



## China: Children's Climate Camps

### Summary

Since 2009, the Government of the People's Republic of China has partnered with UNICEF to promote young people's participation and leadership on climate change through a series of 'climate camps'. Students participating in the camps learn about climate change mitigation and adaptation with the goal of igniting action among the generation most affected and promoting international dialogue. These camps have paralleled the rising importance of climate change as a policy issue for China, both domestically and internationally. As this case study shows, underlying that shift were deliberate efforts to change attitudes and behaviors within the country, with children and youth contributing from the outset.

As a still developing country, China is in the position of having to tackle climate change mitigation and adaptation for a large population of vulnerable poor at the same time. One of the impacts of climate change has been on groundwater supplies, affected by overuse and extreme weather events. In addition to joint work on children's leadership, the Government of China and UNICEF have been working with disadvantaged communities to safely and sustainably manage water. Children have been involved in all phases, from the initial ground water studies to school-based projects.

**Equity for Children** has highlighted the Government of China's and UNICEF's collaboration as a rare example of a national government recognizing the value of children's involvement and leadership on climate change. Working with international and national partners, the country has been able to equip a new generation with the skills and knowledge to lead change and shift mindsets.

### Overview of the initiative

The first climate camp in 2009 was organized in the run-up to COP 15 to educate young people about climate change and encourage individual and collective actions. At the outset, the British Council organized a national competition called "Green Your School Action", which encouraged high school students to innovate ways to mitigate climate change. Teams across the country took up the challenge, participating in regional and national competitions to present their solutions. At the same time, the young team leaders took part in a two week workshop, organized with UNICEF and the Department of Climate Change under the National Reform and Development Council (NRDC), learning about climate change and leadership. While the workshop focused primarily on fostering skills and knowledge among young climate leaders, it also provided an opportunity to select five young people to represent China at the Children's Climate Forum in Copenhagen. These young Climate Change Ambassadors met with other young climate activists from around the world and contributed to the 'Children's Declaration' presented to world leaders at COP15.

“In my city, located in Southern China, the average temperature in summer can be over 33°C degrees, the top floor of our teaching building could be worse. So we thought maybe we could cover the rooftop with plants, which effectively reduce the heat. With the temperature down, we could use less AC and reduce carbon emission... We soon came out with a solution: soilless culture. We recycled PVC pipes, connected them and fixed them on the rooftop, built a reservoir, and used a water pump. Then we drilled holes on the PVC pipes for the plants. With months of efforts, the plants finally covered the whole rooftop. With this project, we advanced to the 'Green Your School Action' regional competition and won the first place.”

As the team leader, I was selected to participate in the Climate Change Young Ambassador Camp in Beijing 2009. We took courses every day. There were courses about climate change, international relations, project management, negotiation skills and drama. On every course we took, we were divided into groups and discussed, came out solutions and presented our ideas or works... The camp was really great, not only that I had learnt more about climate change, but it also helped me find confidence and potential. After the camp, I continued on working on my 'roof greening' project with my teammates, and in December 2009, we advanced to the national final of 'Green Your School Action'. We beat over 10 teams from all over the country and won the first place.” Liao Zhe, participant in the 2009 climate camp (Zhe, 2016)<sup>1</sup>

A second camp was organized by UNICEF in 2010 as part of a project on the impact of climate change on water. Competitions were held and children selected from three sites where UNICEF-led groundwater monitoring was underway. The summer camp on "climate change and future water" enabled the young participants to understand the method and results of the groundwater project, and to contribute to dissemination and use of findings. With the research confirming the damaging impact of climate change and human activity on clean water, UNICEF integrated climate change education into its school based programs, helping teachers and students to understand and create solutions for local impacts.

In 2013, *the International Youth Climate Change Summer Camp Program* brought together 100 students from China and 10 other countries<sup>2</sup> in Qingdao. Organized by the Department of Climate Change of the NDRC, together with UNICEF and the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ), the camp aimed to foster young people's leadership and forge connections across countries on climate change. The camp also served to educate young people about China's environmental and climate mitigation programs. It was intended that connections established among the young participants from the different countries would facilitate global exchanges on climate change.

