



Final Independent Evaluation of Project Improving China's institutional capacity towards universal social protection (Phase 2)

QUICK FACTS

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Administrative Office:	ILO Country Office for China and Mongolia
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This evaluation has been conducted according to ILO's evaluation policies and procedures. It has not been professionally edited, but has undergone quality control by the ILO Evaluation Office.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT	
Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure	The project (phase 2 between 2023-2026) was funded by the EU and implemented by the ILO in response to the challenges remaining in ensuring adequacy, equity, and sustainability of benefits, particularly for vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, informal sector employees, and rural populations in China. Building on achievement of phase 1, the project aims to further build the technical capacity and support China's social protection system coverage extension towards achieving an effective universal coverage and enhancing the quality of benefits provided by the system. The project set up a project steering committee, composed of representatives of EU, ILO and Chinese stakeholders (government agencies, employers' and workers' organizations and other social partners) to facilitate the active engagement of all stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring process of the project.
Present situation of the project	Project phase 2 was completed and is proceeding to phase 3
Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation	The evaluation serves as a final and independent assessment and aims to ensure accountability and to foster organizational learning that can be used to improve future projects and programs related to social protection. Specifically, this evaluation 1) assesses against OECD-DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of the project's outcomes; 2) looks at the project's adherence to the ILO's cross-cutting criteria and issue such as International Labour Standards, social dialogue, gender inclusion, and a just transition towards environmental sustainability; and 3) generates lessons learned, good practices and recommendations that can be applied to future action and initiatives. The evaluation covers the activities, outputs, and outcomes of the project from 1 February 2023 to 31 January 2026 and primarily focuses on the project's policy-level engagements at the national level (e.g., direct beneficiaries). The intended users of this evaluation include donor side (EU), ILO, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China, as well as other social partners who benefit from this project.
Methodology of evaluation	The evaluation adopts a theory-based evaluation design, utilizing the logical framework and theory of change as well as the logic of contribution analysis in facilitating the assessment of key evaluation criteria. At operational level, the evaluation applies an actor-centred and gender-sensitive mixed methods approach to gather evaluative data, including a mix of desk research and other data collection tools (e.g., key stakeholder interviews and participant observation). Insights and feedback were collected from representatives of all groups of key stakeholders as part of the systematic triangulation and validation of data from various sources for generating evaluation findings.
MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS	Overall, the project has performed well across all of the evaluation criteria. This overall assessment shall be understood and contextualised with these factors: 1) the long-term and gradual nature and process of policy/regulation-related changes and the capacity-building/strengthening instrument; 2) the transferability and adaptability of international experiences/learnings into local country context with varied political, social and economic situation as well as demographic features; 3) timescale and efforts taken for complying and fulfilling respective organizational procedures of three major tripartite partners/entities.

Relevance (Relevance Rating: 5 Relevant)

The project design was relevant. It demonstrated high level of alignment and responsiveness to national priorities and strategic directions of tripartite partners, such as China national 14th Five-Year Plan 2021-2025, ILO's vision for universal social protection through renewed efforts to extend the coverage to all, as well as EU's continuous commitments to promote the decent work agenda globally and its international collaboration strategy. The project also linked directly to the priorities of DWCP, UNDCSF and contributed to the SDGs. The project adopted a demand-driven approach focusing on direct beneficiaries' needs for capacity building and strengthening. The design of the project was meantime considered relatively ambitious with comparatively broad scope (e.g., intended outcome and impact-level results) in a set timeframe given the gradual and complex nature and processes of targeted areas of policy-related change. The links among different levels of results (outputs, specific objectives and impact) could be strengthened to ensure more smooth and logical pathways and transition.

Coherence (Coherence Rating: 5 Coherent)

The project showed high level of strategic coherence with the tripartite core partnership among the ILO, China and the EU with continuous high level of interest and engagement among various groups of stakeholders. The project support for leveraging partnerships and stakeholder engagement at all levels was valued for fostering dialogue, synergies and collaborations. The project adapted its strategies to include platform workers-related social security issue and just transition orientation in response to emerging trend and policy priority in this regard. The tripartite partnership is recognized as a valuable model. Meanwhile, the involved tripartite processes demand considerable time and resources in communication, coordination and organization of various project activities, especially when engaging major development actors such as the three partners/entities in this project. This has implications for the project design in terms of factoring in these potential challenges and reality.

Efficiency (Efficiency Rating: 5 Efficient)

The project operation was efficient in terms of proper resource structure and usage complying to relevant organizational requirements and procedures; timely project delivery and communication showing temporal-efficiency.

