

The Role of Civil Society Dialogue in the EU-China Cooperation on Renewable Energy

Issue 2012/05 · December 2012

by Radostina Primova & Johanna van Vrede

Institutional developments in the EU-China energy dialogue

Formal diplomatic relations between the EU and China date back to 1975, followed by the first major EU-China Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement signed in 1985, which enshrined the early institutional set up of EU-China cooperation in different policy areas. This economic cooperation has expanded over the years into a complex institutionalised framework of sectoral dialogues. The development of bilateral ties between both partners has been driven by the rise of China as an economic and geopolitical power, the advancement of the European market integration, their shared trade interests and search for common solutions to global economic, security and technological challenges.

In the general framework of EU-China bilateral relations, energy cooperation was set up in 1994 as one of the earliest Sectoral Dialogues between the European Commission and its Chinese partner in EU-China foreign relations. It aimed to tackle common challenges such as increasing energy dependence and climate change threats, meeting China's growing energy demands in a sustainable way and promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy. High-level cooperation between the EU and China at governmental level takes place through two main bilateral forums: the bi-annual conferences between DG Energy and the Chinese Ministry of Science & Technology (MOST), as well as the annual energy dialogue with the National Energy Administration of China (NEA) initiated in 2005. Furthermore, energy issues are also the subject of discussions between Heads of States at the annual EU-China summits, as part of the specific energy-oriented dialogue.

Expanding EU-China institutional cooperation in the energy sector has been matched by a parallel process of stronger economic ties between European and Chinese companies in the renewable energy (RE) sector (particularly wind and photovoltaics). While the foundation of early EU-China institutional relations was based primarily on trade cooperation, international efforts to mitigate climate change and the common challenge of decreasing energy dependence in a sustainable manner brought a new dimension to their partnership in the energy sector in the mid 90s. Although the role of EU-China energy cooperation has grown tremendously in the context of EU external trade policy and EU strategy to boost its energy independence and international climate policy, the potential of civil society collaboration in this partnership has remained rather unexploited. Based on major civil society initiatives in the RE field that have been developed in recent years, this policy brief argues that civil society dialogue between China and EU could be an important driving force in deepening EU-China cooperation on RE and a bridge towards a more sustainable future.

Boosted by the early institutionalisation of energy cooperation both at intergovernmental and stakeholder level, EU-China energy relations began to flourish in 2005 with the launch of the official EU-China energy dialogue in the same year. Thus, the EU-China energy dialogue laid the foundations for a coherent and inte-

grated institutional framework identifying six priority areas of cooperation: renewable energy, smart grid development, energy efficiency in the building sector, clean coal, nuclear energy and energy law. The creation of the National Energy Administration in early 2008 contributed significantly to the progress of the EC-China Energy Dialogue.

Further fruits of EU-China energy cooperation have been the EU-China energy and environment programme adopted in 2004, the Action Plan on Clean Coal and terms of reference for an Action Plan on Industrial Cooperation on Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energies. Boosted by China's rapid progress in promoting RE and low-carbon technologies, the EU 20/20/2020 targets set in the climate and energy package in 2009, the EU's decarbonisation objectives anchored in the 'Energy Roadmap 2050' and the growing collaboration between European and Chinese firms in the RE sector, energy has developed as one of the most progressive areas of cooperation between the European Commission and China. The renewable energy pillar covers various aspects, such as production, technologies, and standardisation. There has been a consistent increase in RE consumption levels in China and the EU over the last years, with Chinese consumers using 175.8 mtoe of RE, and EU consumers - 160.2 mtoe in 2011 (BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2012).

Since the launch of the energy dialogue in 2005, EU-China cooperation in the energy sector has increased dramatically, both in terms of substance as well as the growing number of state and non-state actors involved. Business cooperation between Chinese and European RE firms has given considerable impetus to the development of institutional relations between the EU and China in this sector. Although the EU has acknowledged the importance of a single voice in its energy relations with China, which has also been highlighted in the Commission's first Communication on EU-external relations in energy (COM 2011, IP/11/1005), Member States continue to face challenges in their attempts to develop a coordinated approach towards China in the RE sector. This is mainly due to national policy differences in the promotion of renewable energies and the fact that RE is not yet a fully-fledged competence at the EU-level.