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<sup>2</sup> USA, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Uruguay, India, Australia, Egypt, Uganda, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nigeria, South Africa, Vietnam, and Nepal.

## History

At the time of the first 'climate camp', in 2009, the Government of China was grappling with its stance and actions on climate change. China has been consistently at the center of international climate debates, due to its status as the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and its high profile within the G-77. At the time, China's focus was still squarely on domestic economic growth, and at international negotiations the country held to a position that developed countries were morally and financially responsible for addressing climate change. (Heggelund, 2007) However, this hard stance did not fully reflect changes already underway in the country. The 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2006 to 2010) had begun to address the trade-off between economic growth and environmental degradation, and in the run-up to COP 15, China made its first commitment to cutting its emissions by 2020. (Williams, 2014)

Behind the headlining catching policy moves in China, efforts were being made to shift mindsets towards climate change, and young people were seen as central to this effort. The small team of specialists working on climate change within the Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) early on recognized that scientific evidence on its own was not enough to bring about change. Attitudes needed to shift as well. Young people, as the most affected generation, could lend urgency and energy to "the human and behavioral dimensions of climate change, from broad societal action to smart energy choices at the household level." (Yan, 2016) The Children's Climate Forum, organized by UNICEF and the City of Copenhagen in the run-up to COP 15, provided an opportunity to engage in international dialogue but to also prompt internal dialogue as well.

At the same time, UNICEF China was beginning to engage on climate change, led by the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) program. The water sector is deeply connected with environmental management, and as such, early to understand that climate change, together with environmental degradation and unsustainable use, is threatening clean water supplies in countries around the world. Inadequate clean water puts children at increased risk of diarrhea, pneumonia, and other deadly infections. Drought and increasingly unpredictable rainfall patterns reduce food availability, impacting children's nutrition. (UNICEF, 2015) With changes in rainfall across China and intense human activity as the country has grown economically and urbanized, concerns over the adequacy and safety of groundwater supplies have been mounting. UNICEF China's project was a study looking at three sites; Cangzhou of Hebei Province, Xianyang of Shaanxi Province and Weihai of Shandong Province, combining past data and projections to understand changes in water supply. From the outset, it was planned that children from all three sites would be invited to participate in the project.

While the WASH sector was beginning to consider climate change, other actors within UNICEF and the child rights community were fostering young people's engagement on the issue. UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations to advocate for children's rights, including the right to participation. Given the inter-generational dynamic of climate change, with younger generations likely to bear the risks of inaction today, it was recognized as an important area to foster participation, catalyzed by COP 15. Working with the City of Copenhagen, UNICEF organized the Children's Climate Forum "to give children from both developing and industrialized countries a voice in the global climate change debate and a chance to influence the important agreement to be decided at COP15." (UNICEF, 2009) It was one of the first

opportunities for children from both developed countries and ‘at risk’ countries to meet and work together.

For the NRDC, it was an opportunity to foster international exchange on an issue of national importance. In advance of the Forum, the Department of Climate Change worked with international partners to spark actions by young people across the country. The school-based initiatives fit in with Department’s goal of shifting behaviors and mindsets, but also represented an investment in developing skills and knowledge needed for the huge technological, economic and social changes ahead. For the NDRC, leadership development was geared towards equipping young people with “the skills needed to work individually and collectively toward solutions to current climate change problems and to prevent future ones.” (Yan, 2016)

Five of the participants who stood out as emerging young leaders were selected to represent their peers in Copenhagen. They joined over 160 children from 44 countries who participated in forum and drafted a Children’s Declaration that was presented to the COP 15 President. The Declaration emphasized the need for developed countries to increase financing for climate change adaptation, and committed the children to take personal action on climate change. (UNICEF, 2009) In many regards, the child delegates made far greater progress than their adult counterparts. The political breakthrough that was expected in Copenhagen failed to materialize, and the Government of China was considered among the obstructers. (Williams, 2014)