Effectiveness (Effectiveness Rating: 5 Effective)

The project indicated evident signs of effectiveness in terms of progress and contribution made towards set objectives, as well as fulfilling contractual obligations in a timely manner; although some of the objectives may take longer time and process to show desired results given the relatively complex and non-linear pathways and multiple influencing factors involved. Resulting changes in project beneficiaries' technical capacity and knowledge, perception and improved work practice, achieved from capacity building/strengthening efforts are valuable. It would better capture this type of results by setting corresponding indicators. This has implications for the project design of a potential following phase. There exist logical links among different levels of results, from looking at the progress/results achieved so far and the original intervention model, the link between project activities and outputs appears logically stronger than that between outputs and specific objectives (outcomes). In another words, there remains room for extra 'middle or intermediary steps' between outputs and specific objectives. Or alternatively, a narrower scope and more concrete articulation of specific objectives may help strengthen the logical links and transition among results, especially between the output and specific objective

level.

Impact and sustainability (Impact Rating: 5 Satisfactory; Sustainability Rating: 5 Sustainable)

The project contributed and progressed positively towards achieving impact and showed considerable potential for sustainability. It strengthened technical capacities and changed perceptions, well fostered and sustained tripartite partnerships, dialogue and good working relationships, as well as consolidated and disseminated policy-relevant research and knowledge products. On this basis, more nuanced articulation of operational-level and measurable impact indicators and exploration of more mutually supportive mode (e.g., information exchange and cost-sharing) would help better achieve impact and sustainability if the project continues.

Cross-cutting issues

The project indicated positive signs in integrating gender consideration through trying to pursue a relative gender-balanced representation among project participants and applying a gender length in analysis and reporting. While there are relatively small number of direct beneficiaries in this project phase, it would help to include more explicit gender-specific results in the next phase if involving larger number of ultimate beneficiaries (e.g., workers). The project also utilized the tripartite social dialogue mechanism involving government, employers' and workers' organizations, further enhanced adoption of this approach would help achieve larger extent of effectiveness and stakeholders' expectations of seeing more concrete and tangible results on the ground.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Recommendations

Recommendations are derived directly from the evaluation findings, particularly those related to relevance, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability, and are intended to inform future programming, including the potential design of phase 3.

1. Build on the momentum and learnings from the current project and take a nuanced and tailored approach to the design of a follow-up project.

- Update and revise the logical framework and theory of change to introduce 1) clearer intermediary outcomes and more measurable indicators that better reflect the gradual nature of policy reform processes; and 2) tailored and measurable indicators that can facilitate learning and performance tracking, including those qualitative indicators on capacity/behaviour changes resulted from capacity building efforts (if it remains a key project element).
- Re-think and re-orient the range of targeted project beneficiaries and needs. Stakeholder interviews reflected strong inclination that extended and more diversified groups of actors should be factored in the project design (maximize constituents' participation at all levels to enhance relevance and ownership, leading to long-term sustainability). For example, enhanced participation of social partners such as enterprises (e.g., Meituan or other similar ones) and selected ultimate beneficiary representation (e.g., platform workers) in project activities with replication/scale-up potential.
- Corresponding target/goal setting reflecting the long-term project ambition and vision, as well as detailed, achievable and measurable milestones along the pathways towards this vision. Gender-specific goal may be more explicitly set, especially when the project may involve a larger number of ultimate beneficiaries (e.g., platform workers or workers in other forms of employment) in the following phase. Document review and stakeholder feedback revealed the need of a more nuanced approach in

establishing logically stronger links between each level of results (adjusting intermediary-level results and indicators if necessary).

- Integrate exit strategies and follow-up mechanisms early to help ensure sustainability (e.g., plans about how achieved results will be maintained and utilized within partner institutions, as processes and methodologies internalized by institutions are most likely to be sustained).

Responsible unit/s	Time implication	Priority	Resource implication
Project team, donor agency	Short-term	High	Medium

2. Support pilot project or sub-projects with potential for both policy and project-level impacts in terms of replication and scale-up possibilities and enhancement of sector-specific evidence base.

