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The UN post-2015 agenda: How Europe and China can take the lead

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The Current Column

of 15 September 2014

The UN post-2015 agenda: How Europe and China can take the lead

Bonn, Shanghai, 15 September 2014. Starting this week, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) will engage in negotiations over the post-2015 agenda for global development. While the Open Working Group of the UNGA has unanimously proposed a substantive catalogue of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is uncertain whether member states can reach a consensus on the new framework. The areas of contestation are manifold: Voices from the developing world fear that poverty eradication and the unfinished business of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will lose in importance. Old industries everywhere resist the shift towards low-carbon models of production and prosperity. Citizens are reluctant to adapt their behaviour in response to the seemingly abstract concept of planetary boundaries. And governments worry about the distribution of costs related to structural transformation at home and worldwide.

Which countries will take the lead in fighting for a meaningful post-2015 agenda? The European Union (EU) and China are likely candidates for a pro-active stance at the United Nations. Both actors have initiated far-reaching changes domestically and they realise the urgency of collective action at the global level. This is the key result of a joint dialogue and research programme undertaken by the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) and the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) over the last two years. The findings are reflected in a fresh DIE publication, co-edited by Thomas Fues and Jiang Ye, under the title "The United Nations agenda for global development: perspectives from China and Europe". In 23 chapters, Chinese and European authors cover a wide range of conceptual and policy-oriented subjects which demonstrate the complexity of identifying a set of goals and targets which are analytically sound and practically feasible at the same time.

The volume – its Chinese version soon to be published there – demonstrates a surprising degree of convergence in European and Chinese thinking, but also points to significant differences. Scholars from both institutions emphasise the historic significance of the post-2015 agenda which aims for a universal paradigm of sustainable development. Both sides maintain that poverty eradication and social progress must stand at the centre of the new framework. Low-income countries will continue to depend on external assistance since they cannot cope with the dual challenge of inclusive growth and resource-light transformation on their own.

Contrary to Germany's official position, contributions from SIIS and DIE concur in underlining the critical role of the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (CBDR), which was introduced in the context of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, as guiding norm for

burden-sharing in the post-2015 agenda. But the operational implications of this remain vague. Chinese scholars emphasise that their country should be ready for enhanced leadership, recognising that North-South cooperation remains as the core of the global partnership with South-South cooperation serving as a useful supplement. Similarly, DIE contributions challenge the German government and the European Union to assume more responsibilities for the design and implementation of Post-2015.

Opposing the call for a binding framework, Chinese and European authors agree that in order to gain universal acceptance and ownership, goals and targets of the post-2015 agenda must build on voluntary commitments by all member states of the United Nations. While impartial and fair mechanisms of performance assessment and mutual accountability are a necessity, coercion and conditionality are not admissible.

Disagreements between the two sides relate to the meaning of national sovereignty and the relevance of political factors. Chinese opinions stress that, although peace and security are clearly a prerequisite to development, such topics should not be listed as explicit goals in the new agenda. In their view, however, it would be acceptable to introduce indicators related to peace and security. In contrast, German scholars generally attribute greater importance to political concerns in the post-2015 context, such as good governance, rule of law and human rights.

Chinese viewpoints are more explicit about overcoming Western dominance in the world order and, to a limited extent, put their hope in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) as an evolving centre of global power. However, just like their German colleagues, they do not call for new multilateral arrangements which would replace, or work in parallel to, existing institutions.

The multi-faceted contributions offer a wide range of policy recommendations in support of closer cooperation between Europe and China in the post-2015 process. The following points could become part of a common approach: Unified, universal framework of MDGs and SDGs, enhanced international cooperation for poverty eradication and 'green' growth as well as structural transformation within planetary boundaries at the national and global level.

It is now up to the European and Chinese governments to recognise their congruent interest in sustainable development and seize the initiative. In order to mobilise sufficient political momentum, EU member states and China need to turn to developing countries and integrate their specific concerns. A year from now, we will be able to tell whether Europe and China have used this unique opportunity for leadership in leading the world towards sustainable, inclusive prosperity.