

# China's increasing global health engagement

March 2017

This note outlines recent changes in China's commitment to overseas health engagement, which form an important part of the backdrop to DFID's China-UK Global Health Support Programme (GHSP),<sup>1</sup> and to the future development of China-UK cooperation in global health. It is based on findings of the February 2017 *Short report on China's increasing global health engagement and emerging China-UK collaboration*, part of the e-Pact Consortium's independent evaluation of the GHSP. The note was written by Lewis Husain and reviewed by Gerry Bloom.

## 1. Headline messages

- Political commitment to increasing China's role in global health is increasing rapidly, and China shows increasing confidence in discussing its experience of improving population health and its relevance to other countries. Engagement is being driven by Chinese priorities, linked to the new foreign policy agenda and domestic economic changes.
- The form engagement will take remains unclear, but some seeds of change are visible including: commitment to health security, public health cooperation and health assistance, increasing engagement in global health governance and norm setting, international cooperation on R&D, increasing commercial opportunities, and soft power projection.
- The geographies of China's likely engagement are becoming clearer, and are starting to be differentiated between Africa, neighbouring countries, regional fora and the BRICS.
- China's institutional architecture is evolving. It is not yet clear where primary management of global health will be situated or how cross-government coordination will be achieved. Nor is the size of the financial commitment to global health and health development assistance clear.
- Questions for China's partners appear now to be less whether China will become a global health player, but how much to engage with China in this process, and how engagement should be structured.

<sup>1</sup> Background on the GHSP is given in Annex 1.

## 2. Emerging themes in China's global health engagement

This section draws together emerging themes from recent Chinese policy, statements and significant events and unpacks what these show regarding China's increasing engagement.

### Recent policies, statements and significant events:

Year	Event/policy/statement	Significance
2015	UN Sustainable Development Summit	High-profile Chinese pledges to south-south cooperation and support to achievement of SDGs
	Second Ministerial Forum of China-Africa Health Development	Cape Town agreement on China-African health cooperation; Chinese commitments to support health in African countries
	Health included under One Belt, One Road (OBOR) strategy	Health linked to major geo-strategic initiative; new cooperation forms and fora mooted
2016	Healthy China 2030 framework	Range of global health concerns included in major long-range national health planning document
	Draft South-South Cooperation Fund policy released	Signals commitment of resources and diversification of forms of collaboration
	WHO Global Health Promotion Conference was held in Shanghai	Signals increasing confidence in China's international role in health
2017	MoU with WHO on support to China's 'healthy silk road' work	First outward-looking MoU signed with WHO

## Emerging themes from recent Chinese policy, statements and significant events:

- There is increasingly a strong, high-level commitment to overseas health engagement. This has developed very quickly. It is part of a broader internationalisation process in which China is positioning itself as a responsible global power, and is linked to the economic logic of China's slowdown and industrial restructuring. Chinese leadership is increasingly comfortable talking about China's experience of improving population health and its value for the world.
- Recent speeches, commitments and strategies show many strands to China's emerging health engagement, including: health security and infectious disease prevention and control; public health cooperation; health assistance and capacity development for partner countries; increasing China's role in global health governance and setting of norms and standards; improving the global standing of China's health technology research; developing networks for international cooperation in drug and medical technology R&D and AMR; increasing commercial opportunities for China's health products and increasing China's soft power projection in health, including through people-to-people exchanges and through the promotion of traditional Chinese medicines.
- Health security is a common element in many recent commitments or policies. This is an area in which China has been active, especially after SARS and (very visibly) in the case of the Ebola response. This undoubtedly mixes humanitarian and pragmatic concerns.
- Many strands of health engagement are emerging and coexist. China's development cooperation sits within the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) system, and there is a commercial strand to increasing health engagement, including developing market access for Chinese goods and services. It remains to be seen how commerce will be linked to China's broader role in global health governance and health assistance.
- It is not yet clear how different strands of global health activity will be brought together, how cross-government coordination will be created, or where primary management of the global health agenda will be situated within government. While there is commitment to developing a Global Health Strategy, which could clarify the mandates of different government departments and increase cross-ministry coordination, this has not yet been issued and may have limited authority to promote inter-ministry cooperation when it is issued.
- Despite the existence of high-level commitments, the extent to which they are currently resourced is unclear. While the draft MOFCOM South-South Cooperation Fund policy indicates that substantial resources will be committed to south-south cooperation, including in health, it has yet to be officially launched. Equally, the MoU with the WHO is not directly resourced, but provides an umbrella for developing (funded)

collaborations. In any case, it is likely that funding for much health work under the OBOR health strategy will come from provincial governments. Information on the level of funding to meet the Cape Town commitments has not been made available.

