

Final Report: Junior Research Stay at Peking University (PKU)

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The University Alliance for Sustainability program offered me the chance to spend two weeks at Peking University to do research on the question on how the concept of sustainability is framed in the Chinese context and how this is reflected in policy making. Additionally, I was hoping to learn about the use of knowledge in policy making and how impact assessments are being performed in China.

During my stay at PKU I had the chance to look at this concept from very different perspectives as I was able to meet with a number of interesting people, each of whom had a particular view on sustainable development and the implications this has for policy making. I was able to talk to different professors in different fields of environmental research, and had interesting discussions at the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design. Moreover, I met with fellow UAS students at PKU. This did not only give me the opportunity to learn more about my research question, but also to broaden my network and make valuable contacts for possible future research projects.

With regard to my research interest, I learned that sustainable development is high on the political agenda, especially when it comes to urbanization but also rural development. The concept of eco-civilization is increasingly taken up by the government, and policies are created to support a more sustainable economic development. The concept is supposed to address many of China's major environmental issues. It covers environmental issues such as the protection of natural resources, land and water resource management, but also the economic and social dimensions of sustainability addressing the growing economic and social disparities in the Chinese society. The concept goes beyond the Western concept of sustainability. Eco-civilisation is discussed in China as a China-focused strategy, which provides a guiding principle for China's sustainable development. It is rooted in Daoist thinking and seeks to represent the transformation of society from destructive industrial progress towards acknowledging the interdependence between people and nature, and among the different groups society.

Civil society and the general public also seem to be aware of sustainability issues, especially when I compare the level of awareness to my last stay in China five years ago. My interview partners confirmed this observation. Of course, air pollution is one of the mayor concerns because it is very visible and directly affecting people, but also other aspects of sustainable development are high on the agenda in civil society. Especially the social dimension seems to play an increasing role as well although the environmental dimension of sustainable development was predominant in the discussions I had. This increased awareness among society and the more active demand of policy changes towards sustainability are leading to governmental action.

This means, policies for sustainable development are developed quite fast. Also, the demand for scientific knowledge to support policy making in these areas is high. Experts at Universities are increasingly asked for scientific contributions to decision-making. However, there still seems to be room for improvement when it comes to including scientific knowledge in policy making. Currently, there are no formalized, transparent processes. Also, some of my interview partners had the impression, that the government is currently moving fast when it comes to implementing sustainability policies. This fast pace, however, often does not leave room for assessing the interrelations and interdependencies with existing policies so that a more in-depth ex-ante analysis of possible policy impacts may be beneficial to avoid unwanted side-effects.

Before coming to Beijing I already did some research on the different discourses with regard to the concept of sustainable development, and also read about the Chinese concept, the eco-civilisation. However, in Beijing I was able to get access to many documents I would otherwise not have known about. The interviews with contacts at PKU but also in other research institutes proofed very helpful in getting a more thorough understanding of the concept. Still it was challenging to get all the information without knowledge of the Chinese language. I was fortunate, though, to have many contact persons in Beijing who were very helpful in explaining and discussing my questions with me.

Particularly, I want to thank Prof. Xue Ling who welcomed me to his lab. He and his students have been very welcoming and supportive during my stay and enabled me to make the most of my short, but intense and inspiring research stay. I was not only offered a work space in prof. Xue Ling's lab, but I was also fully integrated in the team, which gave me the opportunity to learn more about the research done by Prof. Xue Ling and his students.