

Child rights in China

With 1.33 billion people in 2007, China holds one fifth of the global population – including 342 million children, most of them living in rural areas.

China ratified the Convention in March 1992, the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography in December 2002, and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict in December 2007. It has ratified many international accords on child rights and has a strong body of domestic legislation on the promotion and protection of a wide range of child rights.

During the past two decades, child survival and development in China have steadily improved. According to the latest UN inter-agency statistics, the under-five mortality rate was reduced by 51 per cent between 1990 and 2007. An estimated 94 per cent of infants receive routine immunization, as measured by coverage of infants receiving three doses of diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus toxoid vaccine. And, at 3.7 per cent in 2003, the percentage of infants with low birthweight is among the lowest in the world.

Some disparities remain amid remarkable poverty reduction

The economic transformation that began in 1978 allowed GDP per capita to grow at an average annual rate of 9 per cent in 1990–2007. This has generated a remarkable reduction in poverty: Between 1981 and 2004, the proportion of the population who live on less than US\$1.25 a day was reduced from 85 per cent to 27 per cent, and more than half a billion people escaped absolute poverty.

In general, China's children are benefiting from lower material deprivation and better access to quality health care and education. Enrolment in primary school,

for example, is nearly universal for both girls and boys. But as in other middle-income countries, economic advances have been uneven, exacerbating disparities among diverse geographical and income groups. Infant mortality rates, for example, are almost five times higher in the most impoverished districts than in the wealthiest provinces. Similarly, under-five mortality rates for the lowest socio-economic quintile by area of residence are six times higher than those of the wealthiest group.

These disparities are compounded by limited access to quality health services for those living in poor and rural areas as well as those who are part of a massive population movement. China has an estimated 150 million internal migrants, accounting for more than 11 per cent of its population. Among those who have migrated within the country, an estimated 25 million are under age 18, and 58 million children have been left behind in rural areas as their parents seek work in the cities.

A traditional preference for boys has resulted in a significant increase in the sex-ratio imbalance since the 1980s. Data for 2005 show a sex ratio at birth of 119 boys to every 100 girls, rising from 109 in 1982. Although policies have been implemented to address this issue, further action, particularly in the area of social protection, is required to reduce the dependence of rural parents on their sons for support in old age, sickness and other difficulties.

Committing to social development that will sustain child protection

In 2006, the Government of China adopted a new resolution on building a sustainable and harmonious society, with children included as a main concern in the social development process. The resolution is incorporated in the

11th Five-Year Plan (2006–2010), adopted by the National People's Congress in March 2006. The plan also reaffirmed the Government's commitment to the 2001–2010 National Plan of Action for Children and Women's Development. Among the efforts to strengthen public services, the national 'Building a New Socialist Countryside' initiative commits the Government to providing free compulsory basic education and reforming the public social security system.

Challenges ahead

China faces the challenge of consolidating its gains in child rights and ensuring that growth is accompanied by diminishing disparities. In particular, it faces the task of meeting the material and protection needs of rural children, children affected by migration, and those living in the poor areas that are rapidly expanding around the major conurbations.

As an emerging international donor to other developing nations, and a major actor in the international economy, China has an unprecedented opportunity to support and promote child rights beyond its borders. Investing in child rights is among the surest ways to ensure that China's economic and social progress is both consolidated and deepened in years to come.