

Why Can China Still Promote the SDGs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: SDGs are one of the most prominent agendas in today's global governance and are widely accepted by global society. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted the regular process of implementing SDGs. Under tremendous stress, many countries' progress in SDGs has been suspended or declined significantly. Still, China has withstood the impact of the pandemic and made progress in SDGs. This article aims to explain why China can still promote SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic using process tracing methods. By analyzing how COVID-19 will affect accomplishing the SDGs and investigating Chinese efforts to address these issues, this article concludes three main reasons that enable China to make progress in SDGs: the overlap between SDGs and China's national strategic goals, the effective implementation institution design adopted by the Chinese government, and the broad social consensus and partnership that concern SDGs in China. Consequently, this article studied the unique experience and effective practice of China for implementing SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering learnable lessons for global governance and helping governments around the world better promote SDGs after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: China, COVID-19 pandemic, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the way of the current global governance process. Among these global objectives, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presented some of the most difficult obstacles to overcome. The SDGs focus on the most urgent social, economic, and environmental issues facing the globe and are coordinated and promoted by the UN and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), a worldwide organization made up of countries, significant organizations, and other stakeholders. With the continuous implementation of the SDGs, significant progress was made in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, halts the SDGs' regular progression. The impact of this unexpected public emergency event comprehensively changes the current situation of 17 SDGs and reveals serious challenges. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021 states that between 119 and 124 million people were forced back into poverty in 2020 as a result of the pandemic's negative socioeconomic effects. Additionally, this pandemic impact affects nations that are either impoverished or in dire financial straits. Many regions around the world are faced with social and economic risks, which make the existing progress backward and force the government to reduce the

efforts and resources assigned to the implementation of SDGs. It is also reported that the inequalities were extracted and deteriorated during the pandemic. The inequality and vulnerability in health care, education, and food resources per capita are increasingly enlarged [1], especially in countries and regions in extreme poverty.

Under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that all the countries and participants in the implementation of SDGs tend to delay or cancel the existing measures and policies which involve the SDGs and other agendas of global governance. China, a nation that survived the devastating impacts of the pandemic, has reached solid advancements toward the SDGs during this time. The Evaluation Report on the Sustainable Development of China (2022) states that China's SDG level will continue to rise steadily each year throughout the pandemic [2]. China can still advance some key SDGs during the crucial period of the COVID-19 pandemic response. For instance, in the area of absolute poverty (SDG1), the Chinese government declared that it had eradicated the problem in early 2021, during the crucial period of the Chinese response to the pandemic [3]. Why can China still promote the SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic? This article aimed to explain why and how China can make this unusual achievement during the pandemic.

Among the relevant research, several scholars have explored the practical measures for governments further implement the SDGs during the pandemic. For example, Zhao explores the possible solutions by the systematic framework of "Classification-Coordination-Collaboration", improving the responsive solutions adopted by governments [4]. Setting priorities for accomplishing short- and long-term goals, utilizing cutting-edge technology in the evaluation and review process of SDGs, and integrating SDGs are all important, according to Cheng [5]. Furthermore, some research also indicates the relevance between good governance under COVID-19 and the SDGs' level. Feng evaluates 257 Chinese cities to testify to whether the SDG level can help the government's pandemic control [6]. In general, the previous research broadly examines the governments' problems and potential solutions for the implementation of SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic from multiple perspectives and methods. However, existing studies have not examined how the central government of countries used national macro policies and institutions to promote SDGs during the pandemic. And there are no positive examples that can demonstrate that countries can continue to promote SDGs under the shocks of COVID-19. Therefore, this article will take China as a representative case to examine how the central government of countries promotes the SDGs under the stresses of the pandemic.

The research method of this article is Process Tracing (PT) in case study methodology. Firstly, this article will briefly examine the impact COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs from a global perspective. Secondly, this article will select China as a main case, and further explain China's achievement of SDGs during the pandemic. Next, the analysis of why China can reverse the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic and make progress in SDGs will be performed in the third part of this article. Lastly, this article will make an inclusive conclusion on why and how China can still promote the SDGs during the pandemic by analyzing and summarizing the arguments above.

