

# The Impact of Global Environmental Mega-Conferences on Institution Building and Transnational Society on China's Environmental Governance

## Abstract

Environmental mega-conferences, such as the UNCED and the WSSD, and most recently Rio+20 have become a recurring feature of global environmental governance. However, their effectiveness has increasingly become questioned. The call to end these expensive and ineffective mega-conferences becomes louder. Such negative conclusions are based on assessments of horizontal effects in terms of international regime building and – to a lesser extent – in terms of the development of global transnational society. This paper, however, focusses on the vertical influences of such mega-conferences: institutional and policy changes; and the role of non-state actors in environmental governance in the national governance context. The case of China is of special interest because of China's growing presence and weight at such conferences, and its growing stake in global environmental change. The strong presence of non-state actors and the priority attached to environmental issues at environmental mega-conferences have not always featured large within China. But China's policy priorities and environmental governance institutions have changed radically in recent years, as well as the role of non-state actors. This article discusses to which extent and how environmental mega-conferences have influenced environmental governance in China, both in terms of institutional and policy development as well as the development of NGO and non-state sector participation. In contrast to the mostly negative assessments of (recent) environmental mega-conferences, the author argues suggests that such conferences can have major impacts on environmental governance at the national level.

## Keywords

Global environmental governance, China, Sustainable development, International negotiations, Transnational actors

## 1

## Introduction

Environmental mega-conferences, such as UNCED and WSSD, have become recurring features in global environmental governance. Scholarly discussions of these conferences seem to concentrate on whether they have led to greater legalization and institutionalization of environmental issues at the global level. For instance, in the run-up to the latest mega-conference, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (Rio+20), a group of influential scholars expressed hope that Rio+20 would be a 'constitutional moment' for strengthening institutions of global environmental governance (F. Biermann et al. 2012). Another strand of scholars focus on the transnational and networking aspects of environmental mega-conferences (Gill Seyfang 2003; Gill Seyfang and Jordan 2002; Conca 2005; Friedman 1999; Death 2010a). These approaches share a horizontal focus on international and supranational developments. Even when some scholars investigate whether conferences yield greater legitimacy and responsiveness by national governments (i.e. Haas 2003; Sun 2007), the viewpoint is usually that of the effectiveness of international regimes and institutions: whether national governments comply or not. The vertical impacts, in particular the influences of mega-conferences on particular countries have rarely been investigated. Only a few studies been conducted on particular topics, such as the impact of UN conferences on women's movements in Venezuela (Friedman 1999) and Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2011). The case of China and the impact of international conferences has been investigated by only few scholars. Heggelund and Backer (2007) focused on the influence of UN institutions (and conferences) on environmental policy development, while Roch e.a. (2007) investigated the impact of international conferences on environmental education in China. The current study extends this earlier research by questioning how environmental mega-conferences have impacted on China's environmental governance.

Mega-conferences have originally been coined to describe large UN conferences (Gill Seyfang 2003; Gill Seyfang and Jordan 2002; Gaventa 2010), and have also been referred to as mega-events (Death 2010a, 2010b). Mega-conferences are characterized by high level attendance by heads of states; the involvement and attendance by thousands of stakeholders, including civil society representatives; and the extensive coverage by international

media. Seyfang and Jordan (2002) point out six core functions of mega-conferences. First, mega-conferences facilitate global agenda setting as they bring together a variety of stakeholders to discuss common problems. Second, they stimulate integrated thinking about environment and development. Third, they produce common principles, agreements, joint statements, and new laws. Fourth, they provide global leadership for national and local governments to implement international agreements. Fifth, they increase institutional capacity in environmental governance, for instance through mandating new institutions. Finally, they legitimize global governance through making the process more inclusive. Not every mega-conference delivers on all these functions, rather, the core functions act as measures to assess individual conferences (Gill Seyfang 2003). Alternatively, Carl Death characterizes mega-conferences as *political theatre*, not in the sense of meaningless shows (a “travelling circus”), but as a “stage on which the principal actors of world politics can perform their roles, and particular norms, standards and examples, to a worldwide audience” (Death 2010a: 24). Mega-conferences therefore act to reveal which actors matter, which are considered legitimate, and which are considered irresponsible and obstructive. Authors disagree on which conferences constitute environmental mega-conferences. Seyfang and Jordan (2002) include the 1972 Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), the 1992 Rio de Janeiro UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the 1997 5-year review of progress since Rio at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Sustainable Development in New York (UNGASS), and the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). Jonathan Gaventa (2010) includes some climate change summits, in particular the Conference of the Parties held in Bali in December 2007 and the Copenhagen United Nations Climate Change Conference (Copenhagen Summit) in December 2009. Gaventa’s inclusion of issue specific conferences seems to contradict Seyfang’s understanding that mega-conferences address broader social, economic and ecological interests, however climate change has become an encompassing issue with social, economic and ecological significance. Moreover, climate conferences have attracted media attention, side-events, heads of state, journalists, protesters and NGO representatives, to much the same degree or even more than other mega-conferences. No official canon of environmental mega-conferences exists; a selection of mega-conferences should be made in the light of the needs for particular studies, in this case the impact of mega-conferences on China. It seems reasonable, when discussing China, to largely follow Seyfang’s selection. However, this study will also include United Nations Climate Change Conference (Copenhagen Summit), because this mega-conference has been of particular importance to China’s environmental governance. UNGASS, however, is not included because of its limited impact. Moreover, the latest mega-conference, the 2012 Earth Summit (Rio+20) will be included in the current analysis. When referring to mega-conferences, the author does not merely include the relative short duration of a conference; pre- & post-conference processes are equally as relevant in terms of preparations and follow-ups at the national and sub-national levels of governance.

