Introduction: The Belt and Road Initiative and the Sustainable Development Goals: Opportunities and Challenges*

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Abstract This introductory article explains the rationale behind this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* and identifies the key issues and research questions addressed by the contributors. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the source of significant academic and policy debate, in terms of how it is defined and how far it can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. This article seeks to explore these debates in more depth, looking at the opportunities and challenges that are associated with aligning the BRI and the SDGs frameworks at local, national, and international levels to achieve sustainable development. It highlights new evidence, analyses, and insights from across a range of experts from China and BRI countries, and points both to the potential for the BRI to help achieve sustainable development outcomes and the challenges, implications, and impacts for the countries and communities involved.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, sustainable development, SDGs, China, developing country, infrastructure, trade and investment, international standards, risk and opportunity.

1 Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed in 2013 by China's president, Xi Jinping, has significant potential to contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). Re-enacting and extending key aspects of the ancient Silk Road's ethos and geography for the twenty-first century, the BRI is an enormously ambitious agenda which could reach up to 70 per cent of the world's population or more (Xi 2019; Frankopan 2019). It involves diplomacy; trade and investment and financial cooperation; infrastructure and connectivity; regional governance; and people-to-people bonds. It draws on both China's domestic development experience and China's international experience in South–South cooperation. It is the prime means through which the

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country is taking forward its economic and foreign policy aspirations on the global stage, and represents an outward-facing stance and agenda, at a time when older industrial powers in the US and Europe show at least temporary retreat into nationalism. Nevertheless, the BRI is broad, open, and evolving, without a single or shared understanding; indeed, it has become a label under which initiatives and aims of many kinds are being pursued. This ambiguity is itself a source of both opportunity and challenge.

Recent high-level statements, including at the latest Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in April 2019, emphasise the incorporation of international perspectives and mainstream global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The BRI could, in this view, offer opportunities to address global economic social and environmental goals through its projects, and contribute to resolving such issues as the chronic shortage of funds, inadequate institutional development, and weak partnerships. However, questions remain around how far the BRI, and the actors involved in it, from national governments to private sector investors, align with achieving sustainable development outcomes – especially as this was not the original intention of the initiative. Moreover, despite a growing body of evidence, more work needs to be done to understand the political, economic, financial, environmental, and social risks, implications, and impacts for involved countries and communities.

In this context, this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* focuses in on the relevance of the BRI for the SDGs and how the two agendas might be better aligned locally, nationally, and globally. Amidst often polarised debate, it provides vitally needed case study evidence to support a realistic analysis of opportunities and challenges, and to inform the design and implementation of the BRI in ways that support the SDGs in practice.

Despite high-level claims about the BRI's value to the SDGs, there is remarkably little work examining this interrelationship in significant depth. This *IDS Bulletin* explicitly addresses this gap from a range of aspects. Case studies from the perspective of both China and the BRI countries, at both country and project level, are used to contribute more nuanced assessments to current discussion and debate on China's international development policies and practices. The *IDS Bulletin* combines evidence and analysis from development communities (researchers, donors, practitioners) as well as representatives from business, investment, and financial communities who are rarely brought together for a study such as this. It also draws on the rich discussions that took place at 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Supporting Sustainable Development through High Quality Infrastructure', 11–13 March 2019, Wilton Park, UK supported by the UK Department for International Development and IDS, that brought these different groups together to discuss the potential and limitations of the BRI to contribute to a more sustainable world. The event highlighted four key areas for future action:

- A strengthened evidence base on what works in terms of aligning financial and sustainable development outcomes and managing risks;
- Improved knowledge exchange and mutual learning across sectors, actors, and countries on what works;
- Investment in consultation and capacity building amongst BRI countries so they can more effectively manage and prioritise investments to align with their own national sustainable development goals; and
- Global cooperation and leadership around creating international standards and regulation for infrastructure investment, including social and environmental standards.