By examining and analyzing how countries can promote the SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article can provide an innovative view of countries' participation in global governance after the era of COVID-19. China's implementation of SDGs can serve as a good lesson for other countries which have similar situations to China and help them to better improve their governance. Besides, the research on China's practice of SDGs can also complement the existing studies, offering new thoughts to the national case studies of SDGs.

2. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Implementation of SDGs

As the most influential agenda of global governance. The SDGs have a critical importance to global political, economic, and social development. For balanced and productive economic development around the world, the SDGs provide a scientific and systematic framework to promote development without compromising the environment or placing unfair burdens on societies. The institutions and policies of local and national governments have been somewhat impacted by the SDGs from a political standpoint. Additionally, several countries have also begun integrating the SDGs into their organizational frameworks, and some have created new institutions or assigned existing ones to carry out the goals. As for the global society, the non-discrimination and inclusive objectives of SDGs have greatly promoted equality achievement globally. In general, with the growing global implementation of the SDGs, their significance and attention will continuously increase.

After the pandemic of COVID-19, the global implementation of SDGs virtually decreased since the motivations for SDGs have profoundly lowered and weakened, which include the individual and institutional willingness to take part in the SDGs practices. Specifically, it involves their subjective view, for instance, their perception and evaluation of the necessities of SDGs. It is also related to their objective resources, covering their accessibility and capability for the implementation of SDGs. During the pandemic, the subjective and objective circumstances both significantly affect their motivations for the implementation of SDGs.

2.1. Individuals' Motivations for the Implementation of SDGs During the Pandemic

According to the survey conducted by the UN, the number of old people, disabilities, dwellers, children, and youth participating and engaging in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), one of the most important mechanisms to promote SDG implementations among states, has remarkably plunged. Consequently, the inclusiveness and effectiveness of SDGs will be weakened during the COVID-19 pandemic and the individuals' capability for implementation of SDGs will undoubtedly be reduced.

Moreover, the restricted social distancing policy during the pandemic of COVID-19 might be shrinking the civic space, which is vital for reviewing and democratic participation in the implementation of SDGs. Without an institution grounded on principles of inclusion, accountability, and democratic participation in civic space, the unfairness and dictatorship will be expanded, and the individuals' capability for the implementation of SDGs may also be affected. Overall, without a favorable environment for participatory governance, individuals tend to face considerable barriers during their participation in the practices of SDGs. As a result, the decrease in individuals' access to the implementation of SDGs is inevitable during the pandemic of COVID-19.

Regarding the viewpoint of perceptions. Because of the financial strains brought on by the pandemic, more people now prioritize economic recovery when making decisions about economic policy. This suggests that the government should put its primary attention on assisting the economy is recovering, even if doing so necessitates taking some steps that are harmful to the environment. According to the survey of IMF, among the tested individuals, 49% of individuals choose to promote economy recover in the first place [7]. However, for the advanced economies (AEs) and emerging economies (EMs), individuals of considerable scales believe the pandemic interruptions are their chances to change the existing living style to a more green, resilient, and recovery one. But still, the global tendency of individuals' motivations is generally to prefer to deal with the economic emergencies and challenges as soon as possible, even though it may undermine the efforts to climate change.

2.2. Institutions' Motivations for the Implementation of SDGs During the Pandemic

From the perspective of institutions, the impact of the pandemic on formal institutions is mainly concentrated on objective funding issues and subjective evaluations and perceptions. From the central governments to local partners, all the active bodies in the arena of governance are encountered a funding shock. Except for the fiscal austerity pressures around the world, finance also faced a challenge. According to the OCED outlook, there would be an extra existing gap of USD 1.7 trillion for developing countries' implementation of SDGs [8], even though financial support for developing countries is needed more than ever. With the comprehensive stresses, many institutions' practices for SDGs are forced to be suspended or even canceled. Although some fiscal stimulus measures imposed by the central government might maintain the SDG's attainment progress, the loss in the economic difficulties during COVID-19 is much more than the potential recovery and development afterward. Most importantly, for countries with heavy debt loads or at the status of low income before the pandemic. Not only it can't solve its problems in fiscal shortage independently, but it is also unable to use the tool of fiscal stimulus for the further implementation of SDGs. Besides, the SDGs partnership actors, for example, the NGOs, are also profoundly influenced by global fiscal and financial stresses. Therefore, the NGOs' role in the implementation of SDGs is gradually weakened by the stresses of budget. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic directly influences the institutions' capabilities for the implementation of SDGs by intriguing the fiscal shortage and financing gap.

