



## China's engagement with the post-2015 development agenda: The case of education and training



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### ABSTRACT

China's South–South cooperation with African education and its human resource development (HRD) strategy may appear to run on different lines from those of traditional OECD donors. The current education for all (EFA) and education millennium development goals (MDG) debates have not been central to China's international education programming. Nor has China been preoccupied until late in 2013 with any future post-2015 development agenda in education. Yet China's claim to be the largest developing country as well as being involved in foreign aid would lead to an expectation of concern with the shape of the emerging post-MDG and post-EFA agendas. How are we to explain this apparent lack of engagement until recently with post-2015 agendas? The focus of China's educational and HRD cooperation with Africa on the higher education level may be part of the explanation.

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### 1. Introduction

My conclusions? Getting China, and probably Brazil, India and South Africa too, into the post-2015 conversation is absolutely fundamental. It will mean a very different conversation, and a genuinely new global approach to development. Traditional development types in Europe and the USA will find some of that uncomfortable. But it will certainly be interesting. (Melamed, ODI, 25th May 2012)

Almost two years after Melamed wrote enthusiastically that 'Post-2015 discussions kick off in China', it is not clear that the post-2015 temperature is very significantly higher in Mainland China, not to mention Hong Kong. As in many other developing and emerging economies, there have been meetings organised on the theme of post-2015. But most of these 'national' consultations have been supported by the UNDP or other bodies. There was in fact a member from China on the High Level Panel (HLP) and China has shared a seat on the Open Working Group (OWG) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But arguably it is almost as true now as when we reported in February 2013 (King and Palmer, 2013:412) that China 'is still focused on its own issues indeed and there is not enough either

interest or capacity in the government to be very much engaged in such cases as post-2015' (senior consultant in China, 28th February 2013). One hint of possible change in the climate around post-2015 is that the China Development Research Foundation organised a meeting and a report 'Toward an Equitable and Sustainable World: A Chinese Perspective on Post-2015 Global Development Agenda' (August 30th 2013). And just three days before the UN General Assembly (UNGA) gathered to debate post-2015 on 25th September 2013, China announced its *Position Paper on the Development Agenda Beyond 2015* (China, 2013b). We return to these below.

In this paper, accordingly, we shall explore the extent to which China has been drawn into the post-2015 debates whether by formal participation in meetings and consultations, or by citizens expressing their interest in the post-2015 discussions and priorities. We shall draw on both academic and policy comments, and where relevant on the reports of post-2015 conferences in China. We shall note that there are the two aspects of China and post-2015 – (a) its own national achievements in relation to the MDGs; and (b) its role in advocacy for a new global development agenda. There are hesitations about this latter, as China continues to present itself as a developing country; hence it is reluctant to be seen as a donor proposing post-2015 positions for the poorer countries of the world. We shall also pay some small attention to the comparative dimension, notably with other emerging economies such as India. But for now, it may be useful to start with a United Nations global survey of citizens called My World 2015.

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## 2. My World 2015 – a global citizen survey: China's response

In this survey,<sup>1</sup> individuals are asked to rank six priority issues out of a possible 16, drawn from the existing MDGs as well as issues of sustainability, security, governance and transparency. Worldwide, over 2,946,891 individuals have voted from 194 countries, and the system allows voting totals to be seen at a glance by country, as well as by priority rankings, age and gender.<sup>2</sup> It is accessible in 15 languages, including Chinese. China's numbers are relatively low, as of July 2014, at just 14,798. Other BRICS countries include Brazil at 47,261, South Africa 9420, Russia 3910, and India 483,199. The last very high figure is similar to Nigeria, in both of which there have been major offline surveys encouraged by the United Nations Volunteers (UNVs) in India, and the National Youth Corps in Nigeria.

There are a few interesting features of the China figure of just 14,798 who had voted as of July 2014. First, the very great majority of those voting are between 16 and 30 years of age. These 10,886 younger people voted for better healthcare as a first priority, followed by good education, and an honest and responsive government. Then followed the priority of protecting forests, rivers and oceans. Intriguingly, both male and female young people rank better health care as their top priority, and good education second, and honest and responsive government third. Interestingly, the emphasis on protecting forests etc. is fourth priority for both young men and women; however, political freedoms are sixth priority for young men and eleventh for women.

By contrast, worldwide, this age group of 16–30 year-olds voted for a good education first, followed by better health care, and then better job opportunities, and an honest and responsive government. By contrast, Chinese young people of both sexes put better health care first, before a good education. Perhaps most surprising is that better job opportunities are ranked as low as priority five and eight for young Chinese men and women respectively, while they are third for young people worldwide. This is an interesting commentary on access to employment in China or at least amongst the rather small and non-representative group who replied.