The recent EU antidumping investigation brought against China and the follow-up WTO dispute, in which China launched a battle against EU solar subsidies that according to the Chinese Ministry

of Commerce breach the 'national treatment' principle and the 'most-favoured nation treatment' principle under WTO law, illustrate one of the areas of conflict in EU-China energy relations. The trade frictions between both partners might also affect their future RE cooperation, in particular at business stakeholder level. In the context of increasing competition, one of the biggest challenges that the EU currently faces is the limited access of foreign companies to the Chinese market which acts as a barrier for EU and US companies to enter the energy market and accelerate the grid integration of RE in China.

On the other hand, the new institutional framework of negotiations between the EU and China, including an annual meeting of the European Commission, the 27 EU energy ministers and the 9 Chinese ministers of the National Energy Commission, reflects the endeavour of the EU Member States and its Chinese partners to overcome these policy differences and develop a better coordinated approach. Such institutional innovation demonstrates that EU-China energy cooperation has grown tremendously in importance not only in the realm of EU external trade policy and global climate policy but also as a pivotal strategy to boost the EU's internal energy security and sustainable development.

The recently created EU-China people-to-people dialogue as the third pillar of EU-China relations has the objective of complementing the High Level Economic and Trade Dialogue and the High Level Strategic Dialogue. This could be used as an opportunity to incorporate the civic dimension into the institutional framework of EU-China energy relations.

The role of civil society dialogue as an additional bridge in the EU-China RE cooperation

So far, research on Chinese-EU civil cooperation in the field of RE has been fairly limited, despite its potential value. In our discussion on civil society dialogue we look not only at the cooperation between Chinese and European NGOs, but also at other forms of institutional partnerships that involve civil society actors.

Contrary to how it is perceived in Europe, the role of civil society in China has been associated more with consulting the government in the formulation of different policies, rather than providing critical space for articulating citizens' needs and challenging the central authority like in Western Europe. This different

societal role is also reflected in the structure of Chinese NGOs. Civil society is mainly represented through GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations), which have been the major partners for EU NGOs.

Recently, however, in a follow-up to the official RE partnership, more informal, bottom-up dialogue has developed between environmental NGOs and concerned citizens, in particular interested youth, both in Europe and China. This emerging activism can be further demonstrated by the increasing number of conferences, student exchange programmes and information exchanges organised by European and Chinese think tanks and NGOs.

The foundation in 2007 of the China Civil Climate Action Network (CCAN) marks an important stepping stone in the consolidation of the cooperation process between European and Chinese NGOs. The main goals of the network are to enhance the knowledge base of NGOs to work on environmental and energy issues, policy and public involvement, strengthen capacity building of NGOs for joint cooperation and trigger active participation in international NGO discussion forums on climate change topics.

Another example of a promising civil society collaboration is the EU-China Youth Policy Dialogue – a Youth in Action Programme jointly co-ordinated by the EIAS in Brussels and the CAES in Beijing. It was set up to encourage discussion between young people in China and the EU on a range of topics including Climate Change and Sustainable Development. During the joint meetings the ambitious Chinese and European youths highlighted the benefits of developing cooperation at local and social level for sustainable development and joint RE projects as a solution to both environmental and energy supply issues. The participants in the EU-China Youth Policy Dialogue called for stronger cooperation between European and Chinese NGOs in campaigning for environmental education and facilitating access to environmentally relevant information.

Civil society actors have been involved in the EU-China energy cooperation also through participation in RE projects launched by the EU-China Clean Energy Centre. Set up by the European Commission and the Chinese National Energy Administration in early 2009, the centre serves as an important platform for enhancing energy cooperation through collaboration between the Polytechnic University of Torino and a wide range of European and Chinese public actors as well as research institutions. It therefore facilitates discussion

and cooperation between civil society actors and research centres, with the general objective of promoting the use and development of cleaner energy technologies, stimulating energy conservation and efficiency measures and in this way supporting China in its transition to a low-carbon economy.

The bilateral partnerships between European and Chinese cities could be seen as another major tool for fostering more civil society participation and cooperation between Chinese and European NGOs at the local level in the RE sector. An example of such a collaboration is the launch of a new project undertaken by the German Asia Foundation aimed at enhancing social and ecological elements in partnerships between the German region Nord Rhine-Westphalia and China through the promotion of greater civil society involvement in already existing projects. Through this, local stakeholders and municipality actors are trying to use existing mechanisms and resources to more actively engage civil society actors who have rarely been involved in these partnerships in the past due to lack of structure and information.

Main challenges

The different understanding of the concept and role of civil society in China and Europe is seen as one of the main challenges in EU-China civil society cooperation. The marginal civil society dialogue between both partners has often been attributed to the weak coordination and communication among European NGOs, insufficient knowledge on Chinese NGOs, the lack of a common EU approach to China, the limited dialogue of EU NGOs with Chinese civil society actors at the local level and the difficulties faced by Chinese NGOs in applying for cooperative projects funded by the EU.