As for the perception perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed many weaknesses in today's global governance system, including the shortcomings of the existing international public health system, the vulnerability in the field of poverty and inequality, and the lack of international cooperation and mutual trust. Among them, health (SDG3), poverty (SDG1), and international cooperation (SDG17) are the most important themes to focus on. As a result, the attention and resources of countries will gradually be transformed into the areas which exposed many risks of the existing systems during the pandemic. On the one hand, some important but continuously ignored by the international community can attain enough attention, for instance, the global partnership to respond to international public emergencies and the recovery and resilience ability after the pandemic. However, on the other hand, some areas which are also considered important will relatively lose their resources and attention, which may be caused an unbalanced agenda-setting for global governance, especially in situations where economic recovery confronts other SDGs with lower priority during the pandemic. For the countries in the tropical areas, the economic recovery and stimulus measures performed by these governments tend to associate with deforestation and the reduction of environmental protection regulations. Additionally, during the epidemic, the tropical government will shift its focus from environmental law enforcement to health and social initiatives. [9]. As a result, the pandemic partially changes the institutions' motivations for the implementation of SDGs due to the confrontation between economic recovery and SDGs.

3. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China and Its Responds

3.1. China' Progress in SDGs Before the Outbreak of COVID-19

China had advanced considerably before COVID-19 broke out in 2020. Chinese cities are halfway toward achieving the 2030 Agenda, according to the SDG index, which rose by 33.97% between 2005 and 2016 [10]. The eradication of extreme poverty, the creation of an "ecological civilization," and support for global climate and sustainability governance are the three primary areas in which China has advanced the SDG, according to China's Progress Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2019). In China, 700 million people have been pulled out of

poverty as a result of the nation's economic growth, and additional measures have been made to reduce inequality among people. Regarding the ecological system, China's energy intensity and carbon dioxide emissions declined consistently over the previous year, respectively, and between 2000 and 2017, China planted about 70000-kilometer squares of trees. China has also made a big contribution to global sustainability by supporting top-down government measures and bottom-up citizen initiatives. For instance, the "Ant Forest" program, a project started by Ant Finance, has helped cut millions of tons of CO₂, plant 122 million trees, and safeguard 29653 acres of natural habitat between 2016 and 2019 [11]. In general, the Chinese government's strong proposals and promises as well as the Chinese people's strong initiative support and implementation helped the SDGs advance before the pandemic.

3.2. The Challenges Posed by the COVID-19 Pandemic to China's SDG Progress

Among countries, China has had a particularly significant impact on the COVID-19 pandemic among nations. The rigorous virus containment procedures have significantly slowed China's economic growth and frequently halted virtually all offline business activity. China has long struggled to strike a balance between promoting economic growth and mitigating COVID-19. Consequently, China's tight situations during the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably influence the SDG's implementations. For example, in the arena of poverty (SDG 1), the income and working hours of people in poverty have been substantially reduced under containment measures during the pandemic. Regarding the local government, county budgetary revenues have been affected by the implementation of various tax reduction support enterprises. The fiscal gap is getting wider as a result of increased spending on pandemic prevention and livelihood support, particularly for low-income individuals [12]. As a result, most local governments under pressure cannot further pursue the SDGs since the severe budget limitations and a considerable load of sustaining the livelihood of local people. Not only in the arena of poverty but the other 16 goals' implementation in China are also affected in similar ways.

3.3. China's Response to the Pandemic Challenges and Measure to Promote Sdgs

Under the pressure of the pandemic, China took a positive response to promote the SDGs, including enhancing the existing capability and encouraging new potential growth.

