



The Challenge of Urbanisation

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The Challenge of Urbanisation

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In contrast to the past, when cities were regarded as problematic due to issues resulting from industrial development and social deprivation, they are now seen as drivers of economic growth. Experience shows that a 1% increase in urbanisation rates can result in a 4% increase in annual economic growth. At the same time, urbanisation is linked to the transformation of lifestyles, greater consumption of natural resources, growing energy demand, and the commodification of urban life. Finding ways to provide energy, housing, water and transportation without compromising sociospatial justice for millions of existing and new urban residents is crucial for a sustainable future. While the EU Member States will be constrained to retrofitting existing building stock, China has the opportunity to build with current and future population and climate requirements in mind.

China and the EU face similar challenges with regard to the built environment and urbanisation (e.g. population expansion, urban development, ecological deterioration, energy consumption, and uneven development between regions and urban and rural areas) and there is a rich history of collaboration between the EU and China on issues related to the built environment (for example, a memorandum of understanding with the goal of strengthening the exchange of information on regional policy between the European Commission and the National Development and Reform Commission, 2006). However, joint efforts seem to have picked up in pace since the signing of the Shanghai Declaration in 2010. This called for the establishment of an 'ecological civilisation in pursuit of inclusive and balanced growth' and stressed the importance of cities for achieving this goal. 'Better City, Better Life' was chosen as the theme for the first World Expo (2010) in a 'developing' country, and the European Union pavilion was considered a symbol of the importance of EU-China relations.

Current Status

Premier Wen Jiabao and the European leadership announced plans to become strategic partners on sustainable urbanisation in February 2012. At the EU-China Round Table in Munich the following month, it was established that the analysis and extraction of lessons learned from joint pilot projects (in the domains of master planning, comprehensive management, sustainable urban transport and building, etc.) should be enhanced and made available to the EU-China consultation mechanisms (especially with regard to low carbon city planning). The EU-China Youth Policy Dialogue in Chengdu (February 2012) further recognised the importance of energy efficiency for buildings and construction, of harmonised city planning, revitalised urban centres and more nature in the city. The China-EU Round Table in Hangzhou (April 2012) discussed sustainable urban development as one of two main issues on the agenda, and the EU-China Partnership on Sustainable Urbanisation was officially launched in May 2012, acknowledging that the exchange of experiences, interaction and cooperation are important for the achievement of win-win results on multiple levels in an increasingly interdependent world.

Within the context of the EU-China Partnership on Sustainable Urbanisation, and in order to assist Chinese mayors with the continuation of the 'Better City, Better Life' theme, transfer of experience will take place through the annual EU-China Urban Forum for local decision-makers, city planners, businesses and NGOs; a growing number of Sino-European projects; EU investments in low-carbon Chinese cities; and support of many other initiatives, such as the EC-Link Project, EU-China Emissions Trading Scheme, EU-China Social Protection Reform Project, EU-China Disaster Risk Management Project, and Satellite Cities and Metropolitan Governance Project. For example, due to begin in early-2013, the EU-China Low Carbon and Environmental Sustainability Programme will seek to assist Chinese cities in adopting energy and resource efficient ecological solutions. It is envisioned to build one pilot EU-China low carbon eco-city in China as part of the Programme.

Other EU-China actions in the realm of sustainable urbanisation include research projects such as URBACHINA, a collaborative project managed by a consortium of 11 leading Chinese and European research institutions which will analyse urbanisation trends in China over the next 40 years; the Europe-China Clean Energy Centre (EC2); and nine SWITCH-Asia projects for sustainable production and consumption. The Urban Europe research agenda started in 2010 and which aims to amplify urban-related research efforts, has identified China as a potential partner beyond Europe and has envisaged an Urban China initiative. Despite these efforts, there is a need for an even more systematic and coordinated European approach to sustainable urbanisation and to the sharing of best practices.

Why built environment links matter

Having exceeded the 50% urbanisation mark only recently, China's speedy development provides plenty of opportunity to build sustainably now and in the future. In expectation of 350 million new urban residents by 2030, the country adds 2 billion m² of floor space to its cities annually, significantly increasing the building sector's share in primary resource intensity and energy consumption (currently standing at one third of overall consumption!). Transforming the landscape in China and elsewhere with infrastructural projects from dams to highways – of which many are debt-financed – the country is said to have consumed almost half of the world's cement supplies since 2000. This comes with global consequences and indicates clearly the importance of the built environment and its production to the global energy supply and resource management debate.

China's rapid urbanisation poses challenges with regard to meeting national energy and carbon targets; continuing economic growth; and fulfilling the growing demand for housing, transportation, environmental and sanitation services. Reducing energy demand is central to the country's ability to reduce emissions by the end of this decade, but this is linked to efficiency in buildings and the energy intensive industry. In its 12th Five Year Programme (2011-2015), shifting the focus of development from the Eastern coast to Middle and Western China, the country has curbed urbanisation rates to 0.8% per year in order to ensure sustained urbanisation, and thus economic growth, over the next twenty years. At the core of its efforts lies *balanced* urbanisation, characterised by resource-saving, environment-friendly, economically-efficient and socially 'harmonious cities'. The country is working to install heat-measuring systems and energy-efficiency

retrofits for 35% of its residential buildings by 2016 and the government is looking to implement a monitoring and management system for its own building stock and commercial sites. To succeed in meeting these and related targets, China needs the support of qualified partners.

The EU, with a population that is 75% urban, holds rich experience in urban development and transition, and its organisations and businesses can promote green technology solutions and invest in eco-actions in China. Some challenges can and should be addressed by a number of relevant industries, including, of course, architectural design and construction services. Business relationships are already thriving in this sector and foreign enterprises, such as Terry Farrell & Partners (UK) and SWCO FFNS (Sweden), signed contracts for 1,418 architectural and infrastructure projects between 2006 and 2010, totalling an actual investment of \$4.4 billion (€3.5 billion). The recently launched EU-China Partnership for Sustainable Urbanisation has the potential to become one of the key initiatives for providing a platform for exchange for architects, urban planners and the industry from both sides.

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