

China in the Sustainable Development Agenda: Contributions to health and education

Hans Jørgen Gåsemyr

Summary

China is scaling up its investments in health and education, making significant contributions to the UN 2030 Agenda and related Sustainable Development Goals. Domestically, China is working to modernize its entire health care system, improve mandatory and additional education, and foster elite academic institutions. Internationally, China is increasing both its bilateral and multilateral support. Looking beyond 2020, the coronavirus crisis is not likely to change this overall trajectory, but China may increase its investment in both domestic and international health and disease prevention systems.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is home to the world's second-largest economy and identifies itself as a major power and a developing country. In health and education, this is demonstrated by China gradually scaling up its international contributions while working on complex reforms to improve its domestic health and education systems. The 2020 coronavirus crisis, which has pinpointed vulnerabilities concerning disease prevention in China, will likely boost investment in both domestic health and relevant international cooperation.

Building on a long tradition for aid and assistance to other developing countries, China already plays a significant role in international development, with clear relevance to many UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Health and education are particularly active areas within Chinese development assistance.¹ This is especially relevant for SDGs 3 and 4, addressing health and education, but cuts across many goals, including poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), gender

(SDG 5), sanitation (SDG 6), innovation (SDG 9), and partnerships (SDG 17).

China's overall development support is strongly grounded in its own domestic experiences and is primarily based on bilateral and South-South cooperation. China is, however, also expanding its engagements within many international organizations.

Changes in domestic health and education

China's largest contribution to global development is arguably still its domestic achievements. This is also the case for health and education, although the resources devoted to these policy areas have varied considerably over the years.

After its establishment in 1949, the PRC was relatively successful at expanding basic medical services and primary education. Regarding becoming a serious aid provider, China's first medical team dispatched to Africa in 1963 is often considered a vantage point. At that time, the PRC ran a relatively generous aid program, including support to education in the form of scholarships to students from other—ideologically like-minded—countries. With the post-Mao reforms in the late 1970s, China kick-started its economic growth. It also adjusted the overtly political nature of its aid. Having entered the UN in 1971 after taking over the China seat from Taiwan, China joined several international organizations and became a sizeable aid recipient.

Fostering economic growth took priority in the first reform period. It was well into the 1990s before Chinese leaders really started prioritizing social and comprehensive developments, but health and education were eventually pushed to the forefront of the agenda

and remain prioritized areas today. This is manifested in the most recent Five-Year Plans and in China's national SDG implementation plan, both from 2016.²

Health

Within the health domain, overall priorities in recent years have been establishing basic medical insurance systems and implementing a comprehensive 2009 health sector reform. Building on this, China in 2017 introduced another reform, “Healthy China 2030.” Combined, these reforms aim at making medical services more accessible, affordable, and cost effective, not the least by strengthening primary care. Current priorities include gearing the health system from reactive treatment to more proactive and preventive care.

The sustainability challenges facing Chinese health are formidable. The society is aging, overall costs are rising, and the prevalence of lifestyle diseases is on the rise. China is still working to contain the spread of infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, HIV, and hepatitis. Seasonal and novel influenza viruses are regular prevention challenges, and the misuse of antimicrobials and antimicrobial resistance are serious problems.³ The 2020 coronavirus crisis has, yet again, exposed vulnerabilities in the disease prevention system, despite the changes made after the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) crisis in 2003. Nevertheless, China is also making considerable progress, which includes prolonging life expectancy, minimizing birth and infant mortality, and getting close to eradicating malaria. All these issues are addressed in the national SDG plan.

China's total health expenditure is around 5.5 percent of GDP, and the country is investing heavily in medical research and education. China has a huge market for pharmaceutical products and is the world's largest producer of active pharmaceutical ingredients. Chinese pharma has been slow to internationalize, but its entrance to new markets is now speeding up, with the potential to help realize SDGs in other developing countries.

