
28. Safeguarding vulnerable children in China during COVID-19 and beyond: an integrated approach to social protection and social governance

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The COVID-19 pandemic has presented huge challenges to countries and places worldwide (as discussed in Chapter 25 and the in-country case studies in Chapters 26, 27 and 29). The increasingly frequent outbreak of infectious diseases has once again reminded humankind that in the era of advanced industrialisation and globalisation, there is need to work together to deal with growing risks and uncertainties. In China, the pandemic is a major test for public health, the emergency management system and social governance. Social governance represents a new direction of government transformation that China has been promoting in the past decade. It emphasises transcending the previous single-dimensional government model based on social control and social management and mobilising multiple social subjects to participate in public affairs, including the delivery of public services (Guo and Jiang 2017). In particular strengthening and innovating grassroots social governance is seen as the cornerstone for promoting the modernisation of the national governance system and capacity in the new era. It is argued that China's COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control measures are closely related to the characteristics and transformation process of its social governance model.

At the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, the Chinese government adopted an all-out mobilisation and deployment action, reminiscent of war times, enforcing stringent pandemic prevention and control measures. Since May 2020, China has entered a normalisation stage of prevention and control of the pandemic. With the emergence of the faster-spreading Omicron variant from late 2021, the Chinese government emphasised adherence to the policy of 'scientific precision' and 'dynamic clearing', adopting measures including mass nucleic acid testing, movement control and health monitoring using digital technology in a timely manner, to achieve the maximum effect at a lower cost (Liu et al. 2022). In the meantime, it attaches great importance to expanding vaccine coverage for children and elderly persons. China's stringent control strategies have proven to be effective in curbing the spread of the virus and in protecting people's lives.

Admittedly, the strict prevention and control measures have exerted a downward pressure on the economy and on social development, and have had a significant impact on people's socio-psychological well-being, especially for those with existing vulnerabilities (Ding and Zhang 2022). Children are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. It is estimated that, across the world, the pandemic resulted in 60 million children living in monetary poor households and 100 million in multidimensional poverty by the end of 2021 (UNICEF 2021). The pandemic has confirmed the vital role of social protection as a key policy instrument in buffering exogenous shocks and stabilising socio-economic development (Razavi et al. 2020). Like many other countries and regions, China has placed great emphasis on strengthening the

social protection system to mitigate the adverse social and economic consequences caused by the pandemic. Social protection measures provide the necessary support to vulnerable children and families in times of crisis. This includes, but is not limited to, various cash transfer and social service programmes for children in poverty, children who lack parental care, and children with special needs.

It should be noted that China's social protection system for children is embedded in its unique model of social governance characterised by the capacity of the state to use its coercive power to mobilise mass resources, involving cooperation between governmental departments and sectors and with community forces to jointly respond to the pandemic. This governance system was critical in defeating the COVID-19 outbreak and safeguarding vulnerable people's needs in a timely manner. Nonetheless, China's social protection also faces challenges. The pandemic highlights that the benefit coverage is still too narrow, that there are gaps in the coverage between rural and urban areas, and that the institutional framework for social protection is still weak. There is a mutually reinforcing effect between social protection and social governance. Good community social governance ensures the effectiveness of social protection systems in addressing the vulnerability of children and families, and, conversely, a comprehensive social protection framework is an inherent requirement for achieving the sustainability of social governance in the long run.

This chapter examines and discusses China's social protection responses for vulnerable children during the pandemic using an integrated approach to social protection, which includes social assistance, social insurance and social relief, and how this is related to China's social governance model. It is divided into three main sections. The first section reviews the main challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on vulnerable children and families. The second section presents the social protection measures used to address these challenges. The third extends the discussion to how the social governance mechanisms contributed to the implementation of the policy measures on the ground and illustrates some significant challenges. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of China's experience for the development of social protection for children in the post-pandemic era.

