

UNSDCF: Development Analysis & Data Summary

A comprehensive Common Country Analysis (CCA) was undertaken by the UN country team in China in 2019 and used to inform the development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021-2025 (UNSDCF). The CCA was last updated in December 2020. This document is a summary of main points of the CCA.

China's national development vision targets long-term goals that reflect many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This includes China's high priority on ensuring ecological sustainability, as well as encouraging innovation and 'Rural Revitalization' to achieve that goal without compromising growth. These strategies support both China's plans and the SDGs, for example, in promoting green agriculture and rural e-commerce. China's goals are also ambitious, such as China's goal of ending extreme rural poverty by 2020.

China's contributions towards the SDGs – to end poverty, reduce gender and other forms of inequality and protect the planet – go beyond national attainments. This is due not only to China's scale, but also its global role as a source of investment and trade, development finance, technical assistance and experience in innovative technologies and policies.

China, along with the rest of the world, faces challenges in achieving these goals – as well as maintaining achievements. Challenges include the impact of slowing growth amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks this poses for jobs and social spending. Another development difficulty is the combination of multiple population related challenges posed by its demographic transition, including in particular low fertility, migration/urbanization, and the ageing of population. The ageing population is one of these key challenges, with 30.2% of China's population to be over age 60 by 2050 and adequate pensions for all yet to be guaranteed.¹ Additionally, rapid urbanization – without fully integrating migrants and their families within urban social services – risks increasing urban poverty, not currently captured by China's rural anti-poverty campaign. Other challenges include managing the impact of technological change to avoid 'digital divides', as well as addressing urgent environmental threats – such as water, soil and air pollution, along with biodiversity loss and climate change – which disproportionately impact the poorest communities. Only by overcoming these challenges can safe, inclusive and sustainable development be realised for all.

Each of these challenges captures the overarching mission of the SDGs: to leave no one behind. Yet while the government has many programs to support vulnerable groups – such as people with disabilities (PWDs), left-behind children, smallholder farmers and others – the benefits of the country's rapid growth continue to be unevenly shared. This represents China's greatest challenge to achieving almost every SDG. The global goals actively prioritise reaching the most vulnerable groups first to accelerate sustainable development, as societies with large internal gaps tend to be less stable, just and healthy.

¹ UN DESA, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019, Volume II: Demographic Profiles.

Some groups in China are at risk of being left behind, many of whom are not currently covered by government assistance. This includes the groups below.

Migrant workers and their families are usually excluded from public services in the cities where they work due to their rural *hukou* (identity registration). This means many return to their hometowns for medical treatment or leave their children behind to attend school. Consequently, ‘left behind’ children do not benefit from the same parental support in their studies and face greater educational as well as psychological challenges. While the government has taken steps to support such children, this area needs to be strengthened. Further, the best long-term solution is ending legal barriers to children staying with their parents. Migrant workers also face greater risks of exploitation: according to the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2016 only 35.1% of rural migrant workers signed labour contracts with their employers, while 73% are not covered by employment injury insurance.²

Older people may be unable to rely on the support of their families, while the government’s capacity to meet their needs is severely challenged. According to the Office of the National Working Commission on Aging, China will have 487 million people aged 60 or above by around 2050 – exceeding the current US population.³ Older people are not a homogenous group and older women are a particular concern, as Chinese women can now expect to live to 79.1 years, five years longer than men. However, they retire with lower savings and fewer assets, contributing less to their pensions, due to the two-tiered compulsory retirement age for men at 60 and women at 50 or 55⁴. This puts older women at greater risk of poverty, while straining the country’s social security system, unless reforms are made. Rural older people, the oldest old and older people living by themselves are among other segments of the older people who risk being left behind.

PWDs account for more than 85 million people, or over 6.4% of China’s population, among whom 30% are severely disabled. Many students with disabilities are excluded from mainstream education, limiting their long-term development, social inclusion and ability to work. While the government tried to boost jobs for PWDs through a 2007 quota system stating that all employers must ensure at least 1.5% of employees are PWDs, many opted to pay into the Disabled Persons Employment Security Fund instead, to avoid making workplaces suitable for PWDs. Greater accessibility support and public awareness on the rights of PWDs is needed for PWDs to participate fully and equally in society.

Victims of violence includes 24.7% of married women in China who have experienced various forms of domestic violence from their spouses, according to the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2011.⁵ China’s first domestic violence legislation, the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, enacted in 2016, defines domestic violence and provides protection to vulnerable groups.⁶ However, its definition excludes sexual violence and economic control.⁷ Capacity to enforce the law also remains limited, particularly among local

² NBS, “2016 National Migrant Workers monitoring and Investigation Report”, 2017.

³ Office of the National Working Commission on Aging, 2019, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/08/c_138456566.htm.

⁴ Women workers retire at 50, and women cadres retire at 55.

⁵ Runge et al., “UN Technical Paper Recommendations from the International Roundtable on the Family Violence Legislation in China”, 2014. See also: the Third Survey on the Social Status of Women in China by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) and NBS in 2011.