Apart from these challenges, governmental control over the resources and staff of Chinese NGOs has raised further concerns about their independence and ability to carry out a system of checks and balances. The activities of Chinese civil society actors are also obstructed by strict registration and stringent monitoring requirements, making them dependent on influential governmental support. However, the situation has been improving gradually, with Chinese civil society actors, particularly those which developed from bottom-up, increasing their activities, fundraising programmes and influence.

Prospectives: the potential of civil society dialogue in EU-China cooperation on renewable energy

Although the development of civil society dialogue between China and the EU in the RE sector is still in its infancy, it could open up a new avenue for complementing the climate change, energy security and trade dimensions of EU-China energy relations. It carries valuable potential for improving capacity building of NGOs, overcoming the differences between both partners, gaining public support for RE projects and joining efforts in international climate change negotiations.

By using the existing structure of bilateral partnerships between Chinese and European cities in the areas of urban sustainable development and trade cooperation, a bottom-up civil society participation could contribute to a large extent to raising awareness about climate change problems and increasing acceptance for RE projects. Furthermore, it could push local officials into a different way of thinking and handling environmental concerns.

The main solutions for bridging the gaps discussed at policy conferences in Brussels shall aim at reducing knowledge barriers and misunderstandings. This could be done by setting up cross-generational exchanges, study programmes for young entrepreneurs in the RE field as well as raising awareness through school and local community programmes and media. Language exchanges to address the imbalance in language learning between Chinese and European students could also help reduce misunderstandings.

The increasing dialogues on climate change and the role of RE in a time of energy transition taking place in recent years, particularly among young generations, have shown the direction into which EU-China NGO cooperation could potentially develop in the future.

Given the gap between the GONGOs and the more independent NGOs at the local level in China, an essential part of the strategy should focus on establishing better links between EU NGOs and locally based Chinese environmental NGOs. Further, the promotion of more city partnerships, in particular in regions with less developed RE potential, could create additional synergies for NGOs and business actors to work together towards more sustainable solutions.

Selected References

- Liu, X. (2002) 'NGOs in China: An Overview' International Community Foundation
- Sausmikat, Nora / Fritsche, Klaus (2010). Civil Society in European-Chinese Relations. Challenges of Cooperation. German Asia Foundation in cooperation with the network "EU-China: Civil Society Forum", Essen, January 2010.
- Sausmikat, Nora (2011). The NRW-China partnership: strengthening social and ecological issues through the involvement of civil society. Press release. German Asia Foundation, Essen, 16 August 2011.
- Schröder, Patrick (2011). Civil Climate Change Activism in China - More than Meets the Eye. German Asia Foundation in cooperation with Heinrich-Boell-Foundation (Beijing Office), Essen/Beijing, November 2011.
- Yu, Ying (2011). Supporting Civil Society in China: Challenges and Opportunities for the EU. The University of Nottingham. China Policy Institute, Nottingham, August 2011.
- European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS, Brussels)/ Chinese Association for European Studies (CAES, Beijing) (2012). EU-China: A Bright Young Future. EU-China Youth Policy Dialogue Final Publication, September 2012, URL: http://www.eias.org/sites/default/files/EU-China_Youth_Policy_Dialogue_2012_Final_Publication%20.pdf
- Interview with a Commission official from DG Energy, European Commission, 15.03.2012.

About the authors



Radostina Primova is a PhD researcher at the Institute for European Studies (IES), Vrije Universiteit Brussel. In her research, she examines policy coordination and accountability in the EU energy

policy area. Her academic education integrates a broad multidisciplinary training received during her BA Integrated European Studies with disciplinary specialisation in her MA Political Science at the University of Bremen. In the past she was involved professionally in projects related to EU regional policy, energy governance, EU education policy, the reform of the EU budget and civil society participation in Europe.



Johanna van Vrede was a research intern at the IES last year in the Environment and Sustainable Development cluster. Before this she completed her BA Geography at the University of

Durham, and graduated with an MSc in International Relations from the University of Amsterdam. She is now a trainee in the European Parliament in the Science and Technology Options Assessment Unit. Her main areas of interest are energy geopolitics, renewable energy policy and climate change action in both China and the EU.

Policy briefs are published by the
Institute for European Studies

Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence
at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

www.ies.be

Pleinlaan 5

B-1050 Brussels

T +32 2 614 80 01

F +32 2 614 80 10

ies@vub.ac.be