CHILDREN'S VULNERABILITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic is a universal crisis that is disproportionately experienced by children and which compromised their material and psychosocial well-being. The pandemic containment measures, such as strict home quarantines and school closures, had a profound impact on children's well-being in all domains. Of particular concern in the Chinese context are the increased risks of multidimensional child poverty, the declining mental health of children and families, and the negative impact of pandemic containment measures on the well-being of children with disabilities.

Children's Increased Risk of Multidimensional Poverty

There has been an elevated trend of children and families living in poverty due to the pandemic. Those with pre-existing vulnerabilities have been hit the hardest. China's poverty alleviation action in the past decade had successfully achieved its overall goal to eradicate

extreme poverty by the end of 2020 (Xinhuanet 2021). However, coupled with the impact of the pandemic on economic development, increasing attention is being cast on the multidimensional deprivations of children living in rural areas, including those from households that had just been lifted out of poverty. Multidimensional deprivation is taken to refer to income or material deprivation, compromised psychosocial well-being, and lack of opportunities for children's educational development and access to health services to promote their physical development (Chzhen and Ferrone 2017). These challenges must be addressed holistically especially in relation to children who are vulnerable due to special needs and circumstances, such as children of migrant families and those with disabilities.

The pandemic has caused high-level economic insecurity for migrant families with children. There are over 290 million rural migrant workers in China, accounting for around 38 per cent of the total labour force (NBS 2020). The restriction of rural–urban migration has resulted in significant reduction in the household income of migrant families. Using a nationally representative household dataset and a microsimulation model, one study found that around 70 per cent of migrant workers lost part of their wage income during the pandemic lockdown period in early 2020, especially those working informally in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, hotel and catering (Zhang et al. 2021b). The income loss of migrant workers has created new risks for remittance-receiving households, which in turn may have a substantial and multifaceted negative impact on children. A sharp decline in migrant parents' remittances has seen a significant drop in support for the educational expenses of their children in rural areas during the lockdown (Tang and Li 2021). Overall, the economic impact of the pandemic on vulnerable families is likely to have negative effects on children's chances of survival and development in the longer term.

Moreover, home confinement and school closures may increase educational deprivation and inequality as vulnerable children face greater difficulties accessing and utilising digital learning resources. When schools are closed, some children from low-income families with less accessibility to digital technologies struggle to follow lessons. Schools in remote and poverty-stricken rural areas often lack the necessary facilities and infrastructure to support online education. Both teachers and students have limited capacity to use digital platforms to engage in online teaching and learning. A survey of 1183 households in five poverty counties in China found that although online learning plans were established, teachers reported difficulties in maintaining educational quality due to unfamiliarity with digital pedagogy (CICETE et al. 2021). As a result, the pre-existing urban–rural education disparities may have been exacerbated during the lockdown.

Socio-Psychological Well-Being of Children in Vulnerable Households

The COVID-19 outbreak associated with factors such as poverty and the absence of parental care may have a significant negative effect on children's socio-psychological well-being, especially for children left behind in rural areas. Left-behind children refers to children whose parents are migrant workers or where one parent is a migrant worker and the other is incapable of guardianship. Official statistics from China's Ministry of Civil Affairs show that by 2018 there were around 6.79 million rural left-behind children (Xinhuanet 2018). These children are disadvantaged and marginalised in terms of cognitive and non-cognitive developmental risks because of their insufficient attachment to their parents (Lu et al. 2019; Wen and Lin 2012; Ye and Pan 2011). The COVID-19 disruption is expected to affect their socio-psychological

well-being severely (Gao et al. 2022). Schools play a critical role in providing academic and non-academic support to children and families. In times of school closures, however, children may face a range of barriers to accessing healthcare, food and social services. Children from households that lack food security and kinship care and support are especially vulnerable. A study based on survey data from five counties shows that around 40 per cent of children were left unattended for more than one hour during the school closures and the amount of time was significantly longer for those in rural and poor households (CICETE et al. 2021).