⁶ UN China, “UN Joint Statement: Family Violence Law takes a historical step forward for women’s and children’s protection”, 4 March 2016.

⁷ Central People’s Government of the PRC, *Anti-Domestic Violence Law of the PRC*, 27 December 2015.

governments. Children also require protection from other forms of violence, including school and cyber bullying. While the legal framework to address these problems is being developed, more work is needed in raising public awareness.

Rural Smallholder Farmers are another vulnerable group, defined by the World Bank as cultivating land of less than two hectares, comprising 98.1% of China's 207 million agricultural producers registered in 2016.⁸ Due to China's rapid urbanization in recent years, with 60.6% of Chinese now living in cities, young, able-bodied people are leaving rural farming communities for urban opportunities. However, due to restrictions of the *hukou* system, rural migrant workers usually leave older family members and women behind to manage the farming work. Women living in rural areas account for more than 60% of the rural labour force. Their limited resources and small scale often lead them to use of environmentally harmful chemicals in their farming, raising health as well as ecological risks. The establishment of a caring service system for left-behind elderly, children and women should be accelerated.

Ethnic minorities are heavily concentrated in some of China's most remote rural areas, often with arduous topography and greater exposure than most to the consequences of environmental problems and climate change. Of China's 334 poverty-stricken counties in 2019, 113 are official ethnic minority counties.⁹ This puts many at an early disadvantage: ethnic minority children are over three times more likely to fail to complete compulsory education than other children.¹⁰ According to a study conducted in Western China, a region that contains around 71.4% of all ethnic minorities in China, child mortality were twice as high for ethnic minorities as for Han populations.¹¹ Improving ethnic minorities' social and economic development has been a government priority. However, top-down approaches – such as relocations – risk eroding their cultural, religious and natural heritage rights. China's efforts to counter terrorism, particularly among the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, through residential “vocational education training centres” have been the object of a considerable amount of international attention. Some religious groups have also experienced constraints including limitations on infrastructure, and restrictions on educating children in accordance with parents right to provide direction and pass on beliefs to their children.^{12,13,14}

LGBTQI people are also vulnerable. China currently lacks laws protecting people from discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation, which remains common in education, society and employment. As a result, depression and suicide rates among LGBTQI people are high, making access to mental health support critical. Transgender people are especially at risk, due to major barriers to sex reassignment surgery and changing their gender on identity documents.¹⁵ Additionally, transgender women, gay men and other men who have sex with men are at higher risk of HIV infection in China, rising from 6.1% in 2008, to 23.3% in 2018. While China removed homosexuality from its mental disorders list in 2001, investigations reveal that

⁸ NBS, *Third National Agricultural Census*, 2017; Rapsomanikis, “The economic lives of smallholder farmers”, 2016.

⁹ People's Daily “4.8 million fewer people in poverty-stricken counties last year”, 27 June 2019.

¹⁰ UNICEF et al., “Population Status of Children in China in 2015”, 2017.

¹¹ Huang Y , Shallcross D , Pi L , et al. “*Ethnicity and maternal and child health outcomes and service coverage in western China: a systematic review and meta-analysis (2017)*”, The Lancet Global Health.

¹² Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, “Concluding observations on the combined fourteenth to seventeenth periodic reports of China”, 2018.

¹³ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>, 1966.

¹⁴ Convention on the Rights of the Child, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>, 1989.

¹⁵ China Women's University & UNDP, “Legal Gender Recognition in China: A Legal and Policy Review”, 2018.

public hospitals and private clinics still offer conversion therapy. Raising awareness of LGBTQI issues and revising legislation to be more LGBTQI-inclusive would help to improve their rights.

People Living with HIV (PLHIV) are significantly disadvantaged. While HIV prevalence remains relatively low in China, with the national infection rate now 0.09% (1.25 million people) in 2018, AIDS-related deaths that year were relatively high (around 35,000), due to many late-stage diagnoses. Testing by employers is also common: a 2016 study by the China Centre for Disease Control found 42.1% of the HIV-positive respondents had experienced employment discrimination.¹⁶ The government has made considerable efforts to reduce mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of HIV, syphilis and hepatitis B, with antiretroviral treatment reaching 93% of HIV positive women who delivered. However, the MTCT rate of 4.5% in 2018 remains above the global 2% target for the elimination of MTCT. Further efforts, including stronger community engagement and anti-discrimination laws, are needed. It is also vital that comprehensive sexuality education be included in schools, as the main mode of infection has shifted from injecting for drugs and blood plasma, to sexual transmission, driving over 95% of new infections.

