, making energy conservation and emission

reduction and climate change the important factors in guiding foreign economic cooperation, speeding up the comprehensive transformation of foreign economic development pattern including diplomacy, facilitating the broad participation of and coordination among stakeholders including diplomatic, business, publicity, and development department, enterprises and the public, thus more rationally developing and protecting overseas resources and energy; 2. In the new round of WTO negotiation, proposing a request of coordinating WTO rules with MEAs for the purpose of avoiding potential trade conflict related GHG emission, national environmental protection, green industry development, IPR protection, and resource and raw materials; 3. Adjusting the “going out” strategy, achieving a transformation towards green investment and trade, formulating a behavior criteria for Chinese enterprises engaging in overseas development. In addition to in compliance with business rules and international practice, these enterprises have to normalize their investment and development behavior, bear their social and environmental responsibilities at the location of their business activities, support local capacity-building for sustainable development, and make efforts in promoting the establishment of international rules on overseas corporate social responsibility and industry transfer; 4. Changing foreign aid patterns, establishing a green aid mechanism, making energy conservation and emissions reduction and climate change the focus of international aid, strengthening south-south cooperation, promoting the development and protection of overseas resources and energy by using international assistance fund directly or indirectly, and establishing the green image for the country and enterprises.

China is facing an unprecedented challenge in terms of domestic and international development and environment, for which no mature experience and ready models are available. To pursue sustainable development with Chinese characteristics is a process of continued learning, practice, adjustment and innovation, which needs a broad and effective participation of relevant stakeholders and in which we should consider achieving sustainable development and developing green economy a systems engineering or a comprehensive objective system. To create a ecological civilization in modern context, we should endeavor to: integrate legally binding regimes with incentive mechanisms; utilize the combination effect of



divers policies; facilitate the synergy between different environmental and development objectives and between goals, methods, costs, the paths; and promote system innovation in institutional construction, supporting policies, technical research and development, capacity-building, business models, and market development. The practice of embarking on the “Chinese path” is of great significance

not only for China’s development, but also for the global sustainable development, especially China’s experiences could be shared by other developing countries.

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