The pandemic exacerbated the mental health challenges already experienced by many children and young people in China. In Hubei Province, a survey showed that 22.6 per cent of primary school students reported depressive symptoms and 18.9 per cent presented with symptoms of anxiety during the lockdowns after the COVID-19 outbreak (Xie et al. 2020). About 15 per cent of children in five poverty-stricken counties in mid-western China reported experiencing negative psychological effects such as irritability, increased aggressive behaviour, deterioration in sleep quality and anxiety (CICETE et al. 2021). Adolescents in Chinese high schools showed even higher prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic, with the proportion of symptoms among students living in rural areas significantly higher than among their counterparts in urban areas (Zhou et al. 2020). The reduction of outdoor activities and social interaction is a potential threat to children's mental health (Xie et al. 2020). Although more empirical evidence is needed, available data suggests that schools provide a protective environment for children and that closures may have raised the chances of child maltreatment and home violence (Zhang et al. 2021a).

Impact on Children with Disabilities

Restriction measures during the COVID-19 crisis pose particular difficulties for children with disabilities. It is estimated that there are around 5 million children with disabilities in China (NWCCW et al. 2018). The needs of these children were generally sidelined as public attention and resources were focused on responding to the emergency. Children with disabilities have been the most vulnerable population and encountered various forms of exclusion in non-COVID-19 circumstances. The pandemic, however, is highly likely to exacerbate these already-existing difficulties, especially for those children with disabilities living in poor households or requiring intensive caregiving.

Both children with disabilities and their caregivers in China experienced significant vulnerabilities during the period of the pandemic and the ensuing crisis (Jia and Santi 2021). During the lockdown, children with disabilities, including those with special educational needs, witnessed a higher prevalence of mental health and behaviour problems and experienced significant barriers accessing regular rehabilitation, training, intervention and treatment services (Su et al. 2021). Concerns are also directed to the difficult situation of parents or caregivers in taking care of children with disabilities. Many schools could not make special online lesson arrangements for students with disabilities. These students' parents were unprepared to cope with the emergency and lacked educational guidance and resources at home (Jia and Santi 2021). Parents in rural areas were considerably more worried about their children's well-being and exhibited more stress and poor mental health status, regardless of children's disability types (Su et al. 2021). This higher level of parental anxiety in the families of children with disabilities in rural areas is largely linked to parental financial insecurity because of job and earnings losses during the pandemic (Wang et al. 2021).

SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES TO CHILDREN'S VULNERABILITIES

Social protection has played a crucial role in safeguarding children's rights and addressing their multiple needs (UNICEF 2020; Barrientos et al. 2014). In China, social protection for children is an integral component of the national COVID-19 response package for the affected poor and vulnerable populations. Over the past decades, China has established the largest social protection system in terms of the number of beneficiaries reached globally (UN DESA 2021). China's multilayered social protection system includes basic social insurance, social assistance, social relief and social welfare services that cover almost the entire population in both urban and rural areas. By the end of 2019, it is estimated that a total of 967 million people had been covered by China's basic pension insurance, 255 million by work injury insurance, 205 million by unemployment insurance, 1354 billion by medical insurance and 214 million by maternity insurance (Lu et al. 2020). In the next subsections, the following measures are discussed in more detail as they pertain to vulnerable children, namely healthcare, cash and in-kind assistance, and child protection services. This entails a description of the nature of provision and the factors influencing the pandemic response, gaps, challenges and how social protection is embedded in the social governance model.

Basic Medical Services

In China, the basic public health services provide an important foundation for coping with the risks of children's survival and development during the pandemic. Since the health reform plan was implemented in 2009, China has made significant progress in providing all citizens with equal access to basic healthcare with reasonable quality and financial risk protection. A tiered model of healthcare delivery has gradually replaced the previous hospital-centric approach for people at the community level to access basic medical services (Meng et al. 2019). The medical insurance system had nearly reached universal coverage before the COVID-19 pandemic, although gaps in quality existed across regions and between rural and urban areas. Compared to urban residents, people residing in rural areas suffered from a shortage of quality healthcare providers, extended travel to health facilities and lack of social support, and were more likely to have to carry out-of-pocket costs for expensive treatments (Qin et al. 2020; Ying et al. 2020).