- Foci for China's global health engagement are emerging, with OBOR as a vehicle for engagement with neighbouring countries, the overland route to Europe, and a range of regional fora (including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, ASEAN and APEC), while Africa and the BRICS feature in the Healthy China 2030 strategy. The priorities for engagement in these regions/ fora are starting to be differentiated.
- Questions for China's partners appear now to be less whether China will become a global health player, but rather what kind of player it will become, how much bilateral partners wish to engage with China in this process, and how engagement should be structured.

A more detailed discussion of recent policies, government commitments and significant events is included in Annex 2.

# Annexes

## Annex 1: Introduction to the GHSP

The GHSP is a partnership between DFID and the Chinese National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFP) and Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM). The programme fits under a 2011 China-UK memorandum of understanding on collaboration in international development and aims to build Chinese capacity to engage in global health, and to explore ways in which China and the UK can collaborate on issues of key concern to both countries. The GHSP has supported reviews of the value for other developing countries of China's experience in improving population health and is supporting development of a Chinese Global Health Strategy. It is also supporting pilot projects in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Tanzania employing Chinese institutions and experience, and an assessment of the potential for Chinese support to Sierra Leone's health system. High-level discussion of future China-UK collaboration is convened through a Global Health Dialogue.

## Annex 2: China's increasing global health commitment

This Annex discusses emergent findings regarding China's changing commitment and engagement. The headline finding is that the trend towards increasing global commitments and diversification of the forms of China's engagement continues and is strengthening. Recent announcements and discussions show China's increasing confidence in its own experience of improving population health and willingness to openly talk about this on the international stage. Overall, there is a strong trend towards increasing commitment, even in the absence of a Global Health Strategy, though the ways in which policy and financial allocations will develop remain uncertain.

The remainder of this Annex develops these headline points through a discussion of major Chinese government commitments to increased engagement in global health.

- At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, China pledged 2bn USD assistance to south-south cooperation and developing countries' implementation of the post-2015 development agenda – which includes health concerns – as well as pledges on investment in LICs and debt cancellation, and the establishment of an International Development Knowledge Centre.<sup>2</sup> Among other commitments, China pledged to help developing countries build one hundred 'health projects for women and children' in the coming five years.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2015 China and African health ministers agreed the Cape Town Declaration and an implementation framework at the Second Ministerial Forum of China-

<sup>2</sup> Xi, Jinping (2015). Towards win-win partnership for sustainable development. Remarks by HE Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, New York, 26th September 2015. Available [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Xi, Jinping (2015). Promoting women's all-round development and building a better world for all. Remarks by HE Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China at the global leaders' meeting on gender equality and women's empowerment, New York, 27th, September 2015. Available [here](#).

Africa Health Development. This covers a number of areas, including: human resources; infrastructure; laboratory; communication and information sharing; medical service accessibility; cooperation between medical institutions; traditional medicine; and improving access to medical products in Africa. Concrete commitments include: establishment of 100 health facilities (including hospitals and clinics) over the coming three years; sending 1,500 medical personnel to African countries; sending short medical missions to 40 African countries; organising liaison between 20 Chinese tertiary hospitals and African counterparts, to strengthen capacity; Chinese support for development of an African CDC. Overall, the Declaration and implementation framework show a substantial commitment to health assistance and cooperation with African countries and build on the previous Declaration of 2012/2013,<sup>4</sup> and a broadening of forms of cooperation.

- Health assistance is included under the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) strategy, a major foreign policy initiative of the Xi Jinping government aimed at increasing China's overseas engagement in economic cooperation, infrastructure development and other areas.<sup>5</sup> In mid-2015, the NHFP released a three-year implementation plan for overseas health cooperation under OBOR. The plan envisages wide-ranging health cooperation in countries touched by OBOR, ranging from countries in China's immediate vicinity and the region all the way to the Middle East and Europe. The strategy encompasses developing new fora for cooperation, such as a Silk Road Health Cooperation Forum, infectious disease control, training and capacity building, emergency response and health aid, overseas promotion of traditional medicines, health systems and policy cooperation and increasing markets for health products.<sup>6</sup> The expressed intention of including health cooperation in OBOR is to help win support for the strategy among the public of partner countries and to provide a platform for sharing China's health experience, as well as improving China's soft power projection and promoting trade. OBOR is a defining foreign policy initiative, and it is significant that health cooperation has been included in this way; however, while health cooperation is listed in the original strategy, activities listed in the plan are being defined by the health sector, and will be implemented by health agencies. It remains to be seen how coordination between these activities and activities of other ministries will be developed.

<sup>4</sup> FOCAC (2012). The fifth ministerial conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015), Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. Available [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> NDRC et al. (2015). Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. Issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 28th March 2015. Available [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> NHFP (2015). Notice of the NHFP Office on the circulation of the NHFP three-year implementation plan (2015-2017) on One Belt One Road health cooperation (国家卫生计生委办公厅关于印发《国家卫生计生委办公厅关于推进一带一路卫生合作三年实施方案(2015-2017)的通知》), 14th October 2015. Available [here](#).

