

# Rural and urban sustainable development in China - NGO perspectives

On 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, Ms Jiaqi Liu from the organization *Friends of Old Villages*, Ms Deng Yang from the *Collaboration Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production*, both participants of this year's NGO Twinning program (<http://www.eu-china-twinning.org/twinner/>) reported on new trends towards sustainable living in both rural and



urban areas in China. They were accompanied by Susanne Fischer and Monika Wirges from the *Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy* who also participated in the Twinning program and just returned from a field trip to China.

We received insights on various forms of sustainable city and village development models in China, including sharing community programs, citizen-focused urbanization, rural economic development strategies and cultural heritage preservation. Jiaqi explained how their small NGO which is dedicated to preserve cultural heritage slowly started to grow into a bigger organization with branches in Shenzhen, Zhejiang and volunteers in more than 1000 counties and cities. Jiaqi described that villages originally are very sustainable in their local economies, do not produce too much waste, usually it was organic waste which would be

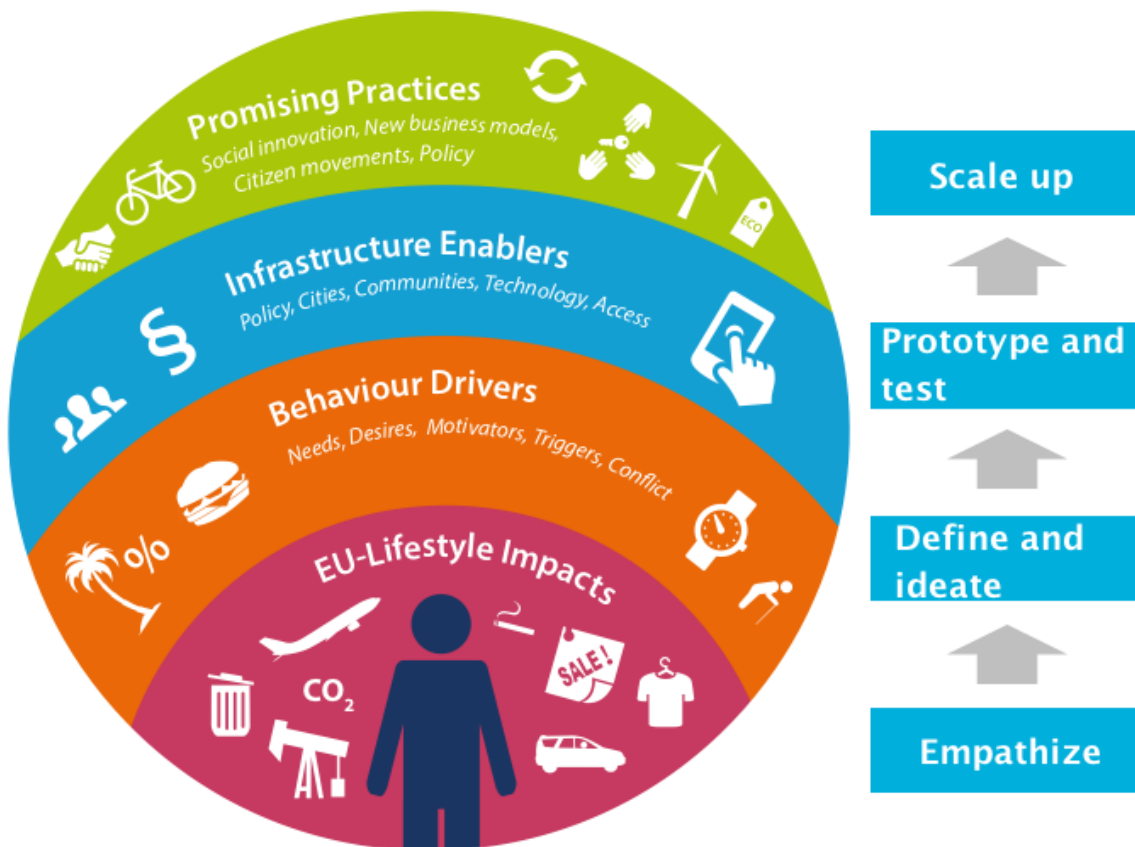
buried in the ground. Also, local knowledge was very important: if villages are located in very hot, humid areas traditional houses were combined with caves which avoided the necessity of air conditioning. Today, 35% of these “cave houses” are abandoned, plastic waste flooding the villages and their rivers. In Dongguan, Shaanxi, Jiangxi or Guangxi the problem is very similar: Villages suffer abandonment and a lack of identity. National studies showed that the biggest density of villages is 48-91/ on 10.000 square meters. Villages will disappear.