The Chinese government implemented several initiatives to strengthen the current capacity to advance the SDGs after suffering substantial implementation and resource losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Preventing the pandemic and protecting people's lives as fast as possible (zero-Covid policy) is the primary goal of the Chinese government. With the initial success of the COVID-19 containment measures achieved, the policy called "ensuring stability on six key fronts and maintaining security in six key areas" were carried out to promote economic recovery under the pandemic and pursue a more resilient development mode. At the same time, the fiscal expenses and support in the scale of 2000 billion yuan of the central government also profoundly assist these measures taken and strengthen the existing capability of local government to promote SDGs. With these effective responses, China succeeds in achieving zero extreme poverty (SDG 1) by 2020 despite the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. The disease control measures have effectively prevented the rebound of the pandemic and promoted rapid economic recovery based on ensuring no widespread infection. And the multiple specialized policies to help the recovery of employment, investments, production, and consumption. With the comprehensive use of digital technology and internet finance, more SMEs have recovered from the shock of the pandemic and are back to normal production [13]. Consequently, during the first and the worst year of COVID-19, China still achieved 2.4% GDP respectively to the previous year, and the disposable income per capita rapid

return to pre-pandemic levels by the 4th quarter of 2020, which assist the government to recover its implementation capability for SDGs in a short time.

For China's implementation of SDGs, the COVID-19 pandemic is both a challenge and an opportunity. The impact of COVID-19 helped the Chinese government to evaluate the existing shortcomings in development patterns. Despite the significant improvements in the public health system, all kinds of social insurance and the relevant healthcare industry were also improved, and the inequality accessibility to these public resources between rural and urban regions is also reduced significantly. Apart from public services, sustainable energy strategies, green economic recovery, and relevant industry development become potential new growth sources for the implementation of SDGs. For instance, the 14th five-year plan (FYP) for renewable energy released by China in 2022 draw a grand vision of 25% of China's energy coming from non-fossil sources, which put the Chinese climate pledge forward to a new stage. This plan includes green investment, finance, and fiscal policies, which strongly push for China's new energy-related industries after the pandemic. With this support, the Chinese portion of clean energy in the world has grown notably during the pandemic, it even surpassed some previous dominant countries in the area of solar panels and offshore wind [14]. In general, this important transformation is based on the rapid economic recovery after the pandemic and the Chinese government's firm willingness of meeting its climate pledge (SDG 7/13).

4. An Analysis of Why China Can Still Drive SDGs During the Pandemic

4.1. The Overlaps Between Sdgs and China's National Strategic Goals

The Five-Year Plan (FYP) is the primary strategic policy of China's central government to guide the country's development. At the same time, the implementation of the SDGs has been added to China's 13th and 14th five-year plans as long as it has been proposed by the UN. China has deeply integrated the SDGs into almost all political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of its five-year plan. As a result, China continues to implement the SDGs as a primary national strategy despite pandemic pressures. In addition to the central government enforcement, local governments are also actively developing their roadmaps for SDGs. For example, many major cities in China have used the tool provided by Voluntary Locals Reviews (VLRs) and China Sustainable Development Indicator System (CSDIS) to evaluate their regional development in SDGs, which can help local government to locate the existing problems and explore a more sustainable solution.

Besides, the new development philosophy put forth by President Xi at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee also had a lot in common with the SDGs concept. SDG7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 17 are directly related to and serve as sub-points for the new development philosophy. The COVID-19 pandemic served as the primary catalyst for the advancement of the SDGs, which has been made possible by China's closeness and response.

4.2. Effective Institutional Guarantee for the Implementation of SDGs

An effective institutional guarantee is necessary for the political will and development philosophy to be realized. As a result, the Chinese government has created an inter-ministerial coordination mechanism for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which is made up of 45 ministries and commissions. These organizations are now in charge of carrying out all 17 sustainable development goals as well as 169 sub-goals. As a result, it has also been necessary for executive institutions at all levels to assume the primary responsibility for the implementation missions, resulting in the formation of an efficient implementation system between the national, regional, and local governments. This strong institutional protection was especially important during the COVID-19

pandemic to ensure that the SDGs continued to advance regularly without being significantly hampered.

