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## Ecological Civilization: What's in It for Urban Sustainability?

By Costanza Termine<sup>1</sup>, Davide Buono<sup>1</sup>, Andrea Critto<sup>2</sup>, Angela Moriggi<sup>1,3</sup>, and Daniele Brombal<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University Venice

<sup>2</sup> Department of Environmental Sciences, Informatics, and Statistics, Ca' Foscari University Venice

<sup>3</sup> Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke)

The concept of [ecological civilization](#) (shengtai wenming 生态文明) has been gaining increasing importance in China's official discourse on sustainability. It calls for a readjustment of the relationship between humans and the natural environment they inhabit, based on a systemic approach to development. Domestic and international observers are still divided over its concrete implications for urban sustainability: does it have a potential to trigger positive change? Or is it rather a rhetorical tool, a buzzword void of any substance?

To find an answer to these questions, a team of MA students of the Department of Asian and North African Studies and MEDIUM researchers at Ca' Foscari University Venice are conducting a systematic review of assessment systems devised to measure progress towards urban ecological civilization. The work is based on the assumption that such systems act as normalizing tools, favoring the adoption of practices consistent with the evaluation criteria they employ. By looking into assessment systems, we can therefore gain valuable insights on the potential of ecological civilization for urban sustainability.

So far, the team has screened 25 assessment systems, published on Chinese scientific journals between 2008 and 2015. A total of 758 indicators have been extracted and characterized based on different dimensions of sustainability and relevant assessment criteria. The definition of dimensions and criteria has been conducted by triangulating scientific literature and Chinese policy documents, in order to allow for comparison with [previous studies](#) and to reflect [recent policy developments](#).

Preliminary results show that systems have a large predominance of environmental and social indicators, respectively 49% and 25% of the total. If we cluster together social, cultural, and policy indicators (which often go indistinctly under the dimension 'society'), they account for 37% of the total. The potential for ecological civilization driven innovation is evident in the cultural and policy dimensions. Indeed, they appear to attach particular relevance to aspects such as ecological and environmental awareness, education and research related to ecological issues, and—albeit to a lesser extent—to the embracement of ecological lifestyles.

As to what extent ecological civilization is bound to influence urban governance still remains to be ascertained further. Two aspects are key in this respect: (a) the degree and extent of participation of stakeholders in the process of development of indicators systems; and (b) their concrete application in real-life scenarios, to inform urban policy evaluation and formulation. This will be the next task for our team.

If you want to know more on our ongoing work on ecological civilization and urban sustainability, please share your inquiries with Dr. Brombal at: [daniele.brombal@unive.it](mailto:daniele.brombal@unive.it).

**Figure. Reviewed indicators characterized by dimension (n.) and selected criteria (%)**

