

PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST: Accelerating Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals

CHINA AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

China achieved the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 14 years ahead of the 2015 target; by lifting more than 600 million people out of poverty, it reduced the incidence of poverty by half.¹ China also made impressive progress on health and education goals, delivering gains for children. Alongside economic growth policies and market-oriented reforms in the MDG era, policies that supported rural incomes, compulsory education reforms, expanded immunization coverage and social protection were implemented to promote human development.

A critical lesson the international community, including China, learnt from the MDG period is to look beyond national averages, which often mask disparities. In moving to consolidate the achievements of the MDGs and overcome the gaps, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly addresses inequalities, placing equity at the core of all its goals. With that agenda, the world's governments pledged "that no one will be left behind. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first".²

SDG GOAL 1: END POVERTY IN ALL ITS FORMS EVERYWHERE

Target 1.1

By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day.

Target 1.2

By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.

President Xi Jinping described rural poverty as the greatest barrier to achieving a "moderately prosperous society"; and the Government has committed to lifting all people out of poverty and ensuring their access to essential services by 2020.

Keynote speech, B20 Summit,
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China continues to demonstrate notable leadership in overcoming poverty through its robust engagement with the SDG process. It is among the first countries to nationalize the 2030 Agenda's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets. The global development agenda aligns with China's overarching objective of creating a 'harmonious society' through sustainability, equity and citizens' satisfaction. Despite the country's recent deceleration in economic growth, socioeconomic changes related to migration and urbanization, an ageing population and widening inequalities, China is holding steady to its commitment to achieve the SDGs.

The SDG 1 targets imply that measurements of poverty must look beyond economic indicators and address the multiple dimensions of deprivation. Equally important, children are singled out in target 1.2 as a population whose poverty should be specifically measured.

In China, national policies emphasize poverty alleviation in remote and ecologically fragile areas, where most of the households living in extreme poverty are located, including a preponderance of impoverished children. Of China's 279 million girls and boys (21 per cent of its total population), 25 per cent are growing up in the poorest and most remote rural areas³. Targeting these areas will reach the largest number of impoverished children and potentially close the equity gap between the poorest young people living in rural areas and those young people living in other areas. To lift all children out of poverty and close the equity gap will require an approach that identifies the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children within all communities.

CHILD POVERTY MATTERS

Children living in China's poorest rural areas lag behind other children in terms of health outcomes, enrolment in or completion of compulsory education and safe household water and sanitation conditions, among other deprivations. The growing impact of climate change, from increased natural disasters to the scarcity of clean water, has the potential to undermine many of the gains made in child survival and development. Children will bear the brunt of changes in climate conditions, which will also make existing inequities even worse⁴. Children who experience poverty can suffer from lifelong physical and cognitive impairments. Some of the irreversible effects can perpetuate the cycle of poverty across generations.⁵

Putting children first in national and global efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and ensuring the fastest progress for the most disadvantaged children across the SDG targets will greatly increase the success of efforts to end poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1).

Singling out 'tried and tested' interventions, this Social and Economic Policy Brief illustrates how integrated child development programmes can reach and meet the multiple needs of the poorest children, strengthen families and communities. Such approaches complement targeted strategies to raise household income.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a normative framework for ensuring that children achieve their full potential and get the best start in life, to receive a quality education, to live free from violence and abuse and to survive and thrive. Creating opportunities that promote, protect and fulfil the rights of the most excluded children will not only lead to achievement of SDG 1 but will also contribute to the achievement of President Xi Jinping's vision.

BEYOND INCOME: MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHILD POVERTY

Children are particularly vulnerable to poverty due to their age and dependency on their caregivers. Even brief spells of multiple deprivations – poor nutrition, neglected health care, dropping out of school, exposure to violence or neglect – are unique vulnerabilities that have implications for child and adult poverty. Putting children first in national poverty-alleviation efforts is the most effective way of breaking this cycle and helping children to grow and reach their full potential.

Children are most likely to be poor. The Government's policy focus on alleviating poverty by targeting poor households, combined with efforts to improve equitable access to quality essential social services, has the potential to reach many of the country's poorest children. Approximately 97 per cent⁶ of China's impoverished households live in rural areas.