Education

Turning to education, recent years' policies have centered on three main targets: improving the mandatory education system, expanding higher education, and nurturing world-class universities and research environments. These targets are clearly addressed in the national SDG plan and in the 2019 SDG progress report,⁴ primarily concerning education (SDG 4) and innovation (SDG 9). China has come a long way, with most teens now completing the mandatory nine years and close to 90 percent entering some form of high school, including the vocational track. Enrollment in higher education (all forms) is approaching 50

percent. Seven Chinese institutions (not counting in Hong Kong) are regularly placed among the world's top 200 universities in international rankings. China is particularly strong within math, particle physics, chemistry, stem cell biology, nanoscience, genomics, nuclear science, biotechnology, engineering, and materials science. The flipside assessment is that overall academic quality remains relatively low and that China-based researchers are less cited than international peers.

Chinese total spending on education and research has climbed towards the 2020 goal of 2.5 percent of GDP. One of the most recent policy initiatives, commonly called “Double First Class,” prioritizes nurturing select world-class environments. Internationalization is a key ingredient, promoted through funding schemes to bring home Chinese and recruit international talents, study programs to attract international students to China, and scholarships for Chinese students to spend time abroad. A contradiction regarding all this internationalization is the Chinese Communist Party pushing for politically correct norms to be further enshrined in university curricula and statutes.⁵ This presents dilemmas for academics and administrators who get caught between pressures to become world leaders while having to toe the Party line. Nevertheless, internationally, China is more involved than ever, bridging domestic capacities with international initiatives, including supporting education-related SDG targets in other developing countries.

Modes of international cooperation

China's international engagements in health and education are expanding and go through several channels, but bilateral and South–South cooperation remain the dominant tracks.⁶ Foreign- and aid-related policies are guided by Chinese traditional principles stressing mutual benefit, non-interference, and non-conditionality—as far as political conditions go. There are conditions attached to Chinese assistance, typically including the use of Chinese goods and services. The PRC is not a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and does not apply its aid-related standards, sometimes making it difficult to distinguish aid from other forms of Chinese assistance.

Health

Some of China's international health assistance is mentioned, in general terms, in the national SDG plan and related progress reports. Importantly, this cuts across several SDGs, with infrastructure building and training and education being key components.

In 2015, the PRC pledged support to building 100 hospitals and clinics for developing countries in the next five years. China, moreover, continues its

long tradition of sending medical teams, which in 2019 counted 1,100 health workers dispersed to 56 countries.⁷ Chinese provinces are responsible for organizing the teams that typically operate health and treatment clinics. The Chinese navy has a hospital ship, the Peace Ark, which also offers medical services during port visits. Both Chinese authorities and international organizations have long pushed for Chinese pharmaceutical products, including traditional medicines, to enter developing markets. Malaria has been a long-term focus, but Chinese companies are now producing internationally available drugs for more diseases. While much of this is based on commercial activities, more drugs for lower costs can help achieve SDG targets in some developing countries.

The PRC is scaling up its humanitarian programs. In response to the Ebola virus epidemic, China stepped in with medical teams, drugs, medical equipment, food, vehicles, and finances, including giving USD 500 million and USD 600 million to the joint UN responses in 2014 and 2015.⁸ Importantly, health is a profiled theme within the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The last two forums included special health ministers’ meetings. Furthermore, smaller China–Africa roundtables and other activities addressing health cooperation are arranged more frequently, often in cooperation with the UN and other international organizations. China has supported the joint Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention within the African Union since the center’s inception in 2017. Finally, health is part of the expansive portfolio of government-supported Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Health is regularly discussed at BRICS summits, which include special BRICS health ministers’ meetings. Overall, China is gearing up its health engagements with clear relevance to SDGs, but the effect is difficult to measure, as these crisscross between many goals and China offers limited transparency respecting its bilateral contributions.