Informal workers are also susceptible to being left behind, making up 54.4% of total employment in 2018, globally.¹⁷ These workers, predominantly women, are not usually covered by social protection systems tailored to the formally employed. Further, labour laws often do not cover their employment arrangements, leaving them at risk of wage arrears, exploitation, injury, and other unfair practices. The 2008 Labour Contract Law prepared with the support of the International Labour Organization requires all employers to offer contracts to their employees. However, while more urban workers now have contracts, the law's implementation varies and only covers organizations operating within the formal sector.¹⁸

Refugees and Asylum seekers face multiple risks. China ratified the 1951 Convention of Refugees, accepting refugees and asylum-seekers on a temporary basis, pending resettlement to a third country. However, refugees have no protection from their government or embassy, relying instead on international protection. In general the Chinese authorities respect the principle of non-refoulement, however refugees who lack valid documentation recognized by the authorities may be at risk of arrest and detention. Refugees are not routinely included in public services, including free vaccination and subsidized healthcare, posing a potential public health risk. With only ad-hoc access to basic education while waiting for resettlement, refugee children risk being left without literacy, skills or opportunities, while refugees also lack the means of earning a living legally and may be driven to unfavourable alternatives.

Trafficking victims face high risks of exploitation and exclusion. In recent years, China has made significant progress in its fight against internal trafficking of women and children, applying new systems to improve law enforcement and rescue efforts. This includes a criminal case registration system for missing children, the national anti-trafficking DNA database and a rapid-search system for missing children.¹⁹ According to the Ministry of Public Security, from May 2016 to September 2019, the platform helped to rescue 4,150 children, 57 of whom were victims of trafficking.²⁰

¹⁶ Sun et al., "Study on the prevalence and risk factors of employment related discrimination and stigma", 2016.

¹⁷ ILO, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy*, 2018b.

¹⁸ Gallagher et al, "China's 2008 Labour Contract Law", 2012.

¹⁹ The China's Child Safety Emergency Response platform (CCSER), developed in cooperation with private tech firms.

²⁰ Informal data provided by Ministry of Public Security to IOM.

China has also ratified a series of international instruments, including the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. Further efforts are needed to reduce the risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation victims, as well as marriage migrants from the Greater Mekong Sub-Region and other neighbouring countries, who face risks to their health and security, including domestic violence.

Protecting these key vulnerable groups calls for greater scale, targeting and effectiveness of government spending on core public services such as health care, education, social protection and environmental protection, all of which currently fall short of necessary levels. At present, China's basic public service spending as a share of GDP is lower than in most other countries at similar levels of development, and well below advanced economies. This should be raised, along with the redistributive role of the national budget, to better equip local governments in poorer areas with the resources they need to finance essential services and ensure no one is left behind.

Many countries face similar financing challenges. According to UNCTAD, annual demand for SDG-related investments in developing countries is between USD 3.3 trillion to USD 4.5 trillion, with a gap of up to USD 2.5 trillion a year.²¹ In 2019, UNESCAP estimated the additional funding needed to achieve the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific to be USD 1.5 trillion.²² China has the largest capital requirements regionally, at nearly USD 1 trillion of the total.²³ Innovative financing approaches being used to support China's sustainable development includes green finance for clean energy and other environmental investments – with China's green market now the world's second-biggest, after the United States. It also covers platforms such as digital finance – through channels such as inclusive e-commerce – along with philanthropy, with over 800,000 foundations in China heavily focused on areas such as education, healthcare and ending poverty.

Given the critical role of finance in achieving sustainable development, China's role as a provider of development funding and technical assistance is growing globally, through infrastructure and other investments in developing countries. This involves multilateral initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China seeks to position itself as a new type of aid provider under the South-South Cooperation (SSC) framework, based on principles of solidarity, equality, sovereignty, national ownership and non-conditionality.²⁴ This is provided via an increasingly diverse set of financial instruments. Recent research suggests that the China Development Bank (CDB) and Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM), two large state-owned development finance institutions, now provide as much financing to developing countries as the World Bank.²⁵

Potential BRI project risks requiring assessment and monitoring include: a lack of local participation and ownership; a lack of remedies and compensation; involuntary land acquisitions; local population displacements; adverse impacts relating to use of land and natural resources; impacts on the health, safety, and well-being of workers and project-affected communities, among

²¹ UNCTAD, "SDG Investment Trends Monitor", 2019.

²² UN-ESCAP, "Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific: ambitions beyond growth.", 2019.

²³ Business and Sustainable Development Coalition, *Better Business, Better World*, 2017.

²⁴ UN General Assembly, "Nairobi Outcome Document", 2009.

²⁵ Gallagher, "China's Role as the World's Development Bank Cannot Be Ignored", *NPR*, 11 October 2018.

other risks. These problems are not unique to the BRI or China; they have occurred, and must be monitored in, a wide range of international business activities.

Through policy and regulatory improvements, as well as reducing inconsistencies in financing and investment standards, BRI-related investment coordination can be further strengthened and more closely aligned with the SDGs. The UN supports countries partnering with China by building their absorption capacities, raising their environmental and social impact standards. It has also worked to harmonize sustainable investment standards, to help mobilize China's vast resources towards priority areas for sustainable development in recipient nations. China is also working to ensure the quality assurance processes of its development cooperation, particularly monitoring and evaluation, as its aid providers have to date lacked strong monitoring systems, compared to more traditional development partners. With the growing volume and complexity of its assistance, China has also recently taken steps to better manage it. This includes the new China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) established in 2018 to enhance policy coordination and China Aid implementation.²⁶

China's international development efforts are also expanding in its increasing role in global peacekeeping. Besides being the largest contributor of military and civilian personnel of the UN Security Council, China is now the second-largest contributor to the peacekeeping budget (at 10% of assessed contributions in 2016-2018).