Two perspectives on influence are applied in this study; an institutionalist one and a transnationalist one. The most familiar is perhaps the institutionalist perspective. It deals with the question: how and to which extent have environmental mega-conferences contributed to institutional and policy development in China? However, a single focus on influence on institutions and policies forgoes the role of (transnational) actors. By transnational actors we mean non-state actors such as research institutes, NGOs, and enterprises. There is agreement that large UN conferences increasingly feature non-state actors (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Lipschutz 1996; Clark et al. 1998). But to which extent and how does participation by non-state actors at mega-conferences influence the role of non-state actors in the national governance contexts? Few scholars have investigated these vertical linkages (notable exceptions are a few studies on the transnational impacts of women's rights organizations: Friedman 1999; Chowdhury 2011). Elora Halim Chowdhury (2011: 8) argues that globalization of movements may engender “disparate and differentiated consequences ... new kinds of divisions and hierarchical relationships ...”. The current study looks at such consequences for the specific context of China, it investigates the development of China’s transnational actors, and how mega-conferences have impacted on their capacities.

This study is based on a review literature and documents, complemented with observations and interviews at the UN headquarters during two sessions of the Commission for Sustainable Development, and with participants and organizers of Chinese NGO delegations. In the author’s experience of doing research in China, too much steering through rigid interview structures is counterproductive, rather interviewees may have more to share by their own accord from personal experience and expertise. Rather than sticking to strict structures, a more flexible approach was used, not dissimilar to e.g. Heggelund and Backer’s (2007). Questions were prepared for individual interviewees, interviewees could share from their expertise and experiences as they deemed fit. This way the author attempted to accommodate for the interviewee’s position. For the ease of interviewees some of the interviews have been conducted on the basis of anonymity, and all had the option to request anonymity for

parts of interviews. While this interviewing method could impact the reliability of this study, in the author's opinion it is the most accountable one especially when topics are considered politically sensitive.

The remainder of this article reviews the influences on China's environmental governance of environmental mega-conferences in chronological order. The final section concludes with a summary of findings and a comprehensive discussion.

