The 15th EU-China Summit: Urbanisation and Sustainable Development

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On 20 September 2012, China and EU representatives met at the 15th EU-China Summit in Brussels. One of the main concerns expressed at the Summit regards swift progress towards energy and climate objectives, and representatives concluded that future research, policy dialogue and business relations should address explicitly the quality of life for city dwellers, both in China and in the EU. Representatives signalled that they will be undertaking increasing efforts with regards to major global challenges – including environmental protection, climate change and, in particular, sustainable development. Sustainable development is defined as human-based, comprehensive, coordinated and balanced development aimed at improving efficiency, preserving the environment and encouraging social integration. Following the recent Rio+20 conference in June 2012, representatives stressed how important the establishment of an Inter-governmental Process on Sustainable Development Goals is for the pragmatic implementation of essential decisions – especially when related to putting in place green economy policies.

Urbanisation plays a central role for sustainable development because it is linked with growing demand for energy and greater consumption of natural resources (for instance, it is estimated that China has consumed more than half of the world’s cement supply over that last decade). China already faces challenges with regard to the carrying capacity of its cities and infrastructure, but leaders are aware that issues related to the supply of energy, housing, infrastructure and other resources are likely to become even more challenging in times of depleting natural resources and as an estimated 350 million new urban residents are expected to move to cities in the country by 2030.

Building on rich experience in urban development and environmentally sensible urban transformation, the EU can contribute greatly to the success of China’s attempts to overcome the challenges of sustainable urbanisation with technical know-how and policy advice. This has been recognised by China and the EU and, less than a year ago in November 2011, they announced plans to become partners on strategic and pragmatic issues of sustainability and urbanisation. The progress made since has been impressive: the EU-China Partnership on Sustainable Urbanisation was introduced at the 14th EU-China Summit in Beijing in February 2012; at the China-EU Round Table in April 2012, sustainable urban
development was one of two main issues on the agenda; and only little later, in May 2012, the EU-China Partnership on Sustainable Urbanisation was officially launched by Vice Premier Li Keqiang and President Barroso. Giving evidence to the speed of Partnership development, an extensive ‘Summer Roadshow’ saw more than ten promotional events in China and the EU take place within only a few months, and efforts to make the Partnership open and accessible to partners in the private sector and across all levels of governance culminated, within the framework of the 15th EU-China Summit on 19-20 September 2012 in Brussels, at the EU-China Urbanisation Forum and the first EU-China Mayors Forum (envisaged to take place annually in the future).

At the first EU-China Mayors Forum, members of the China Association of Mayors and the EU Covenant of Mayors met with architects, urban planners and business sector representatives to debate the possibilities for knowledge exchange and collaboration and the implementation of smart solutions for cities. It is reassuring to observe that the eight side events on 19 September demonstrated multi-dimensional perspectives on sustainable development and included issues beyond purely economic or environmental sustainability which are often overlooked. One of the flagship initiatives of the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership, the EU-China Sustainable Urbanisation Park (SUP), was explored in detail, tracing its development from concept to reality and introducing market opportunities in Shenyang, its host city, to EU businesses. The SUP will contain a residential community, a business park and a light industry park to showcase environmentally friendly methods of construction and green construction products, giving small and medium-sized enterprises the opportunity to establish themselves. Another side event at the Forum was concerned with the realisation of sustainable urban mobility, seeking to co-create new models of sustainable planning; here, European cities presented lessons learned from less successful decisions taken in the past in the context of urban policy and planning so as to help their Chinese partners prevent repeating these mistakes.

Other side events discussed the governance of sustainable urban development; how to turn the challenges of sustainable urbanisation into opportunities; the importance of cultural heritage for sustainable development; the role of demonstration zones for creating win-win business opportunities; the type of business opportunities arising from the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership; and the role of civil society in sustainable development. The EU-China Urbanization Leadership Training Programme was introduced as a new initiative which will be led by the China Academy of Governance. Concluding the event, the Plenary of EU-China Mayor’s Forum, held on 20 September, saw more than twenty mayors and vice-mayors from China and the EU discuss strategies and initiatives in their respective cities.
The cooperation and dialogue between China and the EU on issues of urban planning, energy supply for, and energy demand in, cities have grown considerably and continue to grow. In the immediate follow-up to the Summit, the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership will continue to promote its aims, including sustainable urban development and technology transfer, at dedicated roundtables, study-tours and dialogues in the EU and China. A number of initiatives in the Partnership framework are now about to begin or are already well under way. These include the Eco-Cities Link project, which fosters knowledge exchange in the fields of low-carbon and resource-efficient buildings; partnerships in the field of social policy (for instance, the Social Protection Reform Programme); and partnerships in regional policy, targeting, for instance, the rural-urban interface. One of the most important outcomes of the 15th EU-China Summit is certainly the agreement reached with regards to an EU-China low carbon, urbanisation and environmental sustainability programme which will see €25 million from the EU go towards sustainability-related projects in China, including projects in the realm of sustainable urbanisation. In closing, it is evident that the efforts undertaken on both sides with regards to strategic knowledge transfer as well as commercial transfer of new technologies and know-how promise to deliver innovative solutions to current and future problems related to sustainability and urbanisation.

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