

PRESS RELEASE

Tackling environmental challenges critical for sustainable urbanization

11 September 2014 (Beijing, China) – One of the most pressing issues for China to tackle amidst its development is coping with various environmental concerns particularly heightened by rapid urbanization. With close to 1 percent of total Chinese population - or 13 million – migrating from rural areas to urban centers each year mostly in search of better income opportunities, there is an urgent need for Chinese policy makers to address these challenges.

Chinese urban population is currently at about 53 percent and this is expected to reach as high as 72 percent by 2032. Rapid urbanization in China poses new opportunities, and at the same time, requires policy makers to reflect seriously about what this entails in terms of environmental and energy aspects, as much as meeting needs in infrastructure development and social welfare.

In order to avoid leaving behind “environmental debts” to the future generation, China needs to address its pollution and energy issues effectively to provide for health and wellbeing to its population, warned Cheng Siwei, former Vice Chair of the Standing Committee of National People’s Congress of PRC. He was speaking to an audience of about 350 regional experts at the 22nd General Meeting of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council held in Beijing on 10-11 September.

Rapid urbanization will put the environment under more pressure through the construction of more houses, transport systems and other infrastructure. During a session on the relationship between urbanization and sustainable development, Chen Ying, a senior research fellow from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that it was imperative for China “to pursue low-carbon development” while strengthening international cooperation in the area.

“Urbanization is conducive to growth in early stages of development but varying degrees of inequality or income gap are inevitable,” commented Chul Chung, Vice-Chair of Korea committee for PECC and Executive Director at the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP). Former Prime Minister of France, Michel Rocard, who chaired the session, added that “economic integration enabled by strong institutions is thus key to ensuring that urbanization takes place in sustainable manner and to ensure inclusive development.” Youth in particular should be targeted to bring about needed behavioral changes.

In order to have successful and sustainable urban planning, you need: good institutions and competent management; flexibility based on pragmatism; energy autonomy; while mass urban poverty also needs to be managed, summarized Rocard. When it comes to designing new urban policies, it is desirable to leave some room for local governance to allow for innovative policy tools and decision-making that are more pertinent and specific to the local communities’ needs and circumstances.

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