

Reducing Carbon Emissions: China's Position

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China is the world's highest emitter of greenhouse gases and many outside China argue that it should cap emissions. However, despite a booming economy, Chinese energy use per person is far lower than in developed countries – on average six times lower than the US in 2005. Although millions still rely on coal as their major energy source, CO₂ emissions per person were more than five times lower in China than in the US in 2004.

Under the current Kyoto Protocol – which targets the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions – Annex I (developed countries) have binding commitments to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, while developing countries such as China do not. The international climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009 are likely to form the basis for a post-2012 climate agreement on a new set of commitments. Some feel that large rapidly-developing countries like China, India, Brazil and South Africa should also commit to legally binding emission targets because of their increasing emissions.

The Chinese Viewpoint

China, like most developing countries, actually ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2002 and has made commitments to mitigate climate change, despite the fact that that no international agreement obliges it to do so. Its commitment to tackling climate change is evident. For example, it has a National Climate Change Programme. China has also introduced a renewable energy law, set ambitious renewable energy targets and developed large-scale energy efficiency programmes. In 2008 China urged industrialised countries to take leadership in reducing carbon emissions and openly recognised the need for long-term action by developing countries.

However, China cannot restructure its coal-dominated energy sector straight away; it cannot turn a low-efficient industrial sector into a high-efficient service economy overnight and it cannot fight climate change without international support.

What is a realistic future for China?

China will not mitigate climate change at the expense of economic and social growth; hence it is unlikely that the country will agree to national emission caps. However, agreements for reducing emissions from specific sectors of its economy could be more feasible. Combining climate policy with development policies could create opportunities for soft binding targets to reduce emissions without jeopardising China's economic growth.

The transfer of clean technologies to developing countries is a key issue. New mechanisms and funding could guarantee China access to clean and climate-friendly technologies. The post-2012 climate agreement should include opportunities for technology transfer to enable developing countries to build sustainable low-carbon economies.

Action on climate change by developing countries like China requires international support at local and national levels, as well as larger and more predictable streams of funding. China has ambitious plans to combat climate change. If the post-2012 agreement delivers on the support needed, China might be able to narrow the gap between its plans and their actual implementation and might become a global leader in tackling climate change.



Frauke Urban
Research Fellow
Climate Change and
Development Centre,
IDS