The diversity of this experienced and knowledgeable epistemic community of scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and financial and private sector representatives reflects the multidimensional and interdependent character of the components of the BRI itself, and of the debate over its aims and objectives, implementation, operational practices, and impact. Such diversity also provides for a range of viewpoints to be considered in relation to the evidence brought forward in the case studies and critical reviews at the core of this *IDS Bulletin*, and also in regard to the wider international debate over the BRI. This is important given the varying understandings, myths, and misconceptions across different groups around the BRI's role and effects. The *IDS Bulletin* brings together country case studies of the BRI and sustainable development in Myanmar, Kenya, Pakistan, and Greece. It also explores a range of cross-cutting topics including: the BRI as a *Digital Silk Road*; environmental and social standards; and the BRI as a *critical link* to delivering the 2030 Agenda.

1.1 The BRI and the SDGs

1.1.1 The BRI, connectivity, and sustainable development

The main intention of the BRI, as stated in official Chinese discourse, is to act as the major catalyst for promoting and facilitating infrastructure investment in order to build closer connectivity between the Chinese economy and economies across the world. As China's former Foreign Affairs Vice-Minister, He Yafei has explained:

> The core idea of the Belt and Road Initiative is to achieve greater connectivity, closer ties, infrastructure links, people-to-people links and policy consultation. Through developing new economic corridors and cooperation, whether that be through physical infrastructure or digital, China is adding new ideas to regional governance (Belt and Road Advisory 2018).

The stated reasons for pursuing the BRI focus on realising a number of economic opportunities, both for China and partner countries, with the logic based on China's 'own experience that investment in infrastructure promotes economic growth and reduces poverty' (Miller 2017: 43).

This positive relationship between infrastructure and economic development is far from unique to China, being echoed in experience in Europe, the US, Latin America, and beyond. Nevertheless, China's new infrastructure vision goes far beyond earlier efforts in its scope and ambition (Renwick, Gu and Gong 2018). The official conception of the BRI is for a route 'connecting the vibrant East Asia economic circle at one end and the developed European economic circle at the other, and encompassing countries with huge potential for economic development' (National Development and Reform Commission 2015: III). The Chinese government has explicitly stated that the initiative has four principal aims: (1) bringing prosperity to underdeveloped parts of China, particularly in the west of the country; (2) increased connectivity and economic development along both routes through the movement of goods, services, information, and people and the exchange of culture; (3) greater integration between China and its neighbours; and (4) energy security through diversification of import sources.

To meet these aims, reported estimates suggest that the BRI will require funding in the order of US$4–8tn (Ho 2017). Drawing partly on statistics from the People's Bank of China, China's Central Bank, *China Daily* reports that financial institutions in China have already committed over US$440bn for BRI infrastructure projects (Jia 2019). It notes that Renminbi-denominated overseas investment funds amounted to over 320bn yuan (US$47.49bn) and the report argues that the Chinese capital market has helped companies raise 500bn yuan through equity funding. As an example, it states that BRI countries and companies have issued more than 65bn yuan in Panda bonds in the Chinese onshore market, according to the central bank (*ibid*.).

Natalie Blythe, head of global trade and receivables finance at HSBC, reports that 90 per cent of the funding for the BRI infrastructure projects comes from the public sector (HSBC 2018). The key funding sources are the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank; the US$40bn Silk Road Fund; China's two big policy banks – the China Development Bank and the Export–Import Bank of China; and China's big four non-commercial banks have put up tens of billions of dollars. However, as Yi Gang, Governor of the People's Bank of China has recognised, there is a need, and Chinese willingness, to leverage more private funds for infrastructure construction under the BRI (*ibid*.). There are obvious challenges in facilitating such private sector investment, notably sector reservations over investment in projects in high debt economies and the need to enhance debt and risk management.

Responding to this concern, China and its BRI partners have elaborated a debt-sustainability analysis framework at the 2019 Belt and Road Forum. China's financial institutions and the other BRI economies are encouraged to use this *non-mandatory* policy tool for rating debt risk before making lending decisions. The framework is also designed to meet the further private sector concern over financial 'safeguarding', with the analysis method set by China's Ministry of Finance based on international standards provided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In addition to this stated intention to engage with the private sector for investment, the Chinese government has established a multilateral development financing cooperation centre in collaboration with eight multilateral development institutions, including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, intended to prepare for 'high-quality' projects and promote international standards for BRI financing (*ibid*.).