It is worth noting that China's Targeted Poverty Reduction strategy since 2013 has greatly increased the accessibility of basic medical services in rural areas. Some nutrition and health programmes are particularly targeted at women and children in poverty-stricken areas. The National Development Plan for Children in Poor Areas (2014–20) is one example of strengthening children's education and health security in poor areas. In 832 poverty-stricken counties, the government provides free daily packs of nutritional dietary supplements to every baby and toddler aged 6–24 months and a total of 11.2 million children have benefitted (Xinhuanet 2021). During the period of intensified poverty alleviation, childhood vaccination and postnatal care were scaled up considerably. The increased investment in basic health services in the past decade has achieved a remarkable reduction in the number of maternal deaths and a boost in child survival rates. Statistics have shown that China's maternal death rate fell from about 30 per 100 000 births in 2010 to 17.8 per 100 000 in 2019; over the same period, the infant death rate fell from about 13.1 per 1000 births to 5.6 per 1000 (Qiao et al. 2021).

These improvements to the basic medical service system helped the country to effectively contain the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with respect to mobilising resources swiftly and effectively. The Chinese government made all COVID-19 tests free soon after the outbreak and extended medical benefits to include all drugs and medical services necessary to treat those infected with COVID-19. The pandemic has demonstrated that universal access to healthcare is essential to contain a pandemic effectively (Razavi et al. 2020). Despite these remarkable achievements in advancing the basic health service system, many barriers remain. There are still substantial gaps in the quality of primary healthcare, including unnecessary diagnostic testing, insufficient continuity of care and a lack of in-service training for practitioners (Li et al. 2020). An integrated health service system must be achieved with effective coordination between primary healthcare institutions and hospitals (Xu et al. 2021). In particular, more attention must be given to mental healthcare and psychosocial support must be provided to children and young people affected by school closures. The social and economic crisis brought about by the pandemic highlights the importance of bolstering health protection to ensure universal, accessible and quality care for children in the long run.

Cash and In-Kind Assistance

Worldwide cash and in-kind assistance were the main social protection responses to the pandemic crisis. Social assistance programmes function as the bedrock of social protection for the poorest and most vulnerable children and families. In 2014, China issued the Interim Measures for Social Assistance, which marked the establishment of a fully fledged social assistance system. It consists of the minimum subsistence security programme and eight specific social assistance programmes, consisting of a minimum living standard scheme, a relief and support system for people living in dire poverty, medical assistance, educational assistance, housing support, legal assistance, disaster relief and a temporary assistance scheme (Lu et al. 2020). The nearly universal basic social protection provides important income security that cushions the initial shock of the pandemic and assists with the recovery of vulnerable children and families. Nonetheless, challenges remain, such as the relatively low benefit levels and significant rural–urban disparities. In general, eligibility to social assistance is based on a means test and is strictly tied to household registration status or the *Hukou* system, resulting in large inequalities in access across regions and among different population groups. Migrant workers and those in flexible employment tend to be excluded from formal social assistance programmes.

At the early stage of the pandemic in 2020, the Chinese government moved fast in deploying an emergency social assistance programme to support the poor and vulnerable. On 7 March 2020, the Central Committee on Pandemic Prevention and Control issued the ‘Notice on Further Strengthening Social Assistance for People in Poverty during the Pandemic Period’. This document calls for increasing temporary assistance and simplifying the application and approval process of assistance. Social assistance recipients in Wuhan city, where the first city-wide closure was imposed, were provided with additional allowances. Those who fell into poverty and unemployment due to travel restrictions were also eligible for the minimum subsistence allowance. Official statistics indicate that in 2020, there were over 44 million people in need covered by the minimum subsistence allowance and the average allowance standards increased by 105 per cent in the urban areas and 188 per cent in the rural areas (State Council 2021). In response to the impact of the new wave of the pandemic, on June 2022, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), responsible for child welfare, and the Ministry of Finance jointly

issued the ‘Notice on Effectively Guaranteeing the Basic Living of People in Difficulty’. According to this document, social assistance recipients and uninsured and unemployed persons struck by the pandemic could apply for a one-time temporary relief. While most relief programmes build on existing social assistance schemes to target and help those most in need, the government is also emphasising providing in-kind support to more people affected by the pandemic control measures, for example, delivering daily necessities to lockdown residents through community workers and volunteers, which serves as an important complement to the formal social assistance policy.