*We commit to personal lifestyle changes that place the common good above our individual desires and current way of life.*

*We commit to educate and empower ourselves and our communities to adapt to and mitigate the changing climate.*

*We commit to engage and actively cooperate with all generations and governments in combating climate change.*

Children’s Climate Forum Declaration (UNICEF, 2009)

Following the Children’s Climate forum, advocacy and education continued back in 20 home countries. (UNICEF Program Division, 2013) From Zambia to the Pacific Islands, a generation of young climate activists went home with new ideas and a global network. The ambassadors from China were all high school students at the time. After returning home, they continued to volunteer at local and national climate change events, and served as advocates among their peers for China’s participation and leadership in contributing to adaptation and mitigation. The five have since gone on to university, three overseas and two in China.

In the meantime, severe droughts in southern China in 2010 and in northern China in 2011 raised awareness of the threat pose by a changing climate and intense water use that accompanied economic growth. The UNICEF groundwater study started in 2009 and completed the following year, confirmed reductions in the availability of clean water. The latest IPCC report highlighted the growing threat of

water scarcity and reduced crop yields in northern China, and of flooding in the southern parts of the country. (Hijioka, 2014) And smog due to air pollution, reached crisis proportions in many cities. (Williams, 2014)

As a still developing country, China is in the unusual position of having to tackle both climate change mitigation and adaptation for millions still living in poverty. The scale and complexity of this challenge is reflected in the ambitious approach taken to children's climate education, which fosters "awareness and concern about economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence, and encourages understanding of the broader systems and context." (Yan, 2016) Likewise for UNICEF China, children's engagement on climate change goes beyond participation in reducing carbon emissions, but also addresses adaptation. In response to research findings, climate change education was integrated into the ongoing WASH-led Whole School Environment Project. The project trains teachers to engage students in analyzing local situations and observing the impacts of climate change. Students undertake school-based initiatives to reduce risks including tree planting and preventing the paving over of school yards. (Yang, 2015)

UNICEF China again was asked by the Climate Change Department to help organize a summer climate camp in 2013. In the intervening years since the first camp, the Government had ramped up its commitment to climate change mitigation, becoming the largest single country investor in renewable energy and rapidly improving energy efficiency. (Williams, 2014) The camp brought together young people in China and from abroad to learn about what the country has been doing to adapt to and mitigate climate change. There were visits to waste water treatment plants, solar power panel production plants and marine institutions. (Yang, 2015) The event was given a high importance and involved multiple partners, all of whom put emphasis on building the leadership capacity of children to address climate change. To this end, facilitation was done by 'I Live to Lead', a US-based organization specializing in igniting young people's leadership potential. (Yan, 2016)

In 2015, China joined with 196 other countries to sign a historic agreement on climate change at COP21. In the six years since the first climate camp, China went from being an international laggard to a leader at the climate change negotiations. China now leads the way globally on renewable energy and energy efficiency, and has even committed to supporting other developing countries in mitigating the impacts of a changing climate.

### **Role of children and youth**

The children's climate camps have empowered a generation of young leaders in China, providing them with knowledge and skills to act locally and network globally. As noted by Liao Zhe, a participant in the first camp, it lifted his "confidence and potential." (Zhe, 2016) His leadership was triggered by the national competition organized by the British Council, which successfully ignited young people to innovate school-based solutions, and further strengthened at the climate camp where he took part in activities to both increase his technical knowledge about climate change and build his leadership skills.

However, children and youth have had little input to leadership of UNICEF China's camps, which were initiated and designed by the Government with UNICEF, and implemented with international partners. More recently, the WASH program has sought to bring young people into the design of programs, engaging three university students to develop a training curriculum and manual for climate education in schools. Moreover, the composition of children participating in the internationally-focused camps has been primarily from wealthier, urban areas, with few coming from rural areas. As the children needed to speak English to participate in international meetings, the Government intentionally selected better educated students. (Yang, 2015) Moving forward, UNICEF China and the NDRC will need not only to seek ways to increase young people's participation in the design and implementation of climate change activities, but also foster a more diverse leadership pool.