Within the stated aims, there are a number of more specific economic drivers for the BRI. There is a general consensus that a significant potential *win* for China in the BRI lies in the opportunities it offers the country to address its increasingly important issue of industrial overcapacity; that is, a condition experienced whereby certain sectors including iron and steel, glass, cement, aluminium, solar panels, and power generation equipment, generate more products than the market can absorb (Yu 2017; Casarini 2016). This industrial overcapacity may prove to be a relatively short-term problem, as the Chinese economy transitions from export-oriented growth to a new model grounded in domestic consumption and outward investment (Yu 2017; Casarini 2016). The BRI has the potential to address this by generating infrastructure demand to catch up with the supply. In addition, by building infrastructure in China and beyond, the BRI can form a key component and foundation for the long-term transition (Gu and Carey 2019). As Yu acknowledges, the BRI will help China 'to deal with the domestic problem of industrial overcapacity and speed up industrial restructuring and technological upgrading at home' (Yu 2017: 367).

Another economic driver of the BRI for China is that international infrastructure investment presents opportunities for China to utilise its large foreign exchange reserves more effectively and gain benefits from diversification, rather than focusing on investing in US Treasury Bonds. This shifts at least the potential to realise infrastructure gains through the BRI. There is a strategic benefit too in this strategy. In channelling China's investment away from the US, it can help lower China's political and economic risk exposure against the background of a 'trade war' with the US. According to the Chinese government, by the end of March 2019, it had signed 173 cooperation agreements with 125 countries and 29 international organisations (Xinhua News 2019). The focus is on transport, energy, and communications infrastructure but the BRI's activities are now much broader and embrace aspects of collaboration ranging from agriculture, the environment, taxation, security, global health, and humanitarian response to cultural exchanges.

The BRI comprises two main routes: one continental land-based and one maritime route named as the *Silk Road Economic Belt* and the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*. In addition, there is a newly promulgated *Arctic Silk Road* as part of China's new Arctic Policy

(Government of China 2018), whilst projects in Latin America, the Caribbean, and across Africa are, at times, packaged within the BRI. In practice, however, operational project development is focused along *corridors*. In the continental *Belt*, there are six major corridors for international economic cooperation – the New Eurasian Land Bridge, and the China–Mongolia–Russia, China–Central Asia–West Asia, China–Indochina Peninsula, China–Pakistan, and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar economic corridors. The officially stated objective is that, by 2050, the Belt and Road region comprising these corridors will contribute 80 per cent of global gross domestic product growth, and contribute to the movement of three billion people into middle-class status (Hillman 2018).

The capacity for the BRI to act as an important partner in the implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda has been considered widely (Renwick *et al.* 2018; Shah 2016; UNDP 2017). The potential symbiosis of the BRI and the SDGs was recognised by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in his address to the May 2017 Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing, drawing comparisons between China's (then termed) 'One Belt, One Road' initiative and the SDGs. The Secretary-General argued that both major initiatives are rooted in a shared vision for global development: 'Both strive to create opportunities, global public goods and win-win cooperation. And both aim to deepen "connectivity" across countries and regions: connectivity in infrastructure, trade, finance, policies and, perhaps most important of all, among peoples' (Guterres 2017). This viewpoint has been reiterated by other senior figures. UN Under-Secretary-General, Tegegnework Gettu, at the 2018 High-Level Policy Forum on Global Governance: The 'Belt and Road' Finance and Investment Forum, held in Guangzhou, said: 'The Belt and Road Initiative, given its massive investments and financing flows, can potentially unlock the resources needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (Gettu 2018).

While the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs is primarily a matter for local and national commitments and actions, strengthened international cooperation and understanding are important in providing funds and investment; supportive regulatory and governance frameworks; and sharing knowledge, lessons, and examples of good practice (Gu and Kitano 2018). It is also important that actions and investments undertaken under the banner of BRI support do not contradict national and local action towards the SDGs. SDG 17 talks of 'partnerships for the goals' and it is now clear this must include the mass of actors involved with the BRI. These include international development banks, multilateral agencies, national governments, Chinese state-owned enterprises, private sector organisations, and professional services.