- Support practical pilot project or sub-projects, combining the top-down (well-established macro policy-level support gained from this project) and bottom-up (pilot project-based and involving ultimate beneficiaries) approach to generate solid practical and in-depth evidence so as to feedback into policy making. For example, suggested possibilities for piloting include demand-driven pilot initiative with social partners such as platform enterprises (e.g., Meituan) and workers in the area of work injury-related social security benefits.
- Conduct feasibility and gap analysis in support of any piloting initiative.
- Equip piloting efforts with necessary technical support and regular monitoring to capture first-hand learning and experiences to be shared with other partners including EU and its member countries.

Responsible unit/s	Time implication	Priority	Resource implication
Project team, donor agency, national/local leading implementing agency	Long-term	Medium	High

3. Enhance mutual learning, benefits and influences in the project area

- Share China experiences (both achievement and challenges faced), especially given the fact that China has the largest number of workers engaging in new forms of employment, relevant initiatives and experiences in addressing social security benefits of these workers are of considerable value and interest to the international community. There is appetite from EU and its member countries to learn in this regard.
- Explore possibilities for shared contributions (in-kind or financial) towards achieving the project impact and wider influence.

Responsible unit/s	Time implication	Priority	Resource implication
Project team, line ministerial department and sub-units	Medium-term	Medium	Low

4. Continuous research, evidence generation and knowledge management

- Conduct feasibility studies on adaptability and transferability of international experiences and good practices in local context (e.g., via case studies).
- Capture timely monitoring and evaluation data and lessons learned on pilot project/s to accumulate evidence base and to inform future replication or scaling-up decision.
- Undertake independent complementary research, by ILO for example, if budget permits, to jointly reflect various facets of the reality in the project context that may impact on the project results.
- Keep track of dynamic policy changes and megatrends (e.g., sustainability of social security fund and ageing issue).

Responsible unit/s	Time implication	Priority	Resource implication
Project team, ILO Headquarters, line ministerial department and sub-units	Medium-term	Medium	Medium

Main lessons learned and good practices	Main lessons learned: Adaptation and transferability of new concepts, experiences and learnings. As mentioned in the Effectiveness section, there remain common challenges for all tripartite partners resulted from the evolving conditions and megatrends, such as the growth of the digital economy, platform employment, climate change and artificial intelligence (AI). Similar to other development actors and efforts, this project has started to explore solutions to respond to these conditions. The project showed flexibility and adapted strategies by including new focused policy areas such as social security benefits of platform workers, just transition concept and relevant technical expertise. Project beneficiaries gained valuable learnings from international (EU) experiences-sharing and exchanges, as well as improved technical capacities. It may then necessitate considerable efforts to adapt and transfer these benefits into locally-appliable actions (e.g., through further feasibility studies and piloting initiative) to maximize relevance and achieve concrete results with a pragmatic approach and perspective. Consideration of the complex, long-term and gradual nature & process of policy changes. It is fully understandable and legitimate that project stakeholders expect to see maximized project impact through tangible results and changes. In this connection, it is also critical to consider the inherent nature of the type of projects with the aim of achieving policy and regulation-level changes – non-linear, relatively slow and gradual process involved. There are also other influencing factors including constantly evolving conditions and emerging challenges in both immediate and wider context and environment. This project can be seen as an example facing all these scenarios. The pursuit of these types of changes may be transferred with further breakdown to concrete initiatives (e.g., case study/pilot project) with concrete and measurable short-term and long-term milestones and indicators. This will help build the evidence base eventually leading to confident evidence-based policy making. Main good practices: High level of relevance and strategic coherence and sustained interest and ownership among tripartite partners (EU delegation & member states, ILO offices, Chinese counterparts) and project beneficiaries. The two-pillar tripartite partnership and dialogue fostered and sustained high level of strategic coherence, interest and ownership among tripartite partners (EU delegation & member states, ILO offices, Chinese counterparts) on one hand; on another hand, it forged a unique space for tripartite collaboration among government agencies, employers' as well as worker's organizations. This led to their continuous commitment and engagement through meaningful dialogue and active participation in project activities throughout the project cycle, contributing to maximizing the effect of the tripartite partnership model. Demand-driven and needs-based approach. The project kept on track of emerging trends and policy focus (e.g., phase 2 included platform workers and maternity related social security topics). Capacity building/strengthening support were tailored to beneficiaries' needs such as the well-received actuarial training following needs assessment and stakeholder consultation. On one hand, policy brief, knowledge and research products showed clear focus on key topics relevant to the project context in China; on another hand, the project facilitated in consolidating and sharing relevant China experiences with the international community. For instance, since China has the largest number of workers engaged in new forms of employment, sharing experiences in this regard would benefit EU and other countries (there is appetite for such learning).
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