

Small, yet brave

Liu Jianqiang

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A series of events on World Environment Day exposed a crisis in China's environmental governance, argues Liu Jianqiang. To do their job properly, he says, the environment authorities need support.

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Of all China's government agencies, the State Environmental Protection Administration ([SEPA](#)) may have the hardest life. They have to deal with the world's worst pollution and largest population – and without anywhere near enough power to do so. You may as well ask a dwarf to move a mountain.

This was perfectly demonstrated by recent events in Beijing.

[World Environment Day](#) is held on June 5; it is when SEPA and its international counterparts should demonstrate their achievements. But it was this very day that 1,000 Beijing residents chose to surround the administration wearing white T-shirts painted with slogans, as a protest against plans to build a waste incinerator near their homes in Liulitun, Beijing.

Liulitun, in Haidian district, is home to a huge rubbish dump. Locals complain that ever since the dump was established, there has been a terrible stench hanging over the area. They also say that the groundwater has been polluted illegally, and has seriously endangered their health. Cases of lung cancer, pulmonary emphysema, asthma, bronchitis and pharyngitis are on the rise. In a particular community of 1,000 people, 70 have suffered cancer since the year 2000, of which 46 died. Media reports have confirmed the extent of the pollution caused by the dump.

The plans to build a waste-to-energy plant in the area were met with opposition from both locals and scientists, who said that the project would produce dioxins and present a serious threat to public health. So on World Environment Day they gathered in front of SEPA's offices to demand the project be halted.

This placed SEPA in an awkward position. Environmental protection in China is not a simply a matter of whether or not a certain project will continue polluting; it is a power struggle between different interest groups. This case was no exception – it was power, not science, that decided whether the project would be approved or not. And when it comes

to a battle of strength, SEPA rarely has the upper hand. Particularly when the battle is against Beijing's municipal government, who already had held a press conference announcing the billion-yuan, "pollution-free" project.

You could almost hear the sighs of SEPA officials as they watched the protestors from their office windows. The locals may have believed SEPA had the power to decide these environmental issues, but they were mistaken. In fact, although they should have this power, in most cases they do not. [Management](#) of the environment is spread over a number of different departments: urban sewage falls under the remit of the Ministry of Construction; marine pollution of the State Oceanic Administration; agricultural pollution of the Ministry of Agriculture; and power generation is decided by the National Development and Reform Commission. While river water is managed by the Ministry of Water Resources, the riverbanks are handled by SEPA – and never the twain shall meet. As SEPA's deputy director, Pan Yue, said: "Everyone fights over these different powers, but as soon as there is a problem they come to us: everyone assumes that we are responsible for environmental incidents in China."

Despite being virtually powerless, SEPA has not backed out of the fight. It has launched attacks on 30 major companies, including the main contractor for the Three Gorges Dam; dealt with illegal activity in the oil sector; and sparked a number of crackdowns known as "[environmental storms](#)." In doing so, it has acquired a great number of enemies. SEPA has already reached the limit of its powers; often its actions have little legal weight. Its use of "regional restrictions" earlier this year in order to turn down applications for new industrial projects by the country's four main power generators was the most extreme sanction SEPA has ever managed to enact. Pan Yue himself said: "We have no more tricks up our sleeve."

These repeated battles mean there can be little doubt about SEPA's courage in the public mind. But its weakness is also apparent. There are calls for SEPA to be upgraded to a ministry, but it remains an agency-level organisation rather than an independent department established by the State Council. This leaves it struggling to participate in policy-making, to coordinate with other departments or to solve environmental disputes. Its administrative powers are simply inadequate. For instance, SEPA would like to implement the concept of "green GDP" and evaluate government officials according to their environmental record. But this is difficult to do: nobody is scared of SEPA. And Pan Yue agrees. "I wouldn't be scared of us either," said Pan. "We cannot force a project to cease; we cannot fine anyone more than 15 million yuan; we cannot have officials fired; we cannot even manage our own local branches. What is there to be scared of?"

But the demonstration wasn't the only worry for SEPA officials on World Environment Day. In southeast China's city of Xiamen, there was also opposition to a 10-billion-yuan chemical plant slated to be built four kilometres away from a school of 5,000 students. There are 100,000 people living within five kilometres of the site.

The head of SEPA's environmental assessment department, Zhu Xingxiang, met with representatives of the opponents of the plant. He had to explain that as the investment

was provided by local government, and the project already had approval from the National Development and Reform Commission, there was nothing SEPA could do.

At the same time, [Taihu Lake](#), the most important freshwater lake in China's economically prosperous Yangtze River delta, was choked by blue-green algae, causing panic as over 200,000 people found their tap water was undrinkable. This is China's most serious case of drinking water pollution to date.

The first local to complain about the problem was Wu Lihong. He was detained by the local government for "attempting to blackmail businesses in the name of the environment." He had brought attention to environmental pollution in the area for over a decade, and was regarded as one of the 10 citizens who had done most for environmental protection in the country. In an interview with the *China Business Herald* in November last year, Wu stated the reason for failures to deal with pollution, saying that "some officials shield the polluters." He stated that over half the seats in the local People's Representative Conference and Political Consultative Committee were held by bosses of polluting firms.

Despite its weakness, SEPA is still fighting its corner. The SEPA website carried a statement by Pan Yue on June 7 suggesting the Liulitun project should be delayed to allow for greater consultation. SEPA is also to carry out an environmental impact assessment in Xiamen, which it hopes will be the basis for changes in the local government's plans, and may improve the fate of those living close to the proposed chemical plant.

"Environmental issues cannot be solved by just one or two government departments – public participation is also needed," said Pan. "We hope local governments can provide the platform necessary for the people to exercise their right to know, to supervise and to participate."

SEPA has consistently made its position clear, but it continues to speak of "hopes" and "suggestions." It does not have the power to make decisions. If we expect this organisation to deal with the huge issues it faces, we must change the systems and legislation that surround it, and grant them increased power.

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