China is also increasingly engaged in the UN human rights system, ratifying six of the nine UN Human Rights Conventions and Covenants, having signed but not ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and neither signed nor ratified the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, or the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. China accepted 82% of member states' recommendations in the 2018 Universal Periodic Review, with those rejected pertained to optional protocols that China is not party to, including towards abolishing the death penalty and ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment and Punishment.

This analysis also examines China's progress towards each of the 17 SDGs.

SDG 1: Zero Poverty

- China is now in the final stages of its concerted push to end absolute rural poverty within 2020, a major contribution towards global attainment of SDG1.
- Poverty reduction progress has been strong, with the number of poor falling from 99.9 million in 2012, to just 5.51 million at end 2019 (0.6%).
- This follows sustained government investments under China's targeted poverty alleviation approach, adapting strategies based on different areas and populations.
- Building on these achievements beyond 2020 requires additional approaches: Firstly, including addressing urban poverty, which is not currently recognized. Secondly, adding relative and multidimensional poverty definitions, taking into account factors such as

²⁶ For an overview on the governance structure of China's foreign assistance, please see UNDP China, "Issue Brief - Governance System of China's Foreign Assistance", 2019.

education and healthcare deprivations. Thirdly, addressing these underlying causes of poverty, to prevent it re-emerging after 2020.

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

- China also plays a significant part in global efforts towards SDG 2, by producing an agricultural sector that reliably feeds the world's largest population.
- Grain output has held stable at a historical high of over 650 million metric tonnes since 2015.²⁷
- Two national nutrition programs are currently being carried out: “The Outline of Food and Nutrition Development in China (2014-2020)” and “National Nutrition Plan (2017-2030)” targeting children, pregnant women and the elderly, among others.
- The nutrition improvement programme for rural compulsory education students has registered good progress, already benefiting 37 million students by 2018.
- China reports already reaching its 2020 target of holding the rate of stunting in children under age five below 7%. However, rural under-five stunting rates remain higher, at 11.2%.²⁸

SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

- China's health advances are impressive, with sustained gains in life expectancy at birth, up from 43.7 years in 1960, to 76.4 in 2016.
- This includes significant progress in reducing maternal, infant and under-five mortality. From 2015 to 2018, China's maternal mortality rate fell from 20.1 to 18.3 per 100,000, while infant mortality rate declined from 8.1 to 6.1 per 1,000, and under-five mortality rate dropped from 10.7 to 8.4 per 1,000.²⁹
- Addressing inequalities and disparities in access to quality health services, including sexual and reproductive health services, is critical for achieving good health for all and it is a policy priority. For example, the maternal mortality rates in the eastern, central and western regions were 10.9 per 100,000, 20 per 100,000 and 25.2 per 100,000 respectively in 2018³⁰. Some vulnerable groups such as PWDs, migrants, and ethnic minorities still face challenges to access quality sexual and reproductive health services.
- Preventing infectious diseases has also been a policy priority for decades, gaining further prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The government's Healthy China Action Plan 2019-2030 also emphasises reducing non-communicable diseases (NCDs), in a rapidly ageing, urbanizing society.
- High tobacco and alcohol use put men in particular at greater risk of NCDs: 50.5% of men 15 years and older smoke, versus only 2.1% of women, while men consume on average 11.7 litres of alcohol a year, compared with 2.5 litres for females.
- Adolescents also face other health challenges, such as unintended pregnancies, a shortage of mental health services to overcome behavioural problems and avoid self-harm, and their unmet needs for reproductive health information and services.

²⁷ MFA, 2019.

²⁸ NWCCW, NBS, UNICEF, 2018, citing 2013 data.

²⁹ All data from National Bureau of Statistics Data Portal.

³⁰ NHC, 2019 Report on the development of Women's and Children's Health in China, 2019.

SDG 4: Quality Education

- China's primary and junior middle school education – both compulsory and free – have enrolment and completion rates on par with upper-income countries.
- By 2017, the national enrolment ratio in senior secondary education reached 88.3%.
- However, ensuring equal access for all children to quality education remains a challenge, with varying standards of teachers, school conditions and quality assurance systems across the country. There are also too few qualified pre-primary teachers, which can create lifelong disparities.
- Children affected by migration, including children of rural migrant workers in cities and those left behind in rural areas, also face great educational barriers.
- Education must also better match market demands, including the shift towards high quality, high tech growth. This requires vocational education reforms, to equip people with the skills needed for the future of work.
- More efforts are also needed to provide lifelong learning, including for older people, to improve the quality of their lives and lift their earning potential.
- There is also growing global awareness of the importance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), which is not included in China's school system.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