There are special social assistance programmes targeting children in difficult circumstances, especially those who lack effective parental guardianship. In 2019, the MCA issued the ‘Opinions on Strengthening the Security of *de facto* Orphans’. According to this document, children whose parents were both missing or incapable of guardianship due to incarceration, severe disability and other circumstances that restrict their custody were eligible for a cash allowance and special assistance in healthcare and education. This policy played an important role in the relief and protection of children during the pandemic. As of the end of May 2021, a total of 274 000 unsupported children across the country were included in the coverage (MCA 2021). Nonetheless, the accurate identification of these *de facto* orphans and the provision of targeted services other than cash allowances still needs further development.

The ongoing pandemic has propelled the Chinese government to upgrade its social assistance system. On 25 August 2020, the State Council released a directive on reforming and improving the country’s social assistance system, highlighting the need for the improvement of social assistance in emergencies and disaster through building a tiered and classified social assistance programme. This has also been prioritised in China’s fourteenth five-year plan from 2021 to 2025. It seems that China did not have as generous a stimulus package as many developed countries during the pandemic. This may be explained by the ‘developmental logic’ of social policy that prioritises bolstering labour market participation for economic development over social welfare spending (He et al. 2022). The focus of relief measures is mainly on expanding the coverage of existing social assistance programmes and strengthening the efficiency of its targeting mechanisms. In this process, the community governance system has played a crucial role in helping identify children and families in need and ensuring suitable service delivery.

Child Protection Services

China’s child welfare system has developed rapidly in the past decade. The impact of the pandemic on children in difficulty further highlights the urgency to expand child protection services. In 2018, a new child welfare division was established within the MCA. It is viewed as a milestone in the development of the child welfare system. The government has invested in developing a system and workforce for the delivery of community child welfare services. Official MCA statistics show that, by the end of 2019, there were around 56 000 child welfare supervisors serving at town and township level and 675 000 child welfare directors at village and community level (People’s Daily 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these grass-roots child service workers interacted with other community workers and were responsible for child relief and protection service delivery.

Some incidents of child deaths because of insufficient parental care or supervision generated widespread concern about child protection during the pandemic. For example, in Hubei

Province the quarantining of the father of a single-parent family led to the tragic death of his 17-year-old son with cerebral palsy, who was left at home without any care. In another case a girl attempted to commit suicide because she did not have a smartphone with which to participate in online classes. These heartbreaking cases drew government and public attention to child custody problems (Zhao et al. 2020). On 14 February 2020, the MCA issued the 'Notice on Strengthen Relief and Protection of Children without Custody Due to COVID-19 Pandemic'. Further, on 14 March of the same year, the State Council issued the 'Work Plan for Relief and Protection of Children without Custody Due to COVID-19 Pandemic'. In these two documents, the term 'children experiencing custody difficulties' referred to minors whose parents or other guardians were missing, were receiving treatment or were in quarantine. The central government required township-level governments to coordinate with different departments and personnel, including child supervisors, child directors and community workers, to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the child guardianship situation in the communities. The policy measures declared that local governments needed to shoulder the responsibility of child protection to complement the challenges with family guardianship.