## **2 Influences of environmental mega-conferences on China's environmental governance**

### **2.1 UNCHE**

Most accounts about the development environmental governance in China begin with the 1972 UNCHE (Chen 2009; Lester Ross 1998; Edmonds 1994; Michael Palmer 1998). Developing countries, e.g. India, were reluctant to take part in UNCHE because they were concerned that environmental concerns would trump development. The Soviet Union and East European countries even boycotted the conference. However, China was eager attend. Only a year after its reentry into the UN system, China wanted to reassert its position in the international community (Sun 2007). In 1971 a small and informal leading group was established under the State Council to prepare for UNCHE, it was in effect China's first high level environmental institution (Lester Ross 1998). Premier Zhou Enlai organized a group of scientists and engineers to attend UNCHE. This group included Qu Geping, later China representative at UNEP (1976-77), and, chief administrator of the National Environmental Protection Bureau (1993-1998) (Qu and Li 1994). Officially, China did not play a particularly constructive role in the negotiations, dismissing environmental pollution as a problem of capitalist countries (Lester Ross 1998). However, in an interview with WWF China, Maurice Strong (chief organizer of UNCHE) recalls: "The Chinese were very cooperative and they did not want the conference to fail ... Thanks to the Chinese cooperation, the Stockholm Declaration was able to be a full consensus" (Feng 2009). While China's assigned all responsibility of environmental pollution to capitalist countries, most observers agree that UNCHE had a deep impact on the development of environmental institutions in China (i.e. Lester Ross 1998; Chen 2009; Michael Palmer 1998). Through the UNCHE process the Chinese delegation gained experience from other countries, raising the necessary awareness which lead towards the development environmental laws and institutions. By helping to draft the 'Declaration on the Human Environment' China took its first steps towards accepting environmental responsibilities (Cai and Voigts 1993). The most notable influence on China's environmental governance came after UNCHE. China followed the worldwide trend of creating national environmental agencies dedicated to environmental issues (i.e. Conca 2005). At the time of UNCHE, only 26 governments had dedicated agencies, by 1992 the number was up to 144 (Haas 2003: 85). However, the link between UNCHE and institutionalization in China is not straightforward. While UNCHE was a critical event, institutionalization was still subject to considerable political battle (Child et al. 2007). Institutionalization was mediated through a few persistent political leaders. For instance, Qu Geping translated "There Is Only One Earth", an outcome of the Stockholm conference. During the latter phase of the Cultural Revolution Qu was sure to fail at passing censorship, since socialist China did not acknowledge pollution as a problem in socialist countries. However, he managed to publish by writing a preface critical to the capitalist West. In subsequent reprints Qu refuted his own preface (Gharemani et al. 1999). A central role was also fulfilled by Premier Zhou, who convened the First National Conference on Environmental Protection in August 1973, where cases of pollution were reported by delegates from all over China (China Daily 2011). At this conference the first regulations concerning the "Protection and Improvement of Environment" were approved, and a the policy framework was approved to "protect the environment and bring benefit to the people" (Qu and Li 1981). Provinces followed suit, organizing their own conferences which in turn led to the establishment of environmental protection bureaus at lower levels of government (Edmonds 1994). By 1986 the majority of provinces had established environmental protection bureaus. In 1974 the Environmental Protection Leading Group of the State Council was formed, an informal and not officially authorized government body (Harashima and Morita 2001: 3). In 1982 an environmental protection bureau was formed within the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction. Its influence was limited as it had to compete with multiple bureaucracies in higher positions. To remedy the weak position, in 1984 the State Council created the State Environmental Protection Commission instead. The Commission met four times annually and relied on consensus of representatives from about forty ministries. In 1988 it became the National Environmental Protection Agency with a departmental level under the direct control of the State Council, rendering the

environmental bureaucracy a stronger and more independent status. Members of the Chinese delegation to the UNCHE would continue to fulfill influential posts in China's newly created and developing environmental administration, for instance Qu Geping became chief administrator of the National Environmental Protection Bureau in 1980s.

UNCHE also marked the beginning of China's international environmental diplomacy. China joined an increasing number of international institutions and became party to a growing number of bilateral and multilateral agreements. Bi- and multilateral cooperation intensified over the next two decades. WWF was the first international environmental NGO to enter China, to work on the protection of giant pandas. The International Union for the Conservation Nature (IUCN) set up office in the early 90s. The role of domestic non-state actors in the early 70s was limited to scientists. The first environmental NGOs were yet to be registered. However, the few international NGOs that entered China continued to expand bi- and multilateral collaboration.

## **2.2 UNCED**

While UNCHE marked China's entrance to the international community of states, UNCED marked the normalization of China's international relations after the dramatic events of 1989 (Heggelund and Backer 2007: 7). Beijing tried to position itself as the leader and spokesperson for developing countries by hosting a ministerial conference in preparation for UNCED. Ministers from 41 developing countries agreed on the "Beijing ministerial declaration on environment and development" (Lester Ross 1998) which identified poverty as the main cause of environmental degradation in the developing countries. It called for international cooperation and greater financial aid, in particular the establishment of a Green Fund to provide financial assistance to environmental projects in developing countries. The declaration reasserted the right to development and disapproved of interference in domestic affairs by developing countries. Just before UNCED, the World Bank in collaboration with Chinese authorities, produced a study analyzing environmental problems, causes and policies in China (World Bank 1992). In response, the Chinese government, with assistance by the Canadian government, set up the China Council for International Co-operation on Environment and Development (CCICED), consisting of over fifty Chinese and foreign members to advise the government on sustainable development. All Chinese members of the CCICED had Ministerial or Vice-Ministerial ranks, while international experts, had comparable standing (Drake 1997). CCICED was inaugurated in April 1992, and Song Jian, State Councilor and chairman of the environmental protection commission, was appointed Chair. Qu Geping was among the vice-chairs. CCICED outlived the initial five-year mandate and continues to encourage cooperation, e.g. introducing experiences from other countries to China.