- Global health (and China's Global Health Strategy) are mentioned prominently in the Healthy China 2030 framework, issued in October 2016.<sup>7</sup> This is a high-level strategic document issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council to provide a framework for China's health work to 2030. Chapter 26 calls for strengthening of international exchange and cooperation, through: implementing China's global health strategy and fully promoting international cooperation in the field of population health; developing new cooperation modalities, increasing people-to-people exchange and promoting health cooperation with neighbouring countries through the OBOR framework; strengthening south-south cooperation, implementing plans for Sino-African public health cooperation, continuing to send medical teams to developing countries, emphasising maternal and child health in China's health aid and disease prevention and control in health systems building; strengthening international cooperation on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM); making use of China's high level strategic dialogue mechanisms to include health on the diplomatic agenda in relations with major powers; taking full part in global health governance, influencing the research, negotiation and setting of international standards, and increasing China's international influence and 'discursive authority' in health.
- Other related content in the plan states that China should develop the international competitiveness of its health industries, promote the internationalisation of standards for TCM and products and promote the internationalisation of TCM, develop internationally competitive Chinese destinations for health tourism, and bring China's health technology research publications and patents into the global front ranks.
- The 2017 NHFPC work priorities show a high level of commitment to global health engagement. The main priorities given for China's International Exchange and Cooperation (Article 28) are: deepening health cooperation with neighbouring countries through the OBOR framework and holding a 'Healthy Silk Road' forum; increasing cooperation with the BRICS countries, including through the holding of a high-level meeting on traditional medicines; holding a joint meeting of Chinese and central and eastern European health ministers; reforming China's health aid work and the management of China's medical teams in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), continuing to promote Sino-African public health collaboration and joint work on health aid; and strengthening health collaboration with the WHO and a number of other UN agencies and playing a larger role in relations with major powers, in setting of international standards and norms, and strengthening international cooperation in the fields of population and development. Other relevant points included elsewhere in the document are: holding an international meeting on HIV/AIDS control; taking part in international health emergency response work and initiating an external evaluation and study of the International Health Regulations; increasing work on international standards setting for TCM.
- In November 2016, the WHO Global Health Promotion Conference was held in Shanghai. Premier Li Keqiang's speech at its opening ceremony stressed China's successes in promoting population health and pursuing health reforms while stating that China "will continue to promote global health issues while providing assistance to other developing countries",<sup>8</sup> and stressed the need for international collaboration on addressing global health challenges, in which developed countries should provide support to developing countries, framed as "common but differentiated obligations".<sup>9</sup> Li's speech called for strengthening policy dialogue around health systems strengthening and promoting the voice of developing countries in global health governance; promoting cooperation in disease prevention, control and response, building global capacity for dealing with infectious disease outbreaks and increasing developed countries' support for health system strengthening in developing countries; increasing collaboration in research and development of medical technologies, as well as developing networks for international cooperation in areas such as anti-microbial resistance and drug R&D; and developing the potential of traditional medicines. Chinese media carried substantial coverage of the event, and stressed the significance of the Conference being held in China for the first time.
- In January 2017, the Chinese government signed an MoU with the WHO regarding that agency's support to China's 'healthy silk road' policy during the visit of Xi Jinping to Geneva. As discussed, the CNHDRC, with some GHSP support, supported development of a three-year health cooperation strategy under the overall framework of OBOR, a major geo-strategic initiative associated with the Xi Jinping leadership. This strategy is now providing the framework within which China's health engagement with its near neighbours is expected to take place. While the MoU with the WHO does not appear to be a public document, the priorities for cooperation were widely reported: in collaboration with the WHO, strengthen emergency response capability and take part in work on global health security and public health emergencies; cooperate on infectious disease monitoring and control in OBOR countries and provide technical support to this; cooperate on public health training and capacity building for OBOR countries; promote and develop international markets for traditional medicines in OBOR countries. The fora through which China intends to pursue its increased regional cooperation appear, broadly speaking, to be those set out in the OBOR health cooperation strategy.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> CCP Central Committee and State Council (2016). Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council circulation of the Healthy China 2030 plan framework (中共中央 国务院印发《“健康中国2030”规划纲要》). Xinhua News Agency, 25th October 2016. Available [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Xinhua (2016). China pledges to further promote global health. Xinhua News Agency, 21st November 2016. Available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Xinhua (2016). Premier Li urges joint efforts to boost global health. Xinhua News Agency, 23rd November 2016. Available [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> People's Daily (2017). The 'Chinese benchmark' in global health governance (全球健康治理的“中国标杆”). People's Daily Online, 19th January 2017. Available [here](#). People's Daily (2016). Use building a healthy China to promote the development of global health (以“健康中国”建设促进全球健康发展). People's Daily Online, 22nd November 2016. Available [here](#).