- Gender equality has made steady gains in China, but many challenges remain.
- Overall, China is progressing well towards eliminating harmful practices (target 5.3), taking important steps to combat violence against women, along with trafficking, with the Anti-Domestic Violence Law's approval in 2016 and the National Plan of Action on Combating Trafficking in Persons (2013-2020).
- Son preference has led to gender-biased sex selection, resulting in a skewed sex ratio at birth. Since 2000, the Government has also sought to balance the sex ratio at birth, through nationwide awareness campaigns and banning sex-selective abortions and sex identifying ultrasounds. However, son preference still persists, with 111.9 males born in China for every 100 females in 2017.
- Girls' enrolment in all levels of public education is equal to, or sometimes greater, than those of boys.³¹ Yet discrimination in education persists. For example, female university students make up less than 30% of China's Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students, channelling many away from more lucrative fields.
- Inequality also affects women at work: in 2020, women's wages were just 61% of men's in China for comparable work. More women also tend to work in lower-skilled, lower-paid and informal jobs.³² Female workforce participation has also fallen in recent years, at 69% in 2017, compared to 83% for men.³³
- Various factors limit women's career advancement, including the greater burden of caring for children and older family members, along with other unpaid work: in 2018 the NBS found that men spend on average one third of the time women do on housework.
- Many women also struggle to balance their careers with child-rearing. In 2019, the government banned discriminatory hiring practices against women or contractually obligating them not to become pregnant. However, more efforts are needed to support their

³¹ Data on pre-school and ECD program ratios are not available.

³² NBS, *2016 Statistics on Women and Children in China*, 2016b. p.43.

³³ World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, 2020.

careers, such as extending the legal 98-days paid maternity leave, as well as increasing the 14-days paternity leave, which is not mandatory for employers.

- Female leadership is also increasing in China. According to the 2019 White Paper, more than half of new civil servants are women, while their judicial representation has climbed to 32.7% in 2017, up from 11% in 1982. However, their political roles tend to lack decision-making power, with many women involved in village and urban committees, while making up just 24.2% of representatives to the 19th National Congress of the CPC. In the private sector, the number of women in management roles has risen, though not to gender parity.

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

- China's top water management priority has been ensuring safe water for its rural population. By the end of 2018, 86% of rural people had access to centralized water, up from 82% at the end of 2015. As a result, 16.05 million poor people could access safe drinking water.³⁴
- The government also reported improvements in renovating and building urban water facilities, along with water safety regulations, with the urban water supply 9% higher by the end of 2018 than at end 2015.
- However, water use in China is still inefficient by international standards, with consumption per unit of GDP far exceeding that of the developed world. Given China's water scarcity, there is an urgent need for greater water management in agriculture and industrial production in future.
- Unsustainable agricultural practices have also adversely affected China's underground water quality and long-term water security. While 74.3% of China's water sources are considered good quality (Levels I-III), 86.3% of China's underground water is categorized as level IV or V in 2018. This is mainly due to heavy metals from industry, as well as excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers,³⁵ far above the global average.
- This has also been a leading cause of pollution and eutrophication in freshwater lakes and rivers. Beyond the risk contaminated water poses to human health, pollution and unsustainable action in China's rivers and lakes have seriously depleted fish stocks and biodiversity, disrupting ecosystems and the ability of rivers to regenerate.³⁶
- Marine litter is also an increasing concern: five of the world's ten biggest contributors to marine litter are rivers originating in China (the Yangtze, Yellow, Hai, Pearl, and Amur rivers),³⁷ while the Ocean Health Index for China is lower than the global average.
- Gains have been made in China's sanitation: as a result of sustained government programs, 81.8% of rural households in 2017 had access to sanitary latrines, up from 7.5% in 1993.³⁸ This progress was strengthened by the "toilet revolution" announced by President Xi Jinping in 2015.³⁹ However, more efforts are needed to ensure access for all to sanitary facilities. In 2019, the WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme found 211 million people in China still have no access to basic sanitation services at home, while about 20% of schools did not have sanitary toilets.

³⁴ MFA, 2019.

³⁵ MEE, *2018 National Report on the State of the Environment in China*, 2019.

³⁶ Cassou et al. "The Challenge of Agricultural Pollution: Evidence from China, Vietnam, and the Philippines", 2018.

³⁷ Schmidt et al. "Export of Plastic Debris by Rivers into the Sea", 2017.

³⁸ National Health Commission, *China Health Statistical Yearbook 2018*, 2018.

