

China Policy Institute: Analysis

Climate Change Activism “With Chinese Characteristics”: The Role of Domestic and Foreign NGOs

Written by Angela Moriggi.

China has recently announced the passing of the long-awaited new Overseas NGO Management Law that will impose police supervision over the work of foreign NGOs operating in the country. The news has sparked a lively international debate, as commentators attempt to envision its effects on the activities of thousands of civil society groups, engaged in a diverse number of fields, more or less controversial in the eyes of the Communist Party.

The law is a further step in the creation of a model of “differentiated management” of NGOs, whereby the government will maintain a tight grip over civil society organizations engaged in potentially sensitive activities while strengthening its partnership with other groups, whose support has become vital to the realization of the state’s agenda.

This ambivalent political and institutional environment has long prompted environmental NGOs to craftily balance their position, in the belief that if the benefits of collaboration outweigh the expected costs of confrontation, different forms of state-society interaction can play an increasingly powerful role in facilitating political change and fostering good governance. In parallel to this, their role has gained increasing importance, as China is now strongly committed to environmental protection and climate change abatement. The latter in particular is a rather uncontested field of activism. While environmental issues such as air pollution and water degradation are more and more the cause of public outrage, often resulting in huge mass demonstrations, people’s raising concerns about climate change are still far from representing a real threat to social stability.

This is somehow also due to the way in which the discourse on climate change has been framed so far in China, and for a long time also at the international level. As put by novelist Jonathan Franzen: “climate change shares many attributes of the economic system that’s accelerating it. Like capitalism, it is transnational, unpredictably disruptive, self-compounding, and inescapable. It defies individual resistance, creates big winners and big losers, and tends toward global monoculture—the extinction of difference at the species level, a monoculture of agenda at the institutional level”. This monoculture of agenda has translated into a dominating focus on solutions such as large-scale innovative technologies and transnational financial mechanisms and, from a scientific perspective, on complex computer modeling.

In September 2015, President Xi Jinping announced the launch of a national carbon emissions trading market in 2017. At the same time, China also declared that it will devote 3.1 billion dollars to assist other developing countries in addressing climate change, further advancing its South-South cooperation agenda, through financial, technology and capacity-building support. In this perspective, in fact, climate change is not only a challenge, but also a source of opportunities to foster economic growth and international political leverage. It does not surprise then that China is one of the most sophisticated countries in absorbing new technology and has been highly successful in commercializing and scaling up the deployment of renewables and other technologies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Foreign and domestic NGOs' have played an important part in contributing to the implementation of such objectives (Greenovation Hub, Greenpeace East Asia, WWF China, WRI, The Climate Group China, among others). GHG emissions abatement has also driven NGOs' work in awareness-raising campaigns for sustainable lifestyles, mitigation projects at the community level, and partnerships with business enterprises to encourage investments in low carbon technology development and application (a few examples are Global Village of Beijing, Green Earth Volunteers, CANGO, Shan Shui Conservation Center). Many NGOs are also very active in international negotiations, contributing to improve China's international image, as they lobby for the country to play a strong leadership role in the global debate on climate change.

Yet, this prevailing focus on technological solutions and balancing acts of power relations in the international negotiation of responsibilities, have detracted the attention from the small scale declinations of the issue, and from the many human faces affected by climate change induced struggles. Social vulnerability to climate change in China is dramatic, to say the least. Against this background, the government has developed a national adaptation strategy only in 2013, and there are still major gaps in the knowledge and processes required to develop effective adaptation policies at national and local levels, especially in the field of stakeholders engagement. NGOs role has also been important in this respect. In April 2014, a coalition of seven environmental civil society organizations has released a joint statement following the publication of the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report, pushing for more stringent and concrete adaptation measures to be included in regional and industrial development plans.

Moreover, their involvement at the grassroots, especially in rural communities particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events, have prompted a few NGOs to highlight the need for participatory approaches in the design of place-based adaptation programs. Yet, such experiences have had a marginal impact in the wider debate, and sustained advocacy on these issues is impeded by a fragmented picture of competing agendas working across the climate policy arena, where different institutional stakeholders are involved in developing consensus on climate policy for each substantive area.

The above-depicted scenario will evolve in different and manifold ways in the coming years. China is no monolithic entity, and it will need to engage in multiple pathways to fully realize the transformation to a sustainable low-carbon future. In which ways and to what extent, civil society organizations will be allowed to play a leading and progressive role in this transition, will depend also on their capacity to operate in the interstices of a restrictive political and institutional environment, and courageously exploit the opportunities given by an incredibly resilient governance system.

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