The pandemic crisis has significantly raised public awareness of child protection issues. On 1 June 2020, the Thirteenth National People's Congress (NPC) approved a landmark amendment to 'China's Law on the Protection of Minors'. This marks a new phase of child protection in China. According to this law, the MCA is the legal body in charge of child protection. The law clearly states that an interdepartmental coordination mechanism for the protection of minors at the county level should be established. Correspondingly, township governments were required to set up workstations for the protection of minors, and rural village or urban community residential committees were expected to assign special personnel responsible for child protection. This law and the related policy measures set higher requirements for good governance of child protection, in particular at the lower administrative level. Building on the existing law and policies, in 2020 the MCA and the United Nations Children's Fund jointly launched an integrated child protection services programme in nine counties to consolidate the child protection mechanism and service network for left-behind children and children in difficulty in rural areas (Ni and Zhang 2021). The development of China's child protection system reflects a broader approach of safeguarding children in difficulty. It is a process of institutional capacity building to protect vulnerable children more effectively during the pandemic and to enhance state capacity for good welfare governance (Deng 2020).

Despite the increased policy attention to child protection, significant challenges remain. Service delivery on the ground does not yet respond sufficiently well to the needs of children who may suffer from mental illness, abuse or violence. Many child directors at the community level only hold part-time positions and receive hardly any professional training on child protection. Schools are marked by highly unequal infrastructure and educational quality between rural and urban areas and across regions. Individualised psychological counselling and support services are particularly needed in rural schools.

SOCIAL PROTECTION WITHIN THE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

China's experiences show that social protection measures for children and other vulnerable groups do not work independently but can only operate and develop effectively within an

adaptive governance system. The interdependence between social protection and social governance lays out a solid foundation for China's COVID-19 prevention and control strategies.

Social protection policy in China has witnessed dramatic institutional change in the past four decades after the adoption of economic reforms that led to the opening of the society. In the early stage of the reforms in the 1980s, which coincided with the restructuring of the socialist model of the work unit (*dan wei*), welfare responsibility to a large extent shifted from the government to individuals and families. Entering the twenty-first century, enlarged income inequalities and widespread perception of social injustice resulting from this economic reform propelled the government to re-emphasise the need for comprehensive public responsibilities for social protection. In particular with the new administration in 2013, social protection has been incorporated into the overall agenda of modernisation of the state's capacity. It is no longer viewed as a short-term or responsive policy tool to mitigate adverse consequences of the economic reforms adopted, but more as an integral component of the country's governance system in resolving social conflict and promoting social cohesion. The Chinese government has placed increasing emphasis on the development of the legal and institutional structure of social protection in an attempt to achieve stability, fairness and sustainability. Social protection for vulnerable children during the pandemic also reflects this broader context and process.

However, China's drastic economic and social transformation has greatly impacted the family structure and living arrangements. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, children, and in particular those left behind in rural areas, had been disproportionately affected by rapid urbanisation and large-scale migration. In the absence of adequate social protection and urgent policy action, the pandemic would become a child rights crisis (UNICEF 2020). China actively scaled up its social protection system during the pandemic, and the implementation of various measures showcases that building an institutionalised social protection policy framework is imperative to protect vulnerable children from the public health emergency effectively.

China's experience in response to the pandemic reflects a process of mutual reinforcement between the two systems of social protection and governance. The effectiveness of social protection relies on good social governance mechanisms. It is not unusual that well-intentioned social protection programmes are not well implemented, either because of a lack of coordination among the different departments and social sectors involved or because of improper discretion of street-level bureaucrats implementing programmes (Wang et al. 2022). Children's social protection rights can only be guaranteed within a good grassroots governance system. At the outset of the COVID-19 outbreak, China's responses to the unknown virus were lagging and criticised by the public. The government then swiftly adjusted its strategy and implemented a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to contain the pandemic, yielding a positive outcome. Researchers attribute China's effective response to the pandemic to its authoritarian governance model characterised by the state's coercive capacity in mobilising enormous resources, steering the bureaucracy and implementing community enforcement measures (He et al. 2020).