Child poverty is multidimensional. Inadequate household income is a significant driver of



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child poverty. But poverty is also about the set of deprivations that girls and boys experience across different aspects of their lives and at different points in their childhood. Many children affected by multiple deprivations live outside income-poor households and experience poverty in different ways, such as being unable to attend school or access health care services or access safe drinking water and sanitation.⁷

Evidence, such as the child poverty analysis that UNICEF helped conduct in Hubei Province in 2015 (see the box below), lets us understand which girls and boys face the greatest risk of experiencing poverty across dimensions, the kinds of deprivations that they experience and at which age interventions tailored to their needs can be most effective. Analysis of the poverty that children experience can also ensure the appropriate design of broader programmes and interventions to support caregivers, families and communities.

HUBEI MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS: POVERTY AS CHILDREN EXPERIENCE IT

To better understand the multiple dimensions of poverty that children experience, the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development asked for UNICEF assistance to conduct innovative research in Hubei Province. The study set out to examine the characteristics and drivers of child poverty in four of the poorest and most remote rural regions. The researchers identified eight dimensions of deprivation: nutrition, health, education, information, water, sanitation, housing and protection. The findings showed that 87 per cent of children suffered from at least one deprivation, with the greatest deprivations in access to sanitation facilities, childhood nutrition, the enrolment rate of pre-school children and access to safe drinking water. Children living in the Mufu Mountains area, children from the Miao community, children younger than 5 years and children left behind by their migrating parents were experiencing the greatest poverty. This analysis was critical in developing child poverty programming in Hubei.

Source: United Nations Children's Fund, Poverty Status of Children Living in the Contiguous Poor Areas of Hubei Province Cross-Sectional Study From a Multi-Dimensional Perspective, International Poverty Reduction Centre of China and UNICEF, Beijing, 2015.

Widespread use of child poverty analysis and the adoption of a nationally implemented measure of child poverty would help ensure that all children are counted and make it possible to track child poverty against the SDG Goal 1 targets. Child poverty analysis is the basis of a multisector approach to poverty reduction, which accurately targets the causes of child poverty and ensures that every girl and boy is reached.

FROM EVIDENCE TO PRACTICE

A multisector approach provides the range of age-specific interventions that children need, promotes child development and works earnestly to make sure that no child is 'left behind'. Fully funded, good-quality interventions across the sectors can close the gaps in development opportunities and outcomes between girls and boys growing up in poor rural areas. China has piloted several child poverty programmes, including those highlighted here, as part of an integrated approach to ending extreme poverty.

A cash transfer project leads to improved maternal and child health

The Government, in collaboration with UNICEF, initiated a conditional cash transfer project in 15 poor counties in Yunnan, Gansu and Sichuan provinces as part of the Integrated Maternal and Child Health Programme. The objective is to increase household expenditure on children and promote health care service uptake related to antenatal, perinatal, postnatal and newborn care and child care services. Integrating cash transfers with improved quality health services and access to information helps families address the broader vulnerabilities they are experiencing.⁸

In Zhaojue County, one of the regions with the highest maternal and child mortality rates in China, the hospital delivery rate was at 28 per cent in 2010 and increased to 82 per cent in 2014 as a result of the Integrated Maternal and Child Health Programme, which included the conditional cash transfer project.



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Investing in the youngest children through integrated early childhood development brings the greatest results⁹

Early interventions are highly effective in breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, addressing social exclusion and building the foundations of human capabilities. Integrated early childhood development (ECD) programmes piloted in some of China's poorest counties include: (i) community-based ECD centres for children aged up to 3 years old in poor rural areas and migration-affected urban areas; (ii) community ECD volunteers who visit parents and caregivers with young children, particularly for families who cannot access the ECD centres; and (iii) mobile resource units providing ECD services.

Access to the ECD centers increased from 45 per cent in 2007 to 75 per cent in 2015. In 2015, 43 million children attended 224,000 kindergartens.



