

STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF NGOs: PARTNERS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

As a non-governmental organization (NGO), the China Association for Science and Technology (CAST) and many social institutions such as 'Friends of Nature' answer the call of "China's Agenda 21 — White Paper for Population, Environment and Development in China in the Twenty-first Century". This organization, which received the approval of the Chinese government, contributes to sustainable development by means of promoting academic symposia, policy recommendations, public understanding, and international exchange and cooperation.

On 25 March 1994, the Chinese government approved "China's Agenda 21. Chapter 20 of the Paper, "Public Participation in Sustainable Development", which stipulates that, to achieve the goals of sustainable development, it is necessary to seek the support and participation of public and social institutions. The form and the degree of their participation determine the rate at which the objectives of sustainable development are realized.

In addition to a comprehensive program with objectives, policies and actions, the mechanisms and forms for the institutional and public participation in sustainable development were highlighted. In "The roles of the scientific community in sustainable development", several goals were put as follows.

- The procedures for policy-making in environment and development should be made more open and more public. Cooperation between the science and technology sector and decision-makers should be defined and regulated.

- A mechanism should be formed to ensure exchange of information on environmental protection, sustainable development and other areas of common interest between the science and technology sector and the public. This exchange will ensure that the public is correctly informed and kept up to date on important policy decisions and programs, so that the implementation of new government policies and programs will receive more public support and supervision.
- Regulations for science and technology concerning sustainable development should be prepared or revised. Special emphasis should be placed on the important mission of science and technology in coordinating environment and development. In order to gain public support, such regulations should be open to review by the general public as well as the science and technology sector. It should be stated clearly in the regulations that science and technology research activities should be in accordance with the needs of sustainable development.

China Association for Science and Technology (abbreviated hereafter as CAST), its branches at all levels as well as its affiliated organizations put together, is the largest scientific NGO in China. It has 165 members, which are national professional societies, associations and institutes, of these 39 are in physical science, 62 are in engineering, 13 are in agriculture, 22 are in medicine, and 29 are inter-disciplinary societies or science popularization institutions. CAST's local branches extend to all the country's 31 provinces (except Taiwan Province), autonomous regions and municipalities as well as representatives at city and county levels. These branches are also affiliated to local professional societies. In the rural areas, more than 50 000 science popularization associations are established in villages and townships. As a science and technology mass organization, CAST is characterized with the following advantages in promoting sustainable development. It covers a wide range of scientific disciplines, it is involved with academic leaders of various sciences, and it maintains predictive capabilities for the country's scientific, economic and social development. Its inter-departmental, cross-sector and cross-region characteristics enable it to have extensive links so as to overcome compartmentalism. Having no vested interests, its views, suggestions and supervision are objective and fair.

In recent years, some non-governmental organizations for the protection of the environment have become established, e.g. Friends of Nature. This non-profit organization, which was approved by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in March 1994, has the aim of promoting environmental education, raising public understanding of the environment, nurturing a Chinese-style green society, and promoting sustainable development in China.

For many years, China's non-governmental organizations have participated in and contributed to China's sustainable development through various means and channels.

1. Academic symposia and policy recommendations

Following the call from the United Nations for an International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters (IDRND), CAST as an institutional member of the Chinese Committee for IDRND organized with its national professional societies a series of symposia and worked out policy recommendations for implementation.

Entrusted by the State Council in January 1991, CAST hosted a “nation-wide scientific conference on climate change and environmental problems”. In September and October of the same year, CAST invited 60 experts and scholars from 16 national scientific societies in water, agricultural and urban sciences, as well as from Anhui and Jiangsu Provinces, for a meeting. The meeting was aimed at studying the causes of flooding in the Huaihe Valley and the Taihu Lake Valley. After a site visit to the flooded area, the experts held discussions on cause analysis and made policy recommendations. In 1992, CAST organized the Chinese Society of Hydrological Sciences and its local branches from Henan and Shandong Provinces to conduct a joint study with the National Hydrological Commission. The study focused on flood prevention in the lower reaches of the Yellow River. Later, the “Second National Symposium on the Reduction of Natural Disasters” was convened with the active participation of 16 national professional societies.

In 1993, CAST sponsored the “National Symposium on the Prevention of Plant Diseases and Insect Pests”. The participating national societies ranged from plant protection, agro-sciences, forestry, animal husbandry, veterinary medicine, aquaculture, plants, insects, animals, meteorology, microbiology and environmental sciences. Thereafter this form of meeting was held once every year, producing a green paper on insect forecast analysis and comprehensive prevention recommendations, which were forwarded directly to the State Council. In 1994, CAST sponsored the “International Conference on Disaster Alleviation in Coastal Cities in Asia and the Pacific Region”. The conference witnessed the participation of scientists from 12 national societies as well as experts from Japan and the U.K. In the same year, CAST’s local branch in Beijing invited experts and officials from local government to elaborate on the topic of “development and environment of Beijing”. In 1995, CAST sponsored the “Symposium on Sustainable Development of the Yangtze River Valley region in the New Millennium”. The symposium saw the participation of 13 of its national societies as well as its local branches from Shanghai Municipality, Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, Hubei, and Sichuan Provinces.

In 1997, the Committee for the Coordinated Development of Man and Nature, affiliated to the CAST Standing Committee, sponsored an expert forum at which 14 well-known scientists addressed the audience on the coordinated development of man and nature. The Chinese Association of Agricultural Sciences invited more than 100 experts to elaborate on China’s agricultural situation and sustainable development in rural areas. The summaries, together with the recommendations, were sent to the State Council. CAST local branches in Heilongjiang, Hunan, Jiangsu and Yunnan Provinces also held various activities related to sustainable development. In 1998, CAST sponsored the “Third National Conference on the Alleviation of Natural Disasters”. With the co-sponsorship of 13 of the CAST’s national societies, some 500 scholars attended the conference. The Chinese Society of Geological Sciences sponsored a symposium on sustainable development of the resources and environment of karst regions. CAST’s local branch in Jiangsu Province hosted discussions on strategies for sustainable development of cities in the process of urbanization. CAST’s Committee for the Coordinated Development of Man and Nature affiliated to the CAST Standing Committee sponsored the “Expert Forum of Man and Health”.

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Biographical Sketch

Weiwen Wu graduated from Qinghua University in 1960. From 1961 to 1986 he was an assistant, lecturer, and then associate professor of Peking University. From 1986 to 1998 he was Deputy Director of general office, director of policy research office, and research fellow of China Association for Science and Technology. He retired in 1998.