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Inequality, trust and opportunity

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In the climate crisis, China can be seen as both perpetrator and victim. **Olivia Bina** and **Viriato Soromenho-Marques** dismiss the finger pointing and look for a constructive, sustainable way forward.

The social theorist David Harvey argues that globalisation is leading to time-space compression. Indeed the world does appear to be changing before our eyes at unprecedented speed. The return of China on the economic and political scene as a major actor is a clear sign of the pace and scale of such change.

In terms of the great debate of our time -- what to do about climate change -- the country is now on centre stage. As we approach the United Nations Climate Change Conference in December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark, a growing number of fingers point accusingly at China, with its "ravenous" quest for resources --particularly energy -- and its rising contribution to greenhouse-gas emissions. The country is considered to be the world's second-largest emitter of carbon dioxide and it already may have overtaken the United States for first place.

China also is regarded as a woefully inefficient user of energy and is said to be consuming more than twice as much as can be provided by its own ecosystem (an ecological footprint equivalent to two Chinas). chinadialogue, for one, has provided evidence and explanations for many of these trends by attempting to provide a balanced view of the facts and opinions from east and west. In the same spirit, this contribution outlines the arguments for a constructive perspective of China's role in global climate change and related negotiations.

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If one agrees that there is a need to find an urgent solution to climate change, then it seems reasonable to state that China is a decisive player. Without China, there can be no post-Kyoto agreement in time to avoid the worst scenarios envisaged by the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The following reflections are based on this assumption. Given global inequality and the pervasive lack of trust between developed and developing nations, it seems irresponsible to point accusing fingers at China. If anything, because the country stands precisely in between those categories (which roughly equate to the Annex 1 and non-Annex 1 signatories of the Kyoto Protocol), and thanks to its rising importance on the global stage, China could be the catalyst for ending the current stalemate.

China's government is quick to remind the world that it remains a developing country (especially for the purposes of the common but differentiated responsibilities" principle). However, it is undeniable that China stands in between the categories of perpetrator and victim, and of problem and solution. With three decades at an average annual 9% growth, China is still very much a developing nation.

However, its resource consumption and pollution levels are overtaking those of the wealthiest nations (though not in per capita terms). According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the world's primary energy needs are projected to grow by 55% from 2005 to 2030. China's primary energy demand is projected to more than double, its oil demand for transport will almost quadruple by 2030 and its net imports of coal (currently almost 70% of its energy mix) may reach 7% of the global coal trade in 2030.

In the IEA reference scenario, CO2 emissions jump 57% between 2005 and 2030 with the United States, China, Russia and India contributing two-thirds. China's per-capita emissions in 2030 would be only 40% of those of the United States and about two-thirds those of the OECD countries. According to this data, China is by far the biggest contributor to incremental emissions over that period. Essentially, the country is on a path to build the largest carbon economy on the planet. Hence the label of "perpetrator", and the perception that China should take responsibility and reduce its emissions.

If these are sobering figures, the implications of the pace and scale of China's growth for the environment are more sobering still. In terms of "victim", like many other developing countries, China stands to suffer from a range of impacts, including rising sea levels, increased droughts and erratic rainfall patterns. However, given the limited per-capita resource base of the country and growing pressure on resources from rapid growth, China could be one of the "biggest victims" of climate change, in the words of professor Hu Angang of Tsinghua University.

But in what way can China represent both the problem and the solution? When we consider this question from the country's perspective, climate change becomes both a threat that China cannot ignore and a constraint that must be overcome.

The government is well aware of the link between the country's environmental vulnerability and the Communist Party's overriding objective of maintaining social stability through poverty reduction and economic prosperity. President Hu Jintao places this link at the centre of his Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 15, 2007. He states that the aim of further "sound and rapid economic growth" and the quadrupling of "per capita GDP of the year 2000 by 2020" cannot be questioned.

The party "must regard development as the top priority… of decisive significance for building a moderately prosperous society", he continued. But he also acknowledges that limited resources mandate that the guiding principles for economic achievement must include a "responsibility system for conserving energy and reducing emissions", and the optimising of "economic returns while reducing consumption of resources and protecting the environment".

These principles relate directly to the highly acclaimed "Scientific Outlook on Development", now enshrined in the party's constitution. Hence, there must be growth, but this growth will have to be efficient and with an emphasis on clean technologies and renewable sources of energy.

In other words, we should not expect China to give up its vision of a better quality of life for its people, but we can expect China to move onto a more environmentally sustainable path. The reason is that the Chinese government is aware that the primary constraint to environmentally friendly growth is the economy's dependence on coal and its unwanted by-product, carbon dioxide (CO2). Furthermore, the government accepts that this is a finite world, and a solution must be found to the management of the commons, including the atmosphere's capacity to absorb emissions.

Yu Qingtai, China's top climate-change envoy, acknowledges that climate change "affects not only the development of the global economy and prosperity, but also the very existence of mankind". The single most significant factor of population size and impact is inextricably linked to the country's perception of limits, both within its borders and in terms of neighbouring countries.

Yet the future of the commons is likely to depend as much on the change of unsustainable practices of the richest 20% of the world population (which are responsible for 63% of emissions) as on the population policy and development path choices of countries such as China and India. The commitment to a single-child policy is a price that no other country besides China has contemplated, but all stand to benefit from it, given finite common resources.