Urban planners started to contact them to get advice. They managed to rebuild old school houses and find funding for restoring old Yuan/Ming/Qing dynasty buildings or temples. Nevertheless, the problem is that these buildings are not really used by the village inhabitants.

The aim of their NGO is therefore to preserve villages and make the people appreciate and stay in their villages. They organize environmental clean-ups, supported by successful businessmen/women who return to their villages and help. Local governments are not very supportive.



In the discussion with the audience it was asked how this NGO and Jiaqi think the villagers can be motivated to stay in the villages if they do not have the basic conditions or livelihoods to survive? Jiaqi answered that they focused in the beginning of their work on the cultural preservation. Only later they recognized that social and economic questions cannot be separated from their work. Another question concerned the new national policy of “Building a new countryside” (*xin nongcun jianshi*) which was implemented by the Chinese government 10 years ago. In her view, this policy did not really strive for preservation of cultural heritage. The basic problem seems to be a lack of understanding in cultural heritage. Cultural relicts are not contextualized into the history of the villages and local traditions. One example was the integration of a holy stone into a staircase, transforming this religious symbol into a handrail. Another problem is the gentrification of the countryside. Rich middle class urban population wants to move into the countryside and build their own real estates.



Deng Yang described the topics *Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production* (CSCP) is working on, especially their work on innovations for good living in livable cities. The CSCP is a non-profit limited liability. It was jointly founded by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2005 to establish an internationally visible institution for scientific research, outreach and transfer activities on sustainable consumption and production (SCP). Their approach is to create a people-centered city planning which involves citizens from early stages of urban planning onwards.

Their aims are to develop and produce goods and lifestyles which increase life satisfaction and economic growth but decrease carbon emissions and resource use.

Deng made clear that the first step is to motivate people to change their lifestyle. Secondly, to create add-ons which convince politicians and business. Finally, to integrate citizen visions in business planning, scale it up to the global level and foster global green growth.

As a prototype she introduced her twinning partner in Changsha/China, the P 8 sharing community. From this example, the two organizations want to develop a communal sustainable city and a sharing city initiative globally. The sharing economy is an important part of the 13<sup>th</sup> five-year plan of China. Nevertheless, there is a hot discussion about the use of sharing economies, about a proof that they result in less emission or create jobs. Deng Yang highlighted that there is lots of expertise in sharing economies in the EU which could be transferred to China. The main difference to Chinese approaches is that China mostly uses top-down approaches which are not very well accepted by citizens. Many experiments in China end up in a chaotic employment situation because they were scaled-up too quickly like Uber).

Monika Wirges and Susanne Fischer from the *Wuppertal Institute* bundled up their experiences from their exchange in China with a small NGO recycling clothes in Shanghai. They described the main differences they experienced between the cloth recycling economies in China and Europe. For example the NGO *Bluesky4Children* they visited does door-to-door collections of used clothes in Shanghai, using the WeChat platform for announcements, communication and the clothes pick up service as well as the organization of volunteers. The donated clothes are partly recycled for building insulation materials, or reused and given to people in need in Shanghai or villages in remote areas in Yunnan or Xinjiang, but they are also used for up-cycling projects and in remaking workshops in local communities to arise awareness for recycling practices and environmentally conscious behavior. They went on to tell that their Chinese twinning partner also is involved in minimalization workshops targeting upper-class Shanghai women, trying to urge them to declutter their homes and move on to a more sustainable, more sufficient and less materialized lifestyle.



This resulted in a discussion on the lifestyle in China and all twinning partners agreed that in China, especially women's lifestyle is driven by a very high consumerism and that it is not really an easy task to find "sustainable products". In addition, present leisure activities of people living in urban areas are often defined by shopping. The discussion with the audience then went on to how and if a sustainable lifestyle could actually be defined and which problems are connected to this.