In June 1992 Song Jian led the Chinese delegation to UNCED. Premier Li Peng also attended, delivering a speech reiterating the Beijing ministerial declaration. Despite its insistence on development and financing, China signed the Convention on Biological Diversity, which would entail considerable constraints on development in some of China's underdeveloped regions (Chen 2009). In fact, China became the first major state to ratify the Convention. UNCED also produced the International Framework Convention for Climate Change, the Agenda 21 action plan for sustainable development, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the Forest Principles. Especially Agenda 21 had significant institutional effects on China. Agenda 21 was a comparatively straightforward plan of action. Indeed, following UNCED Premier Li Peng, "made a commitment to conscientiously implement resolutions adopted at the Conference" (Michael Palmer 1998). Agenda 21 was integrated into China's Ninth Five-year Plan which adopted sustainable development as policy at all levels of government. This represented a substantial shift in the government's development strategy which until then prioritized economic development. Now sustainable development became the government's leading strategy (Johnson 2009: 54). The policy change was reflected in the organization of environmental governance. In 1993 a new a top-level advisory body was set up to implement Agenda 21 (ACCA 21). Moreover, the State Council responded to the UNCED by setting stricter deadlines for regulatory enforcement (Lester Ross 1998).

While scholars agree on UNCED's of institutional and policy influence on China (i.e. Heggelund and Backer 2007; Johnson 2009), few have observed transnational influences on China. According to Sheri Liao, founder of Beijing Global Village (an NGO which co-organized China's first NGO delegation at the WSSD), the Chinese delegation was embarrassed by the lack of Chinese NGO representation in comparison to other countries

(Economy 2004: 126). According to Elizabeth Economy (2004) this appears to have contributed to the emergence of environmental NGOs in China. Similarly Matzuwa (2007: 8) observed that a "Global NGO Forum" held concurrently with UNCED raised awareness with the Chinese government delegation that NGOs may be useful. This allegedly has led to the establishment of China's first individually organized environmental NGOs. It should be noted, however, that the government's 'embarrassment' over the lack of Chinese NGOs may have been overstated, and is certainly not proven. The fact is that many NGOs were established in the period between UNCED and WSSD and they would greatly impact on China's engagement with subsequent mega-conferences and on China's environmental governance.

### 2.3 WSSD

The WSSD is most remembered for the introduction of Partnerships for Sustainable Development (PFSD) as official (so-called type 2) outcomes. During preparatory meetings the Chinese delegation was not supportive of PFSD as an official outcome, because it would allow international partnering between state and non-state actors without consent of the government. In theory, Western governments and organizations could use the PFSD scheme to support civil society that are in opposition to the government<sup>1</sup>. It took the organizing bureau of WSSD a closed meeting with the Chinese delegation to get them agree on PFSD. According to Zehra Aydin<sup>2</sup>, member of the organizing bureau, China was convinced after they were reassured that the influence of PFSD would be limited. Strictly speaking, only partnerships that were presented at WSSD count as type 2 outcomes. Partnerships registered after the WSSD could be regarded as falling outside the official scheme – in case they would be perceived as overstepping the sovereignty of states. This formalistic argument sufficiently relegated the status and of PFSD for the Chinese delegation to agree. The vertical influence of the PFSD outcome was therefore limited from the start. Nonetheless, 55 of the partnerships registered with the UN Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) claim to implement some of their activities in China. While the influence of PFSD on China's environmental governance formally had been curbed, in practice individual partnerships could still influence aspects of environmental governance at the locally. The overall effectiveness and legitimacy of PFSD have been thoroughly assessed in several studies (Andonova and Levy 2003; Biermann et al. 2007; Frank Biermann et al. 2012). Generally these studies conclude that partnerships failed to deliver better inclusiveness and more effective governance. Most partnerships have no monitoring mechanisms; they failed to engage business actors and marginalized stakeholder groups; more than 40% of PFSD failed to deliver even rudimentary outputs necessary to achieve their functions (Frank Biermann et al. 2012; Chan 2012). The failure of the PFSD scheme was to some extent foreseeable; the CSD as administrating organization lacked the mandate and capacity to monitor and decide on the registration of partnerships. While the record of PFSD as a global institution has been extensively assessed, few studies have explored the effects of PFSD on national and local level governance. It may therefore come as a surprise that recent studies of PFSD in China indicate relative success in terms of outputs (Chan 2009, 2012). However these studies also indicate that PFSD in China are largely foreign led; and the contribution by domestic actors, in particular NGOs and business, is very limited. In terms of institution building, the influences of the PFSD scheme on China are therefore limited.

