




# 25 YEARS

OF THE CONVENTION ON THE  
RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

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China's "barefoot social  
worker" at the forefront of a  
child protection revolution

by Wang Zhenyao



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## China's "barefoot social worker" at the forefront of a child protection revolution

by **WANG ZHENYAO**

The last 30 years have brought fast paced transformation in China. Millions of people lifted out of poverty, a huge investment in infrastructure, and intense economic growth have propelled the country to the forefront of the global economy.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate how much of this change has been good for China's estimated 279 million children. The shift out of poverty for many families has brought with it better education and health outcomes for their children, as well as new dynamic opportunities for them to learn and grow. The country has already achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in critical areas linked to nutrition, child mortality and education, and is on track to achieve the others.

Yet, we cannot forget that change brings new challenges. And with almost one in four children affected by migration, one of the biggest challenge remains to be the social impact of rapid urbanization. For many parents, seeking a job in a city presents a new opportunity to improve their economic prospects and ultimately build a better future for their children.

In the long run, the prospects may be good, but for many children, the short term reality of being left with a grandparent in a rural village can be tough and complicated. For the children who do move with their parents, moving to a big city can be alienating and foreign. The loss in traditional community support, while often facing discrimination and difficulty in accessing school and health services also pose new problems.

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Along with its economic success, China has built and maintained a safety net that is intended to provide for all its poorest citizens. Coverage does not necessarily translate into access. The challenge is if you are not registered, do not have your birth certificate, or do not even know about these benefits, you can miss out.

Let's take the example of eight year old Papan, one of an estimated 70 million children living in rural areas, left behind by her mother who moved to the city for work. After her father died, Papan's mother left her in the care of her elderly grandfather in order to look for work. The grandfather, who depends on a small income from farming, had little experience raising children. In addition to the financial challenges, Papan missed the emotional support and guidance of her mother being present in her life.

Enter the child welfare model of the “barefoot social worker”, which was first piloted in a 2010 project to help children affected by HIV and AIDS. The project started to experiment with finding someone living in the community, who could be trained in social welfare skills.

At the time, social work was a relatively new profession in China and it was clear that if we were to wait until we had a comprehensive professionalized scheme, it may never reach the children in remote and rural areas who needed it most.

The question was, why not identify people living in the community, equipped with basic knowledge of social work and child protection, and are able to navigate the system. They would be able to identify the children in need, and link them up with the services they require.

The idea of the “barefoot social worker”, introduced by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, with support from UNICEF, built on the success of China's primary health revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, when “barefoot doctors” were sent across the country to vaccinate children and contributed to a dramatic reduction in the number of children under five

dying from preventable diseases.

The 2010 pilot, was initiated in 120 pilot villages in five provinces, targeting 80,000 children. The results four years on are clear: more children are registered and accessing services, more children are in school and healthy, and more children are receiving emotional support from weekly visits by mentors who check in on them and make sure they are okay.

The good news is the Ministry of Civil Affairs is convinced that this is an important initiative that helps the Government fulfill its commitments under *the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable children. It has proven itself as the vital link between Government systems and the people who need to access to these benefits. It also provides an emotional and protective environment for children that can mitigate the worst effects of modern day changes and circumstances that are often foisted upon children.

The challenge ahead is to understand how to scale up this good model and make sure we have large numbers of “barefoot social



A barefoot social worker (L) explains the rights of the child to a young mother in a county in Yining, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China.



Rezuo, a barefoot social worker in the village, helps Laze braid her hair. Laze's grandmother has trouble walking, so Rezuo comes to visit them very often to help with household tasks and provide support.

worker's" we need to expand the program across the country and reach those in the most remote corners. Finding the money to scale up child-focused initiatives can often be challenging, especially when the benefits for such public goods are harder to quantify than a new road. Yet these can be critically important to society's well-being.

Already though, target cities have been selected for the second expanded phase and provincial governments have been approached and urged to test the model for themselves. The hope is that with the proven impact, the resources needed over the long term to sustain and expand this to all corners of the country will flow.

The power of this model demonstrates that fulfilling children's rights is not just about having good policies in place, but also about having the



human link with every child, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. The “barefoot social worker” becomes someone who connects them to the services they need but also acts as a mentor and counsellor, who cares about their problems and situation, no matter how complicated or challenging.

In recognition of this good model, the practical and cost effective example of the “barefoot social worker” is being highlighted as part of this year’s 25th Anniversary of *the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. UNICEF is showcasing examples of innovation from around the world that tackle inequity. It is hoped that the momentum started here in China will expand within the country but also the positive effects can ripple around the world.

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A Fu’s parents died 10 years ago. He and his grandparents live a very poor life. “I know the only way to help is to change the family’s economic conditions,” said the Child Welfare Director, Zhang Shengyin. He helped A Fu apply for orphan subsidies amounting to 7200 RMB per year and secured funding for the reconstruction of their unstable house.

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