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A Seed of Change

Billions of TV viewers around the world were presented with a spectacular firework display at the opening of the 26th Summer Olympics in Beijing. The cold light of day, however, revealed the less welcoming fact that the Chinese capital continues to be badly affected by smog.

The massive efforts to reduce emissions prior to the games did little to improve the situation. With a population of 12 million, Beijing is one of the world's most polluted cities, and the world's athletes had good reason to be concerned about the quality of the air there.

China has rapidly been transformed from an agrarian state into the fastest-growing economy in Asia. The country's GDP has sextupled and the average income per capita quadrupled in 25 years, making China one of the world's major economic powers and a highly attractive business partner.

Massive environmental pollution has been a clear downside of this development. A fifth of the world's population lives in China, and a growing number of them in cities. Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, together with a growing population and accelerating consumption, have brought immense problems.

It is estimated that one in four Chinese drink polluted water and one in three breathe polluted air. Cities are beset by water shortages, the majority of rivers are severely polluted, and erosion is threatening biodiversity. Two-thirds of cancer cases are thought to be linked to environmental pollution.

China has admitted that it is facing a major problem and announced an ambitious climate and energy plan. Redirecting developments in a more sustainable direction seems almost impossible, however, in a country where a new coal-fired power plant is being opened every week. A number of positive concrete measures have been taken all the same.

Take the example of the Mentougou District, a network of 17 villages located in a beautiful mountainous area 50 kilometres from Beijing. That is the location for China's first true eco-city to be developed with the help of specialists from Finland, with modern environmental and energy technology solutions adapted to local conditions and combined with efficient public transport and data communication networks.

VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland is drawing up a feasibility study on planning and building Mentougou Eco-City. Once financing and the right partners are in place, the construction can start. Local officials have pledged their strong support for the project.

A generation ago, talk of an eco-city would have been labelled an idealistic dream, but global climate change has changed all that. If China's first experiment proves successful, the concept could be used elsewhere in China and around the world.

As the father of the idea, Professor **Eero Paloheimo**, put it in this issue's opening article: "The first eco-city will not change the world, but it will provide a seed of change."

Leena Laitinen