In terms of policy changes, the influence of the WSSD is more noticeable. The Chinese government drafted a Programme of Action following the WSSD which according to Heggelund and Backer (2007:8) is more binding than the White Paper issued after UNCED. Moreover, during the WSSD China unexpectedly announced its ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. This had major consequences. First, China helped to attain a sufficient number of signatories to make the treaty binding. Second, the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol represented a major policy change on climate change. Before the WSSD, the government's concern with climate change was mainly as a science phenomenon. By agreeing to the Kyoto Protocol climate change became inscribed as a norm in Chinese politics (M. Schroeder 2008: 514). This had major consequences for the development of China's climate policy and institutions at both central and local levels (Qi et al. 2008; Heggelund 2007). It should be noted that while China's participation in international conferences and international pressure certainly had an effect, the government's realization of China's vulnerability to climate change is perhaps a more important as a driver behind norm-inscription and institutionalization.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview Jan Pronk, Special UN envoy to the WSSD, 22 April 2008, The Hague,

<sup>2</sup> Interview Zehra Aydin, member of organizing team of WSSD, 17 May 2008, New York.

In spite of the limited influence of the PFSD in China and despite the fact that international impacts are difficult to distinguish (e.g. in the case of climate change), the WSSD is still looked upon as rather important for China's environmental governance because of the development of transnational organizations and networks, in particular through the debut of a large Chinese NGO delegation in Johannesburg. About 30 Chinese environmental 'Governmentally-Organized NGOs' (GONGOS)<sup>3</sup> (see: Wu 2003) and NGOs were sponsored by the British Embassy, the Ford Foundation, Canada's Civil Society Project, and the Heinrich Böll Foundation to take part at the WSSD. Apart from organizing a workshop, Chinese NGO delegates were mainly there to learn and to observe how foreign NGOs worked. The unexpected Chinese NGO delegation prompted skepticism; the Tibet Campaign suspected the delegation was government-organized to disrupt their events (International Campaign for Tibet 2002). An NGO delegation organizer recalls: "There were these excited (Tibetan) NGOs ... Of course they criticized us, our delegation, for supporting the [Chinese] government ... [we told them] not to confuse the Chinese [government] delegates [with NGO delegates]"<sup>4</sup>. The Chinese NGO delegation was indeed a private initiative. One of the initiators was Dorit Lehrack, then international officer at the China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO). When the Chinese delegation prepared for the WSSD "Prominent environmentalists were invited for consultation, not as NGO representatives but as scientists. ... This was the point where we jumped in because why would they utilize famous people and scientists but not utilize the environmental movement itself?" Lehrack used her personal contacts to call together an informal group, including Huang Haoming (executive director of CANGO) and Xie Zhenhua, Director of the State Environmental Protection Agency and Minister for the Environment. The NGO delegation received logistic support from the government (issuing passports, booking planes) but there was no intervention in the substance and the operations of the delegation. This relative freedom was based on trust, "if the government wouldn't have liked one of these NGOs, of course that would have been an issue". But most challenges were hardly political, rather they related to engaging of an inexperienced group of NGO representatives. "Some of the people had not even been in Beijing. We thought: does it make sense to bring them to Johannesburg? ... So before we sent people out, we arranged trainings with Beijing Global Village [NGO]. They organized about ten preparation trainings; to explain what is going to happen." The influence of the NGO delegation on the WSSD process was limited; there was no opportunity for the them to meet the government delegation; the NGO delegation was mainly confined to a center where civil society groups gathered; and they were never invited to give a statement, since none of the Chinese NGOs had a an observer status with the UN. However, the WSSD was a great opportunity for the inexperienced Chinese NGO representatives to learn and to network. The NGO delegates were impressed by their experience "When the Chinese came home they said: we made a lot of friends and we understand much better"<sup>5</sup>. After the WSSD a follow-up workshop was held in Nanjing. A document was drafted laying out twenty priorities for environmental NGOs in China. A brochure was also produced providing information for future NGO delegations. Also, the idea of a 'China Civil Climate Action Network' (CAN) was conceived. CAN still exists and enjoys a kind of an 'observer status' with the Chinese government, as it is regularly invited for consultation. Since the WSSD, Chinese NGO delegations have become a recurring feature at environmental mega-conferences. After the WSSD follow-up meeting delegates kept contact, for instance through internet. Lehrack recalls "They started mailing with each other. Later a group of them went down to Yunnan. They [the government] wanted to construct the next dam at the 1st slope of the Yangtze River; a big dam building project, which was finally prevented by the Chinese network of NGOs, with help from the media. This was a follow-up of this Johannesburg thing."