³⁹ Xinhua, "Promoting the 'Toilet Revolution' to Advance Social Civilization", 27 November 2017,

SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

- In 2015, China achieved 100% rural electrification – a remarkable milestone for such a vast and geographically diverse middle-income nation – following a three-year action plan based mainly on solar technology.⁴⁰
- The government is now focused on boosting renewable energies further within the energy mix. China’s Energy Production and Consumption Revolution Strategy (2016-2030) proposes raising non-fossil fuel to 15% of energy consumption by 2020 and 20% by 2030. By the end of 2018, total installed renewables capacity reached 728 million kilowatts, up 12% year-on-year.
- Through the BRI, China has also become a major source of finance for generating and supplying energy in other development nations, supporting SDG 7 globally.
- However, while renewable energy consumption is rising, coal remained by far China’s biggest energy source in 2017, creating 67.7% of total electricity.⁴¹ The ongoing economic slowdown and deteriorating global environment may add pressure to use China’s abundant coal resources in electricity.
- BRI energy projects also raise challenges when partner countries prefer lower cost, carbon-intensive technologies, or apply weak environmental standards.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

- Maintaining economic growth and boosting jobs remain top priorities for China.
- FDI continues to play an important role in spurring China’s growth, but has declined amid global trade tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on global value chains.
- Foreign investors continue to complain about China’s lack of transparency and discrimination, even though foreign companies tend to provide more decent work than domestic companies.
- However, there are signs of improvement: in October 2019, the World Bank’s “Doing Business 2020” study reported China to be one of the world’s top ten most improved economies for ease of doing business for a second straight year. China executed a record eight business reforms in the 12 months to May 1, ranking 31st globally for ease of doing business.
- However, achieving decent work for all remains a challenge, especially for groups at risk of being left behind. PWDs, rural migrant workers, poor farmers, informal sector workers, LGBTQI people and people living with HIV (PLHIV), among others, still struggle to secure jobs that meet international ‘decent work’ criteria, some even experience considerable hiring discrimination.
- Informal sector workers, meanwhile, face serious obstacles in obtaining employment-based social insurance, including pensions and medical insurance, both of which offer far better benefits than the residence-based schemes on which they rely.

SDG 9. Resilient Infrastructure, Sustainable Industry and Innovation

- China’s has seen remarkable progress in its modern infrastructure, including transportation, communication and the Internet.
- China now has more than 29,000 kilometres of high-speed rail, far more than any other country, among a total of 131,000 kilometres of operating railway.

⁴⁰ He & Victor, “Experiences and lessons from China’s success in providing electricity for all”, 2017.

⁴¹ IEA Data Portal, “Electricity generation by source, PRC 1990-2017”.

- It has also built 6.48 million mobile communications base stations, including 3.72 million 4G base stations, with 439,000 added in 2018 alone.
- 93% of China's people have access to mobile-broadband subscriptions,⁴² while 94% of those aged 18-34 own a smartphone.
- However, digital divides are growing, with only three-in-ten Chinese aged 50 and older owning a smartphone, along with only 63% of rural Chinese.⁴³
- China has already reached most SDG indicators regarding industrialization that are relevant for developing countries, such as manufacturing and industrial value added per capita and share of GDP. Its goal now is to boost its tertiary sector, including strengthening scientific research, upgrading technological capabilities, as well as supporting R&D and innovation.
- Enhancing the sustainability of infrastructure and industry are also key for China in its effort to shift towards higher quality growth, including containing carbon-intensive industries and promoting low-carbon sectors.
- China is also helping to raise global attainment of SDG9, with the BRI focused heavily on promoting global connectivity and industrialization in developing countries. To maximise the BRI's potential for sustainable infrastructure, it is essential to ensure that projects are environmentally sustainable, as well as benefitting the communities they directly affect.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequality

- By global standards, China's income inequality remains high, despite the official GINI coefficient falling to 0.467 in 2017,⁴⁴ from a peak of 0.491 in 2008.
- This reflects different paces of income growth nationally, even as per capita disposable incomes have steadily climbed in both rural and urban regions.⁴⁵
- The government has launched a number of measures to reduce income inequality, such as funding for social assistance and pensions, along with tax reforms. The Rural Revitalization Program is another key part of China's efforts to bridge internal inequalities, by boosting rural investments and jobs.
- China's most severe inequalities relate not to incomes, but to accessing essential public services. In 2017, China's State Council issued the "Program for Equalization of Basic Public Services" during the 13th Five-Year Plan Period, reaffirming that all citizens enjoy the right to roughly equal basic public services: education, employment, medical and old-age care, along with housing. The government has set 2020 as the target year for realizing this ambitious goal.
- Meanwhile, as economic growth slows, there is a risk that gaps will widen due to competing demands for public finances.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Economic Growth

- By the end-2019, China's urban population reached 60.6% of the total, a year ahead of schedule under its "New-Type Urbanization Plan" in 2014. This sets out ambitious goals for creating scientific, sustainable and inclusive cities.
- However, major challenges remain, including fully integrating rural migrant worker families. This is undermined by sudden expulsions of these urban residents from their

⁴² International Telecommunication Union, "World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database", 2019.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ NWCCW, NBS, UNICEF, 2018.

⁴⁵ Xinhua, "China's resident disposable income rises 5.8 pct in 2019", 7 January 2020.

homes, which were torn down for construction.⁴⁶ Such practices violate the rights of those families, and contradict core indicators of SDG 11, such as 11.3 “participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning”.