Almost all of the major global and regional intergovernmental organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for example, have signed up to work with China on the BRI. UNDP is working with the Chinese government, to cooperate with China and BRI partners to meet their development aims, promote greater consensus, and identify practical projects allied with investment to promote shared economic growth with inclusive social and environmental benefits (CCIEE and UNDP 2017). The Global Governance Forum brings together Belt and Road countries, UN officials, development practitioners, civil society organisations, and the private sector to explore a collective plan for concrete actions. In addition, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding in January 2016 to facilitate the efficient use of public–private partnerships (PPPs) in support of the initiative (UNECE 2016).

One of the facets of the evolution of some emerging economies from primarily 'recipients' of international development assistance to becoming simultaneously 'recipients' and 'providers' has been increased attention to how these new providers understand and approach development as a basis for their evolving policies and practices. In the case of China, the dominant discourse is that sustainable development should be understood as holistic or comprehensive. Such development needs to be founded on overall economic growth, and the principal engine and facilitator for this growth is infrastructure and technical capacity building. Primarily, as President Xi's own statements underline, this approach comes from the preeminent official Chinese reading of China's own historical development and reform experience (Xi 2017), its models for poverty reduction and human development based on urbanisation and Special Economic Zones, as well as its experience of solidarity with (aspects of) the independence movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Africa and Asia. Notably, these overwhelmingly positive accounts of China's development experience are contested, whether in drawing attention to the (rural) poor, the elderly, and children *left behind* by dominant poverty reduction strategies, or to the more complex geopolitics underlying China's socialist governments in the independence period.

In dominant Chinese perspectives, sustainable development emphasises the need for a holistic, integrated approach to policy and practice (Gu 2015; Gu *et al.* 2016). Broadly, it embraces the idea of *ecological civilisation* as the final goal of change within a given society, involving a synthesis of economic, educational, political, agricultural, and other societal reforms toward *sustainability* (Zhu 2016). The term ecological civilisation was first coined in the 1980s, but came into widespread use in 2007 when it became an explicit goal of the Communist Party following Hu Jintao's report to the Party Congress. It has gained additional weight since Xi Jinping's report to the 2017 Party Congress and inclusion of Xi Jinping's thought into the Party Constitution (Xi 2017). It has figured prominently in Xi Jinping's recent speeches, with reference both to domestic policies and international cooperation (CGTN 2019). The easy compatibility between economic reform and ecological principles implied by the high-level rhetoric around ecological modernisation nevertheless overlies intellectual and political debate about the concept and its application, with some strands associated strongly with organic Marxism (Wang, He and Fan 2014).

Attempts to integrate environmental concerns and ecological principles are evident in China's own domestic processes of economic reform and restructuring, the rebalancing of its energy sourcing, and climate change mitigation. In 2008, an important analysis by the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED) stated that 'China faces a grave overall environmental situation' in its overall sustainable development (CCICED 2008: 43), the Council publishing its final report in 2015 (CCIDEC 2015).

Indeed, the environmental fallout of China's rapid growth is all too evident in high levels of air and water pollution, waste, and land degradation (Albert and Xu 2016). To overcome this situation, the CCICED argued that four major fundamental transformations were needed to sustain China's economic development and establish itself as an environmentally friendly society: (1) growth should be transformed from mostly investment and export-driven to more consumption and domestic demands-driven; (2) manufacturing should have a reduced share of the industrial structure with greater weight given to services and agriculture; (3) the basis for development should be shifted from capital and natural resources to human resources and technical progress; and (4) the unidirectional linear process of resources–products–waste should be replaced by the feedback cyclic process of resources–products–waste–resource recycling. The response to this should centre upon creating a national innovation system (CCICED 2008: 12).

