

Seeking truth from facts: The Challenge of Environmental Indicator Development in China

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China's environmental policymaking has been long plagued by information gaps, asymmetries, and limited public access, among other challenges. While the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development, the national blueprint outlining key economic and development targets for the country between 2011 and 2015, pledges the implementation of "well-equipped statistical and monitoring systems" and "index evaluation systems" to measure progress on a range of energy and environmental targets, developing such robust statistical monitoring systems is challenging. Environmental indicators – quantitative metrics that reflect the status or trend of environmental conditions – can help China measure environmental progress and inform policy. Following former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's urge to "seek truth from facts" (shi shi qiu shi), we examine the challenges of environmental indicator development, data availability, and information transparency through the experience of attempting to produce a China Environmental Performance Index (China EPI), a three-year project to develop provincial level environmental performance indicators in China. Particular attention is given to data and information transparency issues while drawing broader lessons for China's environmental governance and sustainability.