The adjustment and adaptation of the social governance system toward social goals contributed to building and strengthening the responsiveness of the social protection system to people in need. For instance, during the lockdown period in Shanghai city in early 2022, the city government initially required children tested positive for COVID-19 to stay in isolation centres on their own but quickly changed the policy to allow parents who were not infected to accompany their children in need (Xinhuanet 2022). This reflects an adaptation of measures implemented and an attempt to respond to the trade-off between pandemic containment measures and the

protection of children. Entering China's normalised stage of pandemic prevention and control, the mutual reinforcement of social protection and social governance has been a crucial factor determining the successful implementation of the 'dynamic-clearing' policy.

It is important to note that a well-functioning community governance system has proved to be key for China's pandemic prevention and control. This entailed mobilising a large number of community workers and volunteers to participate in fighting against the pandemic on the frontline. Community workers as gatekeepers and enforcers of confinement measures are expected to address local requests and complaints and provide personal services such as grocery shopping or the delivery of medicines to vulnerable children and families during lockdowns. While much effort has been exerted to strengthen community work, local people expressed concern about the unintended consequences of some excessive pandemic containment measures, for example overly strict quarantine regulations and the failure to ensure timely protection of people in need. With accumulated experiences in community governance, a dynamic balance between normal life and pandemic containment measures was gradually achieved. As a result, the social protection needs of children in vulnerable situations could be timely and adequately fulfilled.

DISCUSSION

The responsibilities for containing the pandemic were not restricted to the health sector but were shared by many levels of government and the non-governmental sector, and by communities, families and individuals. The World Health Organization called on countries to respond to the pandemic following a whole-of-society approach in a multi-professional, coordinated and comprehensive manner (WHO 2020). This review of China's response to the pandemic highlights the impact of the pandemic on children, including the possible increase of multidimensional poverty, inadequate education and medical care, mental health challenges, and increased exposure to violence and abuse. Children living in poor rural households and children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable. Social protection is regarded as an important strategy to deal with multidimensional child poverty, deprivation and social exclusion during the pandemic. Universal social protection programmes that are effectively implemented can help to cushion the harm caused by the pandemic on children's vulnerabilities, thereby contributing to the protection of children's rights.

China has taken multiple measures to provide stronger social protection to children in need. The measures include greater investment in basic medical services, improved coverage and benefits of cash and in-kind assistance, as well as more attention to child protection services. Social protection policies for vulnerable children are an essential part of the Chinese government's overall response to the pandemic. These policies and measures have played a crucial role in protecting vulnerable children and families from the adverse consequences brought about by the pandemic. While fighting the pandemic, the Chinese government accumulated experiences in the prevention and control of the spread of the pandemic and improved its social governance mechanisms, focusing particularly on leveraging community governance systems, through local community involvement efforts, and in expanding institutional capacity through the deployment of additional human resource capacity and training of personnel to implement the programmes more effectively. Social protection for vulnerable children is embedded in the country's broader social governance model. The interdependence and mutual

reinforcement of social governance and social protection ensured the effective implementation of various strategies for preventing and controlling the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a negative impact on the world economy. Social protection for vulnerable people can be particularly challenging as the government has to seek a balance between economic development and the extension of social provisions. China has been exploring a coordinated approach to align COVID-19 responses with the country's economic and social development imperatives. Fortunately, China's investment in social protection infrastructure and in its institutional framework over the past decades played a fundamental role in enabling its pandemic containment measures. Although facing the challenges, China's experience proves that the implementation of social protection programmes should be integrated within an effective social governance system. In the post-pandemic era, China still needs to consolidate the institutional foundation of its social protection system, further enhance the multi-tiered system, expand the coverage, and close rural–urban gaps, including reinforcing the social service delivery net in poor areas and at the community level. Children are vulnerable to external risks and uncertainties, and the impact on those with pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as children of migrants, those experiencing guardianship challenges or those with disabilities, may be far reaching. Social protection focusing on children requires the coordinated participation of a wide range of governmental and social sector forces jointly to build a protective service network for vulnerable children. Countries and places worldwide could learn from China's experience and lessons of fighting the pandemic and formulating a long-term plan for developing country-level social protection systems.

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