1.1.2 China's approach to sustainable development

A key component of the proposed system is highly relevant to China's current involvement with global sustainable development and the globalised approach to achieving substantial change. This was to establish an open innovation system whereby both China and other developed nations could collaborate together in joint efforts to promote innovation. In this cooperation process, the CCICED envisaged that technological innovation forms the source, whilst institutional innovation provides the guarantee, social innovation serves as the basis, and the promotion of development and application of energy-saving and environment-friendly technologies would then constitute the core (*ibid.*: 5). Indeed, in recent years, China domestically has become a world leader in the innovation and application of low-carbon energy systems involving solar and wind power, for instance, through a unique combination of state and private sector action. The extent to which this domestic experience of environmental and *green* innovation is replicated in China's international investment along the BRI is more debatable, as we explore below.

China's approach to sustainable development has also been shaped by two important policy frameworks on development, the first formulated through the Chinese state, the second through the Communist Party of China (CPC). Firstly, the 13th Five-Year Plan, adopted by the Fourth Session of the 12th National People's Congress in March 2016, defined a concept of innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared development. These central principles underpinning China's approach to implementation coalesce with those of the 2030 Agenda:

> Peaceful Development, Win–Win Cooperation, Integration and Coordination, Inclusiveness and Openness, Sovereignty and Voluntary Action, as well as 'Common but Differentiated Responsibilities', should be followed in building a new type of international relations featuring win–win cooperation, establishing all-round partnership, and achieving economic, social and environmental development in a balanced manner (UN 2016: 2).

In 2016, the Chinese government published China's Position Paper on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016). This sets out the principles, priorities, and policies and sought to explain the progress made in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The paper set out a number of specific elements to be pursued as priority aims:

- Eradicating poverty and hunger through targeted measures to alleviate and eliminate poverty, and enhancing agricultural production capacities and food security;
- Implementing innovation-driven development strategies and generating momentum for sustainable, healthy, and stable economic growth;
- Advancing industrialisation to inject impetus to coordinated development between urban and rural areas and among the three dimensions of sustainable development;
- Improving social security and social services to ensure equal access to basic public services;
- Safeguarding equity and social justice to improve people's wellbeing and promoting all-round human development;
- Protecting the environment and building protective barriers for eco-security;
- Addressing climate change actively and integrating climate change response into national development strategies;
- Promoting efficient utilisation of resources and sustainable energy; and
- Improving national governance and ensuring economic and social development in line with the rule of law.

China further emphasises the need for global partnership and collective action in implementing the 2030 Agenda, stating that the global community needs to provide sound support in five principal ways (UN 2016). These include:

- Strengthening capacity building of countries so as to improve institution building, increase public resources, and generate internal growth momentum;
- Creating an enabling international environment for development, building a balanced, win–win, and inclusive multilateral trading system and improving global economic governance;
- Engaging with all stakeholders and working towards a more equitable and balanced global partnership for development;
- Promoting coordination mechanisms and incorporating development policy into global macroeconomic policy coordination; and
- Improving follow-up and review by conducting regular reviews of global implementation progress while a review of national implementation would be done according to respective national conditions and the principle of voluntary action.

The second key policy framework is China's 'new development philosophy' initiated and explained by Xi Jinping in his Secretary-General's Report to the CPC Congress in October 2017. China's development of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era' under President Xi Jinping has at its core a 'people-centered philosophy of development' (Xi 2017: 1, 16); a philosophy reflecting and reinforcing the SDGs and 2030 Agenda commitment to leave no one behind in the journey to 2030.

1.2 Challenges and risks

These high-level international and Chinese policy statements around the BRI, ecological civilisation, sustainable development, and development in general all emphasise alignment between the BRI and the SDGs. At the same time, the BRI has also generated a wide range of concerns and reservations, which raise questions about the extent of such alignment in real politics and practice. Internationally, there has been geopolitical backlash as some countries have pushed back against Beijing's growing influence and power, hard and soft (Balding 2018). Governments such as India, the US, France, the UK, and Japan have held back from joining the BRI. Beyond these macro- and geopolitical dynamics, the BRI project has generated a wider range of concerns and reservations related more to challenges over its functionality, implementation, and risks. The agenda of concerns is extensive and includes question marks about the financial strength and durability of the BRI, given its now global reach and the need to diversify and broaden the sources of reliable large-scale funding. Issues of opaque tendering and contracting have also been raised, alongside issues of corruption and asymmetrical development gains; for example, in terms of knowledge-sharing, employment opportunities, technical know-how, and capacity building.