- The signing of this MoU is significant on multiple levels: not only is it the first MoU signed between China and the WHO that is outward-looking, relating to China's overseas health engagement, rather than to assistance to China; it also clearly shows China's increasing confidence in discussing and promoting its health 'experience' on the international stage and the linking of health with China's soft power projection. First, the MoU was signed between the government of China (not the NHFPC) and the WHO, and its signing was timed to take place during the visit of Xi Jinping to Geneva, increasing the profile of the announcement and demonstrating high-level backing. Second, recent speeches and authoritative media coverage show substantial confidence: the People's Daily, for example, talked of the reference value of China's experience, which it considers a 'benchmark' (biaogan) of global health governance,<sup>11</sup> while Margaret Chan has recently provided strong rhetorical backing for the importance of China's experience of improving population health for other developing countries.<sup>12</sup> Third, at the signing of the WHO MoU, China presented a life-size 'acupuncture statue' (a bronze statue showing all the acupuncture points on the body), a clear piece of soft power theatre.<sup>13</sup>
- Despite the existence of these high-level commitments, the extent to which they are currently resourced is unclear. The MoU with the WHO provides an umbrella for developing (funded) collaborations. It is likely that funding for much health work under the OBOR health strategy will come from provincial governments. Also, information on the level of funding to meet the Cape Town commitments has not been made available.
- In September 2016, MOFCOM released a draft document for consultation regarding plans for the creation of a South-South Cooperation Aid Fund. The fund will be open to non-governmental agencies (including universities) for south-south cooperation projects in collaboration with other developing countries. It is understood that the fund will include health projects. Plans for the fund show inclusion of a number of programme management elements, such as project evaluation, which is encouraging. This is a departure from previous practice in specifically channelling funds to non-governmental actors.<sup>14</sup>
- Media reporting shows the extent to which multiple initiatives are being framed as part of a larger global health project with a degree of discursive coherence. In November 2016, for example, Chinese media reported on the establishment of a WHO Malaria Eradication Research and Training Centre, based at the Jiangsu Provincial Schistosomiasis Prevention and Control Institute, apparently only the second such centre globally to be dedicated to malaria eradication. Xinhua reporting of this, though, shows the extent to which such initiatives are now being framed as part of something larger, claiming that the centre is evidence of China's "active participation in global health" and contribution to OBOR.<sup>15</sup> This kind of framing is similar to the OBOR health plan itself, a high-level narrative that brings together a broad range of discrete, and otherwise relatively separate, initiatives that are largely the responsibility of sub-national governments. The emergence of such high-level narratives appears to show the increasing importance of key ideas such as global health and the 'healthy silk road' in framing thinking and providing a legitimating framework for certain actions.
- The premiership of Xi Jinping has been marked by major changes in China's foreign policy, particularly the flagship OBOR strategy. Recent speeches and announcements show the ways in which the Chinese leadership is theorising the role the country should play in the world and demonstrate a confidence to make high-level normative statements regarding the international order. Xi Jinping's recent visit to Switzerland, for example, included speeches at the World Economic Forum and at the United Nations. Xi's speeches appear to be strong statements of China's desire to be a responsible, multilateral global power concerned with equity, globalisation managed for the benefit of all, and green and low-carbon development. The increasing commitment to global health and to health assistance should be seen against this background and as part of this broader evolution.<sup>16</sup>

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**11** People's Daily, 2017, Op. cit.

**12** Chan, Margaret (2016). China's growing contribution to health at home and on the global stage. Lecture at the Chinese Academy of Governance, 18th November 2016. Available [here](#).

**13** WHO (2017). Visit by the President of the People's Republic of China to WHO. WHO, 18th January 2017. Available [here](#).

**14** MOFCOM (2016). South-south cooperation aid fund project application and implementation management (draft for comment) (商务部关于《南南合作援助基金项目申报与实施管理办法(试行)》(征求意见稿)公开征求意见). MOFCOM, 9th September 2016. Available [here](#).

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**15** Xinhua (2016). Actively participate in global health and enthusiastically serve One Belt One Road (主动参与全球卫生 积极服务“一带一路”). Xinhua News Agency, 6th December 2016. Available [here](#).

**16** Xi, Jinping (2017). Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind. Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, at the United Nations Office at Geneva. Xinhua Online, 19th January 2017. Available [here](#). Xi, Jinping (2017). President Xi's speech to Davos in full. World Economic Forum, 17th January 2017. Available [here](#). Thompson, Peter (2017). Closing Remarks of Peter Thomson, President of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly at High Level Meeting on 'Building the Community of Common Destiny of Mankind'. UN.org, 18th January 2017. Available [here](#).