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Complementing investment across sectors supports the integrated delivery of services in schools¹⁰

One third of all schools in China do not have proper water and sanitation facilities. In 2006, the Government, in collaboration with UNICEF, piloted the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools Programme in five impoverished counties. The programme focused on improving water and sanitation facilities, hygiene-promotion activities and raising awareness through campaigns that targeted children, teachers and communities.

By 2014, water, sanitation and hygiene guidelines were integrated into the Ministry of Education's national school management standards and integrated into the National Guidelines on the Overall Improvement of Basic Conditions for Compulsory Schools in Poor Areas.

The Barefoot Social Workers initiative bridges service gaps among China's most excluded children¹¹

Even where essential services are provided, significant obstacles remain and not all children can access them. Poor transportation, limited financial means, lack of parental care, language barriers, low education levels of caregivers or lack of access to information keep some children excluded from the

services they need. In 2010, the Government initiated the Barefoot Social Worker Programme, with UNICEF assistance, in 120 villages in Henan, Sichuan, Shanxi, Xinjiang and Yunnan provinces to help children access those services and other social protection measures they are entitled to. Each Barefoot Social Worker is responsible for between 200 and 1,000 children. They help these children access essential services, including education, social assistance and health care.

By 2012, the proportion of children with their birth unregistered had dropped from 5.3 per cent to 1.8 per cent, the enrolment rate of children with disabilities in schools had jumped from 59.4 per cent to 84.5 per cent, children leaving home for jobs before age 16 had decreased from 4 per cent to 2 per cent, and the proportion of child marriages had dropped from 3 per cent to 1.2 per cent.

CONCLUSIONS

Making the choice to put children first in national poverty alleviation strategies is essential. With economic growth decelerating, policy choices will become harder. The Government's commitment to



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implementing national programmes that prioritize reaching the poorest children with multisector programmes will ensure that China delivers on its pledges to alleviate poverty and reduce inequalities now, while building the potential of every child to contribute to sustainable economic gains in the future.

KEY MESSAGES

Putting children first in poverty eradication is the best way to end poverty, reduce inequality and deliver sustained economic growth.

The SDGs **call for children to be specifically measured and tracked as a group.** That means every child must be registered and counted, and levels of monetary and non-monetary child poverty must be nationally tracked.

Focusing on one SDG, in isolation, will not achieve expected results; **tackling a combination of SDG goals** that address multiple deprivations through integrated programmes will achieve the best results for children.

Child poverty analysis provides sound evidence that can be used to support policies, programmes and decision makers in making the best choices on when, where and how to invest in children most effectively.

Child poverty analysis can support better targeting and more efficient use of resources by addressing the drivers of poverty and reaching the most excluded and vulnerable children.

Child poverty programmes complement income poverty programmes by directly reaching children and addressing the broader vulnerabilities of caregivers, families and communities.

China has many proven child poverty programmes that demonstrate practical ways to integrate interventions that can be scaled up under the national poverty alleviation strategy.

¹World Bank, "World Bank data," <data.worldbank.org>, accessed 20 Sep. 2016.

²United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UN, New York, 2015.

³National Bureau of Statistics of China, What Census Data Can Tell Us About Children in China: Facts and figures 2013, Government of China, Beijing, 2013.

⁴United Nations Children's Fund, Unless We Act Now: The impact of climate change on children, UNICEF, New York, 2015.

⁵United Nations Children's Fund, A Multidimensional Approach to Measuring Child Poverty, UNICEF, New York, 2011.

⁶World Bank, China from Poor Areas to Poor People: China's evolving poverty reduction agenda, World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2009.

⁷United Nations Children's Fund, State of the World's Children, UNICEF, New York, 2016.

⁸Ministry of Commerce and United Nations Children's Fund, Conditional Cash Transfer Project, 2011–2018, UNICEF, Beijing, 2011.

⁹United Nations Children's Fund China, Integrated Approaches to Early Childhood Development 0–3 years, UNICEF, Beijing, 2015.

¹⁰United Nations Children's Fund, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools, UNICEF, Beijing

¹¹United Nations Children's Fund China, China's 'Barefoot Social Worker: Innovating for children – innovating for equity background, UNICEF, Beijing, 2015.



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