### **Partnerships**

From the outset, the NDRC and UNICEF China have worked in partnership to address climate change and children. On climate change, NDRC has worked in partnership with the Ministries of Finance (MOF) and Environmental Protection (MEP), UNEP and GIZ. In the case of the 'climate camps, partnerships with UNICEF, the British Council and I Live to Lead, have provided experience on fostering child participation and youth leadership. Likewise, for UNICEF, the partnerships have complimented the organization's mandate of fulfilling child rights, while providing supplementary expertise in areas outside of the traditional core programs in education, health and protection. The planned continuation of the partnerships indicates that the approach is generally working. However, none of the partners has a core commitment of empowering young people to work on mitigation and adaptation, which could be limiting the impact and sustainability. Partnerships with organizations such as the China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN) could provide greater grounding in youth-led movements.

### **Scaling-up and sustainability**

Beyond each event, there has been no sustained program or partnerships to build a children's climate change movement in China. Young people were encouraged to educate their peers and lead activities in their schools and communities, but there has been limited follow-up on whether or not this occurred. At the Children's Climate Forum in 2009, children and youth were able to network with young civil society activists from countries around the world, and further networking was encouraged during the International Summer Camp in 2013. Whether this has led to the establishment of sustained dialogue or collaboration has not been checked. Many UNICEF Offices are in a similar position, with limited capacity to sustain children's participation on climate change between major events. An exception is Zambia, where Unite4Climate, established following COP 15, continues to engage young people across the country to combat climate change. (UNICEF Zambia, 2015)

A major constraint for UNICEF China in sustaining the young people's engagement on climate change has been the lack of dedicated staff and resources. The climate camps were managed by the WASH section, whose staff was already preoccupied with programmatic responsibilities and emergency response. (Yang, 2015) At the global level, UNICEF dedicates relatively limited amounts of funding to children and adolescents' participation generally, and even less to their participation on climate change specifically. This is changing, propelled in part by the centrality of climate change to the new Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs). A new *Strategic Framework on Environmental Sustainability for Children* was launched in 2015, with a stated priority to “Advocate for full recognition and inclusion of children in the policy discourse on environmental sustainability.” (UNICEF, 2015) Whether or not this translates into increased resources for child and youth participation in climate change mitigation and adaptation is still to be seen.

### **Future goals and plans**

The National Center for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation (NCSC) has taken over from the NDRC the coordination of training and outreach on climate change. The center plans to scale-up its activities with young people. Some of the activities planned include travel programs “to help young people widen their horizons and connect across the globe in the area of climate change, internships for deeper understanding of the core issues, and exchange study programs so young people can strengthen their creativity, skills and abilities in addressing climate change.” (Yan, 2016)

Mainstreaming of climate change in education is also planned, with the goal of “an informed society anticipating and responding to climate and its impacts.” In support of this the center intends to track comprehension and use of climate science concepts by educators. (Yan, 2016)

UNICEF China is exploring options to mobilize a larger number of children on climate change and create a sustained program of action. The Office has successfully fostered child rights advocacy and engagement with young people on other issues through social media channels such as Weibo and WeChat, and this is considered a ‘low-hanging fruit’ for future action. Beyond online platforms, a more ambitious framework and partnerships are envisaged, with linkages to schools based education, and continued high level forums or summer camps to bring students from across the country together. This plan recognizes the need for expanded partnerships and resources, necessary for a sustained commitment to working with and empowering children and adolescents.

*This case study would not have been possible without the support of Zhenbo Yang UNICEF China, Cristina Colon, UNICEF Division of Policy and Strategy, Li Yan at the National Centre for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation, and Liao Zhe, participant in the Children’s Climate Camps. Thank you for generously sharing your time and knowledge.*

*Some reflections on UNICEF’s global work on climate change are based on my experience working with organization on climate change and children’s participation as Chief, Policy, Advocacy, Planning and Evaluation, UNICEF Pacific (2010-2013) and as Programme and Planning Specialist, Division of Communication (2008-2010).*

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