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Letter: Honing the climate change message

Five years ago, I scheduled my first meeting with a local official to discuss carbon emission reduction in China. I had planned a polished and persuasive argument. First, I presented the main findings from the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007. I then illustrated the various scenarios and the possible turning points we may see under the Kyoto Protocol and beyond. I concluded that we should spring into action to develop a lower-carbon-emission strategy to address global climate change within the regional developmental policy system immediately.

The official's reaction surprised me. I learned that those in government didn't feel that climate change was a priority. Rather, they were focused on sustaining local economic growth and maintaining socioeconomic stability. This was true despite sustainable development being a national strategy since 1994 (1) and the publication of China's first comprehensive policy initiative, China's National Climate Change Programme, in 2007 (2).

Based on this meeting, and the others that followed, I honed my message. Instead of emphasizing the local responsibilities in addressing global issues such as climate change, I now tell politicians that local efforts on reducing carbon emissions could lead to substantial co-benefits, such as reduction of local air pollutants (3), better economic performance (4), new economic growth areas, and job opportunities. I remind them that tax sources would be created by building low-carbon-oriented facilities.

There has always been a language gap between scientists and local officials, particularly in the field of sustainable development. To address climate change effectively, we must bridge that gap. I found that advocating for science was possible if I could articulate our shared goals.

References:

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