Additionally, the Chinese are investing more in international organizations. There are several reasons for this. The Chinese have recognized challenges with their traditional approaches, not the least regarding the sustainability of many projects and services they help initiate. While China seeks to enhance its image as a responsible SDG actor, its development professionals are also eager to learn from international practices. China is the second-largest funder of the UN regular budget and has shown considerable interest in international health governance. A PRC citizen (from Hong Kong) led the World Health Organization (WHO) from 2007 to 2017, a Chinese national is currently included in the WHO leadership group, and Xi Jinping visited the WHO headquarters in 2017. Chinese voluntary financial contributions to UN organizations are still modest but have increased in recent years,

including enlarged allocations to the WHO, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS, the UN Population Fund, the UN Children’s Fund, Gavi, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.⁹

Education

As with health, Chinese contributions to education take several forms, but some things are different. First, education constitutes a market attracting many students to China, totaling almost 500,000 international students in 2018, half enrolled in degree programs and 13 percent funded by Chinese scholarships.¹⁰ Second, although there is also certainly international cooperation in education, it is less steered by large multilateral institutions. A case in point is that the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) neither has the USA nor Israel as members after they withdrew in protest over the inclusion of Palestine. China, conversely, is stepping up its engagements. Xi Jinping himself visited UNESCO headquarters in 2014.

As with health, some contributions to education are listed in the national SDG plan, cutting across several SDGs and including infrastructure. In 2015, China promised assistance to building 100 new schools and vocational training centers.¹¹ The PRC has a long tradition of granting scholarships for university degree programs and shorter-term courses in China, including training for teachers and public officials. The 2019 SDG progress report states that, in the previous year alone, China offered financial support to 50,000 students from developing countries and that, in the last three and a half years, 3,900 diploma and degree study routes were provided to developing countries. Importantly, Chinese university administrators have long recognized complaints about dubious application processes for scholarships in some countries, which they have found difficult to resolve as multiple institutions are involved. China has an active youth volunteer program, with Chinese teachers spending time abroad teaching various subjects.¹²

All the above-mentioned activities, often discussed as people-to-people exchanges, are increasing, with new pledges made during recent BRI and FOCAC activities. In 2016, China stated it would provide financial support for 10,000 BRI country students to study or do research in China—each year. During the 2018 FOCAC, China pledged funding for 50,000 new scholarships (supposedly spread over three years) plus many other training and capacity-building opportunities. It is difficult to measure the impact of Chinese contributions, but for students from least-developed countries, which China prioritizes for aid, possibilities to get an education in China may help achieve some SDG targets. Another mode of Chinese support within education is the Chinese Confucius Institutes (CIs).

CIs are, however, not considered aid, although many students surely benefit from attending Chinese language classes. There are now more than 540 CIs in the world, according to the Hanban web overview. Note, however, that CIs have proven controversial in some countries, and some institutes have closed.

As is the case with health, China is expanding its multilateral engagements, which include setting up training centers and regularized course modules with a growing list of regional and international organizations. The current (incomplete) list includes UNESCO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Population Fund, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the OECD, all of which have established centers or programs offering courses for developing country participants, fully or partially funded by China.

Conclusion

China prioritizes both health and education in its national development plans. The 2020 coronavirus crisis will likely lead to further investment in domestic disease prevention and relevant international cooperation. On the international side, China is scaling up its bilateral contributions and investing more in multilateral organizations. If this trend continues, China is bound to become a more influential actor in international health and education with the potential to spur SDG achievements, especially, perhaps, in least-developed countries.

Notes and select references

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3. World Health Organization (2016): "China–WHO: Country Cooperation Strategy 2016–2020."
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5. Chinese Ministry of Education (2017): "Review of China's education reform in 2017"
6. Estimates of Chinese aid vary. Naohiro Kitano concludes that it was USD 6.4 billion in 2018. See his 2019 paper "Estimating China's Foreign Aid: 2017–2018 Preliminary Figures." Note that estimates of Chinese aid vary considerably between sources and are subject to uncertainty.
7. See footnote 3 (2019 progress report) and State Council Information Office (2017): "Development of China's Public Health" (white paper).
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