

EMBARGOED UNTIL SATURDAY, JANUARY 25, 2014

CONTACT: Angel Hsu, Yale University
angel.hsu@yale.edu
+39 342 8646509

Susanne Stahl, Yale University
susanne.stahl@yale.edu
203 432 5967

CHINA RANKS 118TH ON THE 2014 ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE INDEX

China's overall performance has improved despite dramatic declines on air quality

DAVOS, Switzerland – China ranks 118th out of 178 countries in its efforts to address environmental challenges, according to the 2014 Environmental Performance Index (EPI). With respect to other emerging economies, China performs better than India, which ranks 155th, but does not fare as well as Brazil, at 77th, Russia, at 73rd, or South Africa at 72nd.

While not performing overall as well as some of the other emerging market economies, China is the only country in this group that has reduced the rate at which its climate emissions have grown over the last decade. This achievement is particularly notable considering that China was responsible for 29 percent of global economic growth in 2013, while Brazil, India, and Russia accounted for only 7 percent.

“Through top-level commitment, China has demonstrated considerable leadership on meeting targets to reduce the carbon and energy intensity of its economic growth. Gains in energy efficiency, achieved by eliminating inefficient industrial production and through the increase of renewable energy, are measurable,” said Angel Hsu of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and lead author of the report. “China outperforms both Germany and the United States on the 2014 EPI’s Climate and Energy indicators.”

Switzerland comes in at the very top of the 2014 EPI. Luxembourg, Australia, Singapore, and Czech Republic round out the top five positions of the Index, which ranks countries on high-priority environmental concerns including air quality, water management, and climate change.

Despite improvements in some areas, China still lags on many other issues, notably air quality and water resources. Using new indicators that assess global exposure to fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) – the potent air pollutant that has negative human health impacts and last year led to national states of emergency in China – the 2014 EPI ranks the country worst in the world with respect to average exposure to PM_{2.5}. In terms of wastewater treatment, an indicator that assesses the degree to which effluent from industrial, municipal, and household wastewater is treated before being released into freshwater or marine ecosystems, China ranks 67th, behind other emerging markets Russia and South Africa.

With expanded data coverage, the 2014 EPI ranks 46 more countries than the last EPI release. These countries are mostly sub-Saharan African nations and Small Island Developing States, providing a first look at where these developing countries stand on their environmental efforts. Tonga, for example, far outperforms all other countries with similarly sized economies, coming in at 47th overall. In total, the 178 countries in the Index represent 99 percent of global population, 98 percent of the world’s total land area, and 97 percent of global GDP.

The sweeping coverage of the 2014 EPI reveals important global trends. For example, the world is doing well on improving drinking water and sanitation. Child mortality has declined as a result. Progress in these categories tracks the concerted pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, which have clear targets, strategies, and metrics for assessment on water and sanitation.

Poor environmental performance is difficult to improve when policymakers do not set clear targets, as with fisheries, industrial wastewater treatment, and air quality. Since 2000, the number of people breathing unsafe air has risen by 606 million people, to a total of 1.78 billion. These numbers are heavily concentrated in the developing world.

“The EPI reveals that improved environmental results are possible when measurement and management practices align,” said Yale University Prof. Daniel Esty. “When data and measurement are poor or not in concert with policy priorities, natural and human systems suffer.”

The Index also demonstrates what happens when countries are unable to prioritize environmental management. The bottom five performers – Somalia, Mali, Haiti, Lesotho, and Afghanistan – all grapple with civil unrest, significant economic development pressures, and political turnover. Still, each of the bottom-performing countries has improved environmental performance in some areas over the past 10 years. The percentage of households in Afghanistan with access to improved drinking water, for instance, increased from 5 percent in 1991 to 61 percent in 2011.

While the 2014 EPI offers an overview of global performance on some issues, it also reveals distressing data gaps. The sustainability of agricultural practices and toxic chemical exposure, among a range of critical policy challenges, have virtually no reliable metrics by which to identify priority needs, set policy targets, or evaluate national performance. The international community must continue to prioritize these issues and work toward better metrics. The impending Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are one avenue of international opportunity.

“The EPI has clear implications for the international effort on the SDGs,” said Columbia University's Marc Levy, an architect of the EPI. “The good news about the SDGs is the commitment to treating the environment as an integral part of the next generation of development goals. The bad news is that this political breakthrough rests on a dreadfully weak measurement infrastructure.” Potential SDGs on agriculture and water, for example, will fail without dramatic measurement improvements.

Delivering better data will not be easy. “It is going to require more than just the work of national governments and NGOs,” said Kim Samuel, the EPI’s co-creator. “The private sector is realizing the parallel benefits of business and environmental sustainability. The hope is that the EPI will guide increased cooperation among all sectors of society.”

The EPI is produced biennially by researchers at Yale and Columbia universities, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and with support from the Samuel Family Foundation and the McCall MacBain Foundation. Full details available at <http://epi.yale.edu>.

.....

Angel Hsu, the lead author of the 2014 EPI, co-author Marc Levy, and Kim Samuel, co-creator of the project, will hold a press conference at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2014 in Davos, Switzerland, on January, 25 at 2:00 PM local time.