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Sustainable Development at the Crossroad: Comparing policies and performances towards the SDGs in China and Europe

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Abstract

Most policymakers, aware of the economic and social imbalances and environmental pollution, have reacted by proposing a political strategy oriented towards more sustainable form of development. However, the commitment of big players, as Europe and China, towards the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development is crucial. Both Europe and China are launching one after the other policies towards a more sustainable development.

In Europe, on the one side, the efforts devoted by the European Commission (EC) for sustainable development started during under the Juncker presidency (2014-2019) as well as in the new political guidelines and priorities currently pursued by the von der Leyen presidency (2019-2024). The former include the EU Sustainable Development Strategy and the related monitoring system, along with its implementation actions, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Investment Plan for Europe, the Horizon 2020 programme, the Circular economy action plan, the EU plastics strategy, ect... . The latter embrace striving to be the first climate-neutral continent (through the European Green Deal which includes a new industrial strategy as one of its multifaceted elements), promoting social fairness and prosperity in our economies, empowering all people through new technologies, ensuring equality of opportunities and strengthening democracy, among others. In 2020, the EC announced “A New Industrial Strategy for Europe” for driving a twin transition towards both digital leadership and climate neutrality as well as, the new “Next Generation EU” (NGEU) recovery plan was adopted in response to the coronavirus pandemic, leveraging on the green and digital transition (EC, 2020).

On the other side, although Chinese development outcomes recorded impressive economic achievements and progress across social domains, but this progress achieved to date has not always been harmonious because of unsustainable features, rising inequality, environmental pollution and strong provincial disparities. Environmental and social sustainability have become part of the domestic political debate only more recently (Kuhn, 2016). Recently, Xi Jinping introduced in his Chinese Dream project the realization of a “moderately prosperous” society, a target widely mentioned in the National Development and Reform Commission reports (2019, 2020).

The aims of this paper are two. The first is to explore Chinese and European policies. The second is to measuring and comparing their progresses towards SDGs.

The Chinese dataset is based on official statistics from the Chinese Statistical Bureau (various sources) and consists of 42 variables measured at provincial level covering all the 31 provinces for the period

2010–2017. These variables are grouped into the 17-unidimensional SDGs domains. The data are comparable with the European countries and regions data from Eurostat. The Multidimensional Synthesis of Indicators (MSI), a new method for aggregating SDGs performances, is used to capture synergies and heterogeneity of results over time.

The empirical analyses provides Chinese and European policy-makers a better understanding on how policies may influence positively or negatively different SDGs and offer further monitoring tools to shape policies - at country level for Europe and provincial level for China - in line with the Agenda 2030 for the humanity and its common future.