## 2.4 Copenhagen Summit

China was eager to present itself as a responsible power at the Copenhagen Summit, rising up against the challenge of climate change. In the run-up to the Copenhagen Summit, in particular at the Tianjin and Bali preparatory meetings, China found itself diplomatically in a relatively comfortable position. Climate change had become a priority issue in China between 2002 and 2009. Since 2007, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao chaired a High Level Leading Group on Climate Change, coordinating climate policy between different departments. In advance

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<sup>3</sup> GONGOs are often seen as extended arms of the central government, 'fake NGOs' in fact they can achieve relative independence and influence (see: Wu 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with NGO delegate to WSSD, October 2011, Beijing.

<sup>5</sup> Interview Dorit Lehrack, organizer of the WSSD NGO delegation, 21 March 2011 Beijing.

of the Copenhagen Summit, energy intensity targets were formulated. In case Copenhagen would fail it seemed that the US would be blamed as it consistently resisted international commitments. The Chinese delegation therefore had reason to go to Copenhagen with some confidence. China announced it would set up a 'China Information and Communication Center' at the venue, where experts would give lectures and senior members of the negotiation team would hold daily press conferences (Hsu and Zhao 2011). Such openness towards the international media was unprecedented. However, instead of coming across as transparent, cooperative and responsible, China found itself being scapegoated for the conference's failure. As China was forced in a defensive position in the second week, the daily press conferences quite suddenly stopped, feeding even more negative responses with the international media. At the Copenhagen Summit the international community failed to agree on the expected concrete outcomes, emission targets and deadlines. China was blamed, and the Copenhagen Summit turned out to be a PR disaster. The UK Energy and Climate Change Secretary Ed Miliband argued that China led a group of countries to "hijack" the negotiations (Vidal 2009). Federal chancellor Angela Merkel allegedly fell out against China "Why can't we even mention our own targets?" (Lynas 2008). Climate commentator and advisor to the delegation of the Maldives, Mark Lynas, wrote a commentary with the title: "How do I know China wrecked the Copenhagen deal? I was in the room"(Lynas 2008). A Beijing based foreign journalist<sup>6</sup> remarked the media portrayal of China as the saboteur was certainly one-sided. He argued that China got blamed because the Chinese delegation did a bad job at handling international media and the fact that Chinese diplomats lack freedom to negotiate within a predetermined bandwidth. Negotiators constantly need approval by ministries and State Council agencies. When negotiations take unexpected turns (for instance the US delegation playing up monitoring and reporting and verification [MRV]), rigid diplomatic control is difficult to combine with openness towards media.

Surprisingly, China's international PR disaster did not prevent some positive impacts on institutions, policies and transnational actors in China. For instance, the Copenhagen Summit saw the attendance of the first Chinese Youth delegation, an initiative by Chinese overseas students in the United States who wanted to set up such a delegation after the example of Western youth groups<sup>7</sup>. More importantly, the experience at the Summit has led to the reappraisal of the role of NGOs and media. After the conference China's lead negotiator and vice minister of China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Xie Zhenhua, declared that "China is willing to be transparent. But we want to get the details clear and principles decided"(Meng 2010). A meeting was held between him and civil society organizations to discuss the delegation's approach to next rounds of talks. Civil society organizations were seen as instrumental in improving China's image. At subsequent UN negotiations in Cancún (and at Rio+20), the presence of Chinese civil-society and media organizations was much larger (Hsu and Zhao 2011). Copenhagen not only had positive impacts on China's environmental NGOs. After its disappointing outcomes, much of the funding for climate actions by NGOs dried up. The larger NGOs, for instance WWF China, previously had several climate campaigners, after the Copenhagen Summit WWF China could only support one part-time campaigner<sup>8</sup>.

In terms of influences on institutional and policy development in China, Copenhagen may have had a positive impact. According to Patrick Schroeder, international officer at CANGO, "China got a lot of pressure from the media, and was internationally blamed for the failure. This actually had very big impact on what has been happening in China in terms of climate change. This made China more pro-active: work on emissions trading, work on carbon reporting by companies, the whole MRV. Also it made things happen in terms of climate change legislation. So in this respect, you could say [the impact] was positive."<sup>9</sup> Another expert on China and climate change, Christian Ellermann<sup>10</sup> affirms the rapid developments in climate change policies and institutions in China, however he remarks that this is hardly the result of the shaming and blaming in Copenhagen alone. Copenhagen may have had policy and institutional impacts, but it is unlikely that the impact of international

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<sup>6</sup> Q&A with Beijing based journalist, January 2010

<sup>7</sup> Interview Lina Li, officer at Greenovation Hub, Beijing, 11 July 2012

<sup>8</sup> Interview Lina Li

<sup>9</sup> Interview Patrick Schroeder, international officer at CANGO, Beijing, 4 July 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Interview Christian Ellermann, Chief Representative Ecofys BV in Beijing, 5 July 2012.