In addition to structural benefits, the central government's strong administrative capabilities are a major factor in the SDGs' ability to advance despite the challenging external context. This trait is particularly striking in the way the Chinese government responded to the outbreak of the pandemic. For instance, the policy instruments the Chinese government employed during the pandemic, such as extensive fiscal and financial support, social control, and personnel coordination, strikingly illustrate the Chinese government's great policy skills. Due to its capacity, China can manage the pandemic while still achieving the SDGs.

4.3. Broad Social Consensus and Partnerships Drive SDG's Implementation

Understanding acceptance and participation in all sectors of society in the 2030 Agenda is the key to its sustainable and effective implementation. Since 2015, the Chinese government has strengthened the policies for enterprises and social organizations, promoting these institutions to accept and follow the SDGs. Besides, the cultivation of awareness of SDGs is also widely performed by local governments and public schools. These measures aim to gradually build up the recognition of the value of SDGs in the whole society and form a social consensus that SDGs are a matter for everyone and everyone should contribute to SDGs.

With these efforts, more and more companies are practicing SDGs in their production operations and Chinese companies become one of the most active participants in the UN Global Compact. Besides, more than 8,000 foundations in China are working in areas that are highly aligned with the 2030 Agenda, with funding expenditures related to the SDGs increasing from \$29 billion in 2015 to \$56.2 billion in 2018 [15]. Even though the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 seriously interrupts the regular operation of the private sector and causes great losses, especially for SMEs. However, many companies continue to perform SDGs and support many critical goals during the pandemic, for instance, poverty and green development. Despite the contributions during the pandemic, the encounters with COVID-19 also encourage companies to pay more attention to the environment and social responsibility [16].

Apart from the contributions of companies and foundations, the mass mobilization of grassroots government also plays a critical role during the implementation of SDGs. For example, in the arena of poverty, through demonstrations of poverty alleviation actions, the Chinese government promotes active public participation in the consumption of poverty alleviation products and guides the public to care for the poverty and vulnerable people. This 'whole society approach to poverty alleviation' has effectively ensured that China's goal of zero poverty is achieved on schedule.

In general, the Chinese government's promotion of widespread SDG knowledge has tremendously aided in China's complete implementation of SDGs at all times, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion

Undertaking the impact of the pandemic, the motivations of individuals and institutions for implementing SDGs around the world have profoundly reduced. The socio-economic shock brought by COVID-19 significantly lowers individuals' motivations and capabilities to participate in the SDGs' progress, especially in low-income countries. In addition, budget pressures and fiscal overloading have a significant part in the reduction of willingness, and the imbalanced resource distribution in SDGs policies may also result in further issues and concealments.

Similar to other countries, when China encounters the COVID-19 pandemic, the decrease in motivation extensively influences the regular implementation of SDGs. In response, China

decisively adopts several effective measures to minimize the pandemic's impact, including performing firm zero COVID policies, ensuring stability in six key areas focus on the livelihood of people, and providing fiscal and technological support to employment and production recovery. Based on the orderly recovery, China grasped the opportunity for the development of sustainable industries and made remarkable strides in some arenas during COVID-19.

The broad efforts of the Chinese government are the key grounds for China's promotion of SDGs during the pandemic. For instance, the high overlap between SDGs, China's Five-Year Plan, and new development philosophy, national comprehensive development guidance, directly drive the SDGs even in the severest period of COVID-19 outbreaks. Besides, the institutionalized implementation mechanisms and powerful administrative capacity conducted by the central government and commissions contribute to the implementation of SDGs as well. In addition to the endeavors made by the government, the widespread social consensus still motivates a great number of voluntary efforts for implementing SDGs, considered a prominent down-up method to promote SDGs during the pandemic.

In conclusion, China's special institutional design, administrative capability, and positive governmental support make it possible to respond to the pressures of the pandemic and promote SDGs simultaneously.

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