Moreover, the population factor introduces the powerful per-capita perspective. China's per-capita emissions are around five tonnes per year, compared to only two tonnes in India or 10 to 12 tonnes for most of Europe, and 20 to 25 tonnes in the United States. Yu 's words, reported by the Associated Press, explains in no uncertain terms that he could not "accept the argument that I, as a Chinese, am only entitled legally to one quarter of what you are entitled to", but also acknowledges that "being equal to an American when it comes to per-capita emissions would be a nightmare for the Chinese". The equitable dimension is one of three core principles (together with efficiency and effectiveness) of Nicholas Stern's new report Key Elements of a Global Deal on Climate Change, recommending a global target of two tonnes of emissions per person by 2050.

There is the complex link between all these issues that makes China both a perpetrator and victim of climate change: part problem, part solution. In terms of "part solution", it seems essential to acknowledge what the Chinese see as important progress and goodwill on their side, including: making the pursuit of a balanced ("scientific") development agenda a priority of Hu Jintao's presidency; linking the issues of global climate conditions to its domestic environmental protection policies; raising energy efficiency to one of the highest priorities of government (with a target of 20% increased energy efficiency by 2010); seeking to introduce clean technologies in key economic sectors, starting with energy production; and having pursued and maintained a single-child policy.

Indeed, there has been progress. The 1990s witnessed a reduction of CO2 intensity by more than 50% through energy saving regulations, changes in energy subsidies and incentive structures. As for industry, while China has become the world's factory, some of its energy intensive industries already are adopting more efficient technology (notably steel plants). The government is also promoting a shift towards less energy-intensive industrial sectors, and has been regulating the energy consumption standards of the building and transportation sectors. This is important since the latter sectors are expected to gradually increase their relative contribution to total GDP against a decreased share of the industrial sector.

Of course, good intentions in policies and rhetoric are often -- some would say too often -- compromised by poor implementation and weak governance. However, in context of the poor performance by high-income countries in meeting the targets set by the Kyoto Protocol and the wider sustainability objectives of Agenda 21, it is understandable that the Chinese feel their efforts should receive recognition. It is also acknowledged

that responsibility for greenhouse-gas emissions cannot be allocated by national production levels alone. Should China as producer of energy-intensive goods be held responsible for its emissions (as suggests the regime under the Kyoto Protocol)? Or should consumers be responsible? In 2005, 33% of China's domestic CO2 emissions were due to production for export. These cheap goods are in demand across the globe, and mainly amongconsumers in rich countries. So who is "responsible"?

A focus on emissions within national borders may miss the point. The tightening alliance of the middle- and lower-income countries (in Kyoto Protocol language, the non-Annex I G-77+China and G-5 groupings) want acknowledgement of the simple fact that underlying all the calculations and accusations, we are all pursuing the unsustainable development path that has brought significant global inequality. Once again, China's government position is unequivocal. In the Position Paper of the People's Republic of China at the 63rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2008, it states that "climate change is an issue of development, and should be addressed in the context of sustainable development".

China's progress to date in terms of addressing the rapid rise in emissions may be criticised for being too little given the size of its contribution. But few could argue that from the perspective of a country with 1.3 billion people, a large proportion of whom are still living on US$2 a day or less, China's actions are only as irresponsible as the richest 20% of the world's richest nations emitting 63% of global greenhouse gases. This critique of China is further weakened once we consider that developed nations have largely failed to meet their reduction targets and have fallen short of commitments to transfer funds and technology as designated by the Kyoto Protocol.

It is difficult to see how the poorer 80% of the world should make an effort when the richest 20% have done so little. The dissatisfaction with the existing financial architecture, including the Official Development Assistance target of 0.7% of GNP, is a major obstacle to successful post-Kyoto negotiations. Yu Qingtai warns that "the effectiveness of participation by the developing countries [in the international effort] will, to a significant extent, depend on whether the developed countries will take substantive actions on financial and technological assistance … and capacity building, to facilitate their achievement of sustainable development".

These views are held by several other developing countries, and are further exacerbated by the idea of historical responsibility, whereby rich nations (especially the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan) that emitted large amounts of greenhouse gases in past decades should take responsibility for their "carbon debt" and take additional measures to reduce future emissions.

Hence the stalemate that is reached every time negotiations shift from asking how to address rising emissions to the more fundamental question: why act? For decades, efforts focused on finding a scientific basis for action. But, as negotiations have shown, it is the issue of responsibility that undermines progress. China -- together with India and Brazil – argue that they are committed to addressing the causes of climate change.

But China will not allow climate-change issues to impede its legitimate development of an industrial and infrastructure base, and thus it will not join the Annex I club, nor take on emission reduction targets quite yet. Nevertheless, there is a disparity between China's position at the negotiating table for a post-Kyoto agreement and the country's national interest in addressing the threat that a carbon economy represents for its future.

Economist and government advisor Hu Angang has recommended that it should take a bold approach to climate change: one that links to a broader and more constructive idea of the challenge. He suggests focusing on a low carbon society and, we would add, sustainable development. Hu argues that it is in China's best interest to adopt targets, as this would turn China into an economic and

diplomatic winner.

Indeed, the Climate Group suggests that China has one of the world's strongest growth rates in low-carbon industries, leading to a "real possibility" that China will transform into a global low-carbon leader. If this path is taken, experts suggest that China would overcome the constraints caused by dependence on coal (and thus high CO2 emissions), achieve economic development and energy security, reduce the threat from climate and attain diplomatic recognition.

Ultimately, China is only part of the problem and thus can only be part of the solution. However, what seems unquestionable is the need to engage China in a constructive dialogue. The potential for positive outcomes is high and the benefits will spill over other areas of international concern. The country is demonstrating progress towards a low-carbon economy (albeit with all its limits), and vision for a future of moderate prosperity. The urgency of the situation demands recognition of global inequality and efforts in words and deed to build trust in a common future. Only in this context will China accept the global responsibilities that come with its rapid economic rise.

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