The survey is picking up something country specific, despite the relatively small numbers for most countries, because, for instance, South African young people vote for a good education first, but then protection against crime and violence second, followed by better job opportunities. India, by contrast, despite its numbers being massively increased by the role of the UN Volunteers in encouraging offline survey completion, ranks, for its young people, a good education first, followed by better jobs, better health care, and then after clean water/sanitation, and honest and responsible government, interestingly, equality between men and women.

We cannot read too much into a survey of 14,798 people, but it perhaps says something that China in July 2014 registers much lower numbers than Indonesia at 28,742 and Thailand at 71,409. However, Japan is very much lower than China at 2399 and South Korea at 1716.

In due course it will be valuable to see what the organisers of the My World survey deduce from this citizen poll. They have already fed the results into the Secretary General's High Level Panel which reported at the end of May 2013. But it is important to make the point that those voting for these priorities are ranking the top six priorities which 'would make the most difference to their lives' in their own countries<sup>3</sup>; they are not expressing opinions about what priorities there should be for the developing world, the South

or other emerging economies, or indeed for other industrialised countries.

## 3. The UN encourages (and dominates?) post-2015 debates in China

We have already noted that the My World 2015 citizen survey is in part a UN initiative, but we should also note that in 88 countries, 'national' consultations on the post-2015 agenda have been supported and encouraged by the UNDP. For China, the first of these UN-led events took place on 21st May 2012 in Beijing and was entitled 'Towards a Global Post-2015 Framework for Development'. Leading Chinese and international experts from think tanks, academic and development organisations were present along with three overseas experts, from Tanzania, UK and the UNDP, New York (UNDP, 2012). One of these, Claire Melamed from the ODI in UK, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, has captured some of the spirit of what she thought was a rather different emphasis from so many of the post-2015 meetings she had attended. For one thing, what she saw as 'the biggest issue of the day was probably infrastructure' instead of the usual post-2015 focus on health and education; there was a good deal of 'discussion of how countries can develop the effective road, rail, port and airport systems that underpin not just economic growth but also progress in health and education' (Melamed, ODI, 25th May 2012). It is interesting to contrast this particular emphasis from this meeting with the very low ranking given to better transport and roads in the My World priorities of the Chinese voters. What may help to explain this is that the audience for this first UNDP exercise in China in debating a 'framework for development' was possibly concerned more with development challenges beyond China as within. Even though this roundtable was not really about aid, there were apparently connections between China's role at home, and its role and cooperation capacity abroad, whether in technology transfer, infrastructure etc.

In other words, the roundtable, unlike the My World survey, pointed both ways – to development frameworks for China, and to China's role in international development. We shall see to what extent this duality was present in the next three UNDP-related consultations.

Two months later, the next UN sponsored event was on 18th July 2012 in Beijing, when the Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, congratulated the Chinese people for their dramatic participation through social media in the global campaign termed 'The future we want' which he had himself launched in 2011. According to the reports at the time: 'Approximately 3 million Chinese people have joined the online conversation to share their visions and to demand action for a better world since the campaign was launched on Sina Weibo in March' (2012).<sup>4</sup> In addition, a film was made by over 200 Chinese people entitled '2032: the future we want'. Interestingly, these 3 million were perceived to be connecting to the Rio + 20 vision of the previous month, June 2012, whose outcome document was also termed 'The future we want'.<sup>5</sup>

So we have, on the one hand, some 3700 Chinese voting for their own development priorities through My World from January to early September 2013, but almost a year earlier, over 3 million Chinese were apparently engaging through social media with 'the future we want', with its connections back to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development. The Rio + 20 outcome document of 57 pages only mentioned 'post-2015' twice, and was concerned to set up an Open Working Group, which we shall check for its Chinese engagement a little later on. It seems clear, therefore, that

<sup>1</sup> My World was initiated by a number of organisations including the United Nations Millennium Campaign, ODI, the World-Wide Web Foundation and Ipsos Mori. The website went live in January 2013.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.myworld2015.org>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.myworld2015.org/?page=about-my-world>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.undp.org.cn/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&catid=14&topic=11&sid=44859&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>.

<sup>5</sup> [https://rio20.un.org/sites/rio20.un.org/files/a-conf.2161-1\\_english.pdf.pdf](https://rio20.un.org/sites/rio20.un.org/files/a-conf.2161-1_english.pdf.pdf).

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