- While the new urbanization plan does include the goal of integrating migrants within cities, it is unclear how this goal is to be carried out.
- Further, construction must factor in environmental concerns, which cannot be compromised by speed.

SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

- Under China’s “Ecological Civilization” agenda, the Government is accelerating responsible consumption and production measures.
- In 2015, China adopted an action plan targeting “zero-growth” for fertilizer and pesticide use by 2020. This effort to end and reverse soil degradation is a critical agricultural goal, given China has only 6% of the world’s arable land to feed one-fifth of the global population.⁴⁷
- The 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) goes further than previous plans, with tough environmental targets that are mostly mandatory.
- Responsible consumption is now receiving widespread attention. Garbage classification systems have launched in many areas,⁴⁸ while in January 2019, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, along with 20 other ministries, launched the national “zero waste” pilot city plan, to reduce waste and encourage recycling.
- In January 2020, the National Development and Reform Commission also announced a government program to reduce single use plastics nationwide, which could have a positive impact across the region.⁴⁹
- A key challenge in promoting responsible production and consumption is the gap between government policy and local governments decisions.
- Further, while inspections and enforcement are intensifying, market incentives – such as higher prices for key resources – have not been widely applied in China.
- Another challenge is the need to raise awareness and capacities among all China’s people in shifting to greener consumption patterns, with the understanding that the supply of green products is inadequate in China.⁵⁰

SDG 13: Climate Action

- In a major boost to the Paris Climate Agreement, China now aims to peak carbon emissions by 2030, as well as achieve carbon neutrality by 2060.
- Between 2016 and 2018, China's energy consumption per unit of GDP fell by 11.35%, saving about 540 million tonnes of standard coal equivalent.⁵¹
- By the end of 2018, China’s carbon emission intensity had also decreased by 45.8% since 2005, meeting its 2020 target ahead of time.
- However, China has not yet introduced other pricing tools to curb emissions, such as carbon taxes.

⁴⁶ Feng & Clover, “Beijing demolitions spark rare street protests”, *Financial Times*, 12 December 2017.

⁴⁷ FAO China, briefing on Fertilizer and Pesticide Use.

⁴⁸ Xinhua, “China Focus: China wastes no time in garbage sorting”, 7 June 2019.

⁴⁹ BBC, “China to ban bags and other single-use plastic”, 20 January 2020.

⁵⁰ SWITCH-Asia RPAC, UNEP, “Analysis of the Current Situation on Sustainable Consumption in China”, 2020.

⁵¹ MEE, “UN Climate Action Summit: China’s Position and Action”, 17 September 2019.

- Another challenge for China is incentivizing greater climate action at local levels, as well as across the private sector.
- Air pollution also remains a concern. As the most immediate and visible environmental degradation experienced as a result of rapid economic development and industrialization, China has undertaken extensive efforts to improve air quality for its citizens over the past few years. The implementation of the Air Pollution and Control Action Plan in 2013 was effective in helping to stem the problem of air pollution in China’s urban centres, leading to slight improvements in national measures of air quality.
- Under China’s new “high quality development” model, investing more in green technologies serves two vital ends; promoting environmental sustainability and creating a new source of long-term economic growth.
- A global leader in renewable energy, China is determinedly exploring new technologies to reduce its reliance on coal for energy and transportation.
- In particular, China is rapidly developing electric vehicles, with more than half the world’s electric vehicles now sold there.
- While playing a leading role in addressing climate change, China is also severely affected by it. With its vast territory and diverse geological conditions, China is subject to a wide range of climate-related disasters including droughts, floods and typhoons.
- In 2018, China’s economic losses due to environmental disasters reached RMB 264.5 billion.⁵² Almost one third of China’s total arable land is affected by crop failure due to severe weather and other climate-related disasters.⁵³
- Rural populations in Northern China are especially exposed to desertification and crop failures, amid erratic weather patterns worsened by climate change. This has serious implications for China’s long-term food security.
- To mitigate and adapt to climate challenges, the government has invested more heavily in strengthening emergency management capacities. The Ministry of Emergency Management (MEM) was set up in 2018 to lead and coordinate national responses to all types of disasters, natural or man-made.

China has the technical and economic capacity to realize its environmental goals. However, three key tensions will affect the outcome of China’s efforts:

- Firstly, at the national policy level, growth remains the key metric for assessing development. With growth already slowing in the COVID-19 pandemic, attempts to ensure that it does not falter further in the short-term threatens to reverse sustainability progress.
- Secondly, at the local level, environmental protection directives face resistance when they affect output, tax revenues and jobs in the local economy.
- Thirdly, the ability of households affected by environmental degradation to assert their right to a safe environment is growing but still weak, especially for vulnerable groups most affected.

SDG 14: Life Below Water

- China is expected to account for 53% of the global increase in consumption of fish and other seafood over the next decade, squeezing aquatic resources around the globe.

⁵² MEM, “The basic situation of natural disasters in 2018 released by the Ministry of Emergency Management and the Office of the National Committee for Disaster Reduction”, 2019.