'shaming' alone can motivate institutional and policy change. Rather domestic developments are probably more important drivers, such as the development of 'low-carbon economy' as a domestic discourse<sup>11</sup>.

## 2.5 Rio+20

Rio+20's main outcome, a document titled "The Future We Want" mostly reaffirmed earlier agreements; references to the themes of the conference, 'governance reform' and 'green economy', largely remained rhetoric. The most substantial commitment seemed to be the announcement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), as a follow up to the Millennium Development Goals which expire in 2015. However, themes, time schedules and targets have yet to be decided. While Rio+20 has been widely regarded as disappointing, it does not imply that the impact on institution-building and policies in China is also insignificant. Once a concrete set of SDGs has been formulated, implementation in China may require new policies and institutions. Given the weak outcomes of Rio+20 it could, however, be expected that its influence on Chinese institutions and policies will be limited. Another influence of Rio+20 on China's environmental governance may be the strengthening of non-state actors. In fact, the unsatisfactory intergovernmental outcomes may incentivize non-state actors take a lead (P. Schroeder 2012). It is too early to determine exactly the vertical influences of Rio+20 on China, but there are indications that the Rio+20 process has led to closer collaboration between NGOs and business.

More than 20 Chinese NGOs participated at various Rio+20 side events. Since the Copenhagen Summit the Chinese government encouraged (GO)NGOs to participate, in an effort to improve China's image. According to Patrick Schroeder, international officer at CANGO, the Secretary of the Conference and vice-minister for the environment Shu Zhukang said: "China doesn't have to be afraid of NGOs", indicating the collaborative relation between the environmental state bureaucracy and NGOs. Compared to the "China Information and Communication Centre" in Copenhagen, the Rio+20 China pavilion featured more NGOs and businesses<sup>12</sup>. The number of side-events organized by Chinese organizations was unprecedented, in Johannesburg one event was organized, at Rio+20 more than ten side-events were held. This is especially relevant since side-events at mega-conferences have arguably become main events at environmental mega-conferences (Fahn 2012), attracting more media attention than e.g. high level meetings. At these side-events Chinese NGOs attract the spotlights of international media, foreign delegates, and international NGOs. Subsequently the Chinese government also pays more attention to 'their' NGOs<sup>13</sup>. Chinese NGOs make use of this exposure and attention to go a bit further in commenting and criticizing sustainable development policies than they would do in a purely domestic setting. For instance, the Rio+20 outcome was officially welcomed by the Chinese government, but some Chinese NGOs, among them CANGO, signed a petition ("The Future We *Don't* Want") in opposition of the outcome, placing themselves within an acceptable range of opposition to the official government position.

At Rio+20 a large delegation of Chinese business representatives made its debut. With funding from the "Alishan Society of Entrepreneurs and Ecology Foundation" (SEE), NGOs "Shan Shui Conservation Center" and "Greenovation Hub" organized a series of side-events called "China Going Green Dialogues" (CGGD) (Wang 2012). Business delegates presented commitments and proposed sustainable development solutions. Twenty companies took part, like real estate developers Vanke and Vantone, Broad Air Conditioners, and Esquel Group textiles. According to Lo Sze Ping, co-chair of CGGD and director of Greenovation Hub the partnering between "supposed polar opposites" represents a "breakthrough partnership between China's businesses and environmentalists" (Mullin 2012). According to the organizers this was the "first ever collaboration between Chinese NGOs, private foundations and enterprises" at a UN conference<sup>14</sup>. Rio+20 could therefore be considered as a breakthrough in terms of participation of Chinese businesses and business-NGO partnerships. The NGO-business partnership at Rio+20 is the culmination of developments that started in 2004, when SEE was initiated with the 'Alashan Declaration', in which entrepreneurs acknowledged that the economic growth led to the deterioration of the natural environment (Society Entrepreneurship & Ecology 2005). By 2005 SEE listed 80

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<sup>11</sup> Ellerman, C. & Mayer, M. (forthcoming). Chinese Framings of Climate Change. From moral responsibility to low carbon economy.

<sup>12</sup> Interview Patrick Schroeder

<sup>13</sup> Interview Patrick Schroeder

<sup>14</sup> Interview Lina Li



signatories, mostly business executives, who acknowledged ‘new responsibilities’ and pledged (financial) support to fight desertification. The CGGD at Rio+20 represented the extension of SEE’s work beyond the issue of desertification, towards the environment as a general field of interest. It remains to be seen whether the business-NGO partnership at Rio+20 is a temporary arrangement or whether it will herald lasting corporate responsibilities in environmental issues. Vantone CEO Feng Lun, a former official turned real estate developer and one of the founders of the SEE foundation, believes that business involvement is not a singular event, because China’s growing philanthropic sector create possibilities for corporate-sector partnerships to expand (Wang 2012). According to Lina Li, officer at Greenovation Hub, there are indications that there will be a follow-up to the Rio+20 CGGD. After Rio+20, Greenovation Hub was asked by SEE to identify NGOs to receive support<sup>15</sup>. At the launch of the CGGD Feng Lun, in the capacity of chairman of SEE, pledged at least 500 million yuan (\$78.8 million) in support of 500 environmental NGOs over the next five years: “We hope to combine all our forces on this platform to support research institutions, NGOs and our community” (Shanshui Conservation Centre 2012). Such a large private commitment for environmental causes is unprecedented in China. Even when the Chinese charity market has taken off in the recent decade, only 3.4% of donation are given to environmental causes (Yang 2011). Rio+20 provides an interesting contrast with the WSSD in terms of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Even when partnerships emanating from the WSSD implemented activities in China; they were in fact initiatives by foreign NGOs, governments and businesses. At Rio+20 the closer collaboration between NGOs and businesses was a “homegrown” initiative, such localized business-NGO partnerships will stand a better chance to remain part of China’s environmental governance.

### 3

#### Discussion

#### Conclusion &

Environmental mega-conferences are increasingly criticized for not producing the outcomes to put the planet on a more sustainable course, and some argue that Rio+12 be the last of environmental mega-conferences (Halle 2012; Andresen 2012). Indeed it seems like the failures of Copenhagen and Rio+20 are no longer exceptional but the ‘new norm’ (Halle 2012: 4). Especially in terms of new international regimes, institutions and agreements, mega-conferences of the last decade have not been particularly productive. Accordingly media and scholarship are inclined to highlight failure. The current discussion does not deny such critical assessments. It rather points out the limited focus on the formal outcomes of conferences, while relatively little attention is given to transnational effects and - more importantly - vertical effects of environmental mega-conferences. Little attention has been paid to the influences of environmental mega-conferences on lower levels of governance. However, these influences provides additional arguments in supportive of environmental mega-conferences.

The impact of environmental mega-conferences on China implies a top-down effect. While institutional, policy and civil society sector developments are informed by both international and domestic pressures, one observes a co-evolution with environmental mega-conferences. The early conferences, UNCHE and UNCED, have coincided with China’s re-entry into the international community. UNCHE propelled the development of environmental governance institutions. UNCHE negotiators became leading figures of China’s newly established environmental bureaucracy. The UNCED process further institutionalized international high-level collaboration through the CCICED, and sustainable development became China’s leading development strategy. The later mega-conferences featured development of transnational actors, in particular NGOs and business leaders. The WSSD saw the international debut of Chinese NGOs. Some major environmental NGO accomplishments, for instance the stalling of dam construction, has been attributed to the network of NGOs that developed from the WSSD. Since the Copenhagen Summit, the Chinese government involves non-state actors to improve China’s image. Subsequently, Rio+20 not only saw a large Chinese NGO delegation, but also the participation of China’s first business delegation. While the Chinese NGO sector is not completely independent, NGO missions are not strictly instrumental to the state. Rather, a professionalized NGO sector has learned to exploit mega-conferences as an opportunity to make their voices heard, and even subtly criticize government policies.

The vertical influences of environmental mega-conferences on China illustrate why conferences should still take place, despite failure at reaching new international agreements. Environmental mega-conferences asserted

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<sup>15</sup> Interview Lina Li

intended and unintended institutional, policy and transnational impacts in China's environmental governance, and catalyzed institutional and transnational developments in environmental governance. Rather than immediately calling for a moratorium on environmental mega-conferences, they should be assessed for the effects they assort at the national and sub-national levels. For instance, the fact that mega-conferences enable NGOs in authoritarian countries to be more assertive than they usually would be in a purely domestic setting, testifies for mega-conferences, not only as 'constitutional moments' for global environmental governance, but also as an integral and relevant part of the domestic and global environmental governance architectures.

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