⁵³ ADB, ‘Addressing Climate Change Risks, Disasters, and Adaptation in the PRC’, 2015.

- China plans to increase overseas fishing to supplement domestic supply.
- Under the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), China's distant water fleet will increasingly contribute to its total wild catch, rising to 23% by 2020 from 14% in 2017. Unless managed sustainably to allow fish stocks to replenish, with limits on catch volumes, such operations would intensify the over-exploitation and collapse of the world's fisheries.⁵⁴
- China also faces large challenges in combatting marine pollution. The Yangtze river is a major source of plastic pollution with a severe impact on marine biodiversity, carrying 333,000 metric tonnes of plastic to the ocean every year. UN Environment estimates that marine ecosystems will suffer USD 13 billion a year in damage due to plastic waste.⁵⁵

SDG 15: Life on Land

- China is one of the most biodiverse countries worldwide.
- Reforestation, combating desertification, and biodiversity conservation have been targeted in government initiatives for many years.
- In 2010, China's State Council released the China National Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Plan (2011-2030), to apply the Convention on Biological Diversity.
- As of end-2018, China had set up 2,750 nature reserves, spanning 1.47 million square kilometres. 16.9% of China's land was designated as a protected area by the end of 2016.
- At the same time, lack of a consistent legal framework, lack of capacity and limited awareness remain barriers to successfully managing a coordinated Protected Areas (PA) system.
- At the national level, there is no comprehensive law on establishing and managing PAs, although there are many laws and regulations for protecting wildlife, as well as managing forests, grasslands and other natural systems.
- A crucial challenge remains how to include local communities in the decision-making process and raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity protection.
- Improved coordination with neighbouring countries on the conservation of endangered and threatened species, such as big cats and migratory birds, would strengthen their protection, given their habitats are often located in transboundary areas.

SDG 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions

- China's recent report on progress towards SDG 16 highlights achievements in addressing "all forms of crime", including ending all forms of violence against women and children (see 'SDG 5') and fighting corruption, along with international cooperation in law enforcement and security.⁵⁶
- Several key SDG 16 targets are not mentioned in the government's report. This includes 16.6 on accountable and transparent institutions, 16.7 on responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making, and 16.10 on public access to information and protection of "fundamental freedoms, in line with national legislation and international agreements".
- There remains considerable need for further action to achieve 16.B, "Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development".
- Approaches to SDG 16 tend to be driven by the government, with limited scope for bottom-

⁵⁴ CCICED, "Special policy study on global ocean governance" 2018.

⁵⁵ UN Environment, "Plastic Waste Causes Financial Damage of USD 13 Billion to Marine Ecosystems Each Year as Concern Grows over Microplastics", 23 June 2014.

⁵⁶ MFA, 2019.

up, citizen-driven initiatives.

- Authorities are encouraged to act in a way that each community feels that their identity is respected and their human rights fully observed.

SDG 17. Partnerships to Achieve the Goals

- China actively participates in various partnerships to support SDG achievement, through the country's own initiatives and many multilateral platforms.
- There are a number of relevant Chinese programs such as the BRI, the AIIB and the New Development Bank, the creation in 2018 of CIDCA and the triennial FOCAC.
- China participates actively in multilateral initiatives, including efforts to reform global governance to better protect and promote the interests of developing countries.
- China's 2019 SDG Progress report is significant in that China accompanies its own progress with a description of its efforts to assist other countries' in reaching the SDGs.
- At the Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, President Xi Jinping announced the South South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF) would be set up, with an initial pledge of USD 2 billion, followed by a supplementary pledge of USD 1 billion in 2017.

This Development Analysis and Data Summary concludes by identifying risks to China's SDG achievement.

This includes the impact of a potentially greater than expected economic slowdown, hurting jobs and incomes, as well as reducing government and corporate budgets for SDG spending, as policy-makers may prioritize restoring growth at the expense of long-term sustainability investments.

Natural disasters, other pandemics or sudden shocks could also compromise SDG attainment. In particular, China's dense population and concentration of economic activity along its coasts raises the economic risks of climate change induced extreme weather events. There is also the possibility of insufficient investment in human capital, which is vital to achieving every SDG, as well as leaving no one behind.

A number of governance risks may also undermine SDG achievement, including a lack of horizontal coordination across ministries and sectors. For example, introducing multidimensional approaches to poverty alleviation requires close coordination between poverty authorities, agriculture, rural development, health, education, environment, housing and infrastructure and others. Governance risks are also deepened by the lack of space for an empowered civil society representing the interests of groups at risk of being left behind. Finally, gaps in disaggregated data, particularly on the status of groups at risk of being left behind, also make it harder to identify and overcome challenges.

Overall, while China has demonstrated strong commitment and progress towards the SDGs and its own sustainable development vision, addressing the above bottlenecks will be key to ensuring that its efforts are successful and enduring for all.

More information on this Development Analysis and Data Summary is available from the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office in China.