Moreover, a range of specific risks – financial, social, political, and environmental – has been highlighted in relation to the impact of BRI projects on recipient countries. In terms of financial risk, there have been documented cases of *pushback* by some governments (such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and also Pakistan), faced by what was presented to be BRI-project-related debt. This issue was highlighted at the Wilton Park event. For example, Kyrgyzstan currently has 12 loan agreements with China, which has committed around US$2.2bn to road and energy projects (Santander 2019). The dramatic improvements in infrastructure have been coupled with a significant increase in national debt (Hurley, Morris and Portelance 2018; Kong *et al.* 2019; Dollar 2019). Examples such as these have fuelled accusations that China is engaging in so-called *'debt trap diplomacy'* through the BRI, lending excessively to developing countries, knowing full well that these countries will not have the means to repay the loans, and will then be forced to default on the loans and hand over key strategic assets to China, or otherwise submit their sovereignty to Beijing, as a political strategy (Hurley *et al.* 2018).

The term 'debt trap diplomacy' was first coined around the example of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, when in 2017 the country turned over its operational control to a Chinese-dominated joint venture in return for US$1.1bn in investment from China Merchant Port Holdings (CMPort). Yet, others have, in turn, critiqued this narrative. Brautigam (2019), for instance, discusses the more complex interests around Hambantota Port, showing that this was a long-standing national project, yet a rather inefficiently managed, loss-making one, in which debts were owed to many international investors, not just China. Brautigam argues that proceeds from the sale of a stake to CMPort went to the Sri Lankan treasury, which used them to make payments on the Chinese loans and other debt service obligations, and to look forward to turning the port around into a profit-making operation. Brautigam (2019) also suggests that more generally, the political aims and risks of China's infrastructure investments have been overblown; the BRI strategy, at heart, remains economic. It should also be noted that the Malaysian government and that of Pakistan have both drawn back from their initial positions on the BRI following intensive negotiations with the Chinese government and the loan provider agencies (CNA 2019; Dunya News 2019).

Environmental risks, and evidence of environmental damage and negative ecological impacts from BRI projects, are also emerging (Teo *et al.* 2019). These were also underscored at the Wilton Park event. There is evidence of contradictions between China's environmental policies at home and in BRI countries, where, for instance, investment in coal-fired power plants continues across Central Asia (Tan 2018; Shearer *et al.* 2018), albeit in a region where renewable energy was described by the 2015 UNECE Renewable Energy Status Report as 'still facing challenges' (UNECE 2015).

There is a growing body of evidence emerging from African countries, such as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Uganda, that highlights the environmental and social risks experienced by local communities as a result of investment projects. For instance, projects such as the Kribi Port Project in Cameroon have resulted in loss of habitats and forests, and the social risks to communities include loss of livelihoods and homes through land acquisition which has not been properly compensated (Schenkel 2018). Although tenure data are improving, the problem of land acquisition and compensation continues to pose a challenge, compounded by the issue of poor legal documentation. Direct Chinese investments in natural resource extraction and management, such as in forests, might therefore bring damage to community rights and livelihoods (Zhen 2016).

However, there is also some evidence of positive environmental and livelihood benefits from Chinese projects. The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) Forest Governance project (Mayers 2018) has shown that experiences are highly varied, and much depends on the local context and specifics of the scheme, and the extent to which good community consultation and transparent approaches to project governance and benefit-sharing are built in. Similarly, the assumption that Chinese projects involving agriculture, land, and water invariably lead to *grabs* and dispossession has been carefully critiqued (Brautigam 2015). In this latest episode of *China in Africa*, there has been great variation on the ground, with both positive and negative experiences shaped by embedded social, economic, political, and historical factors.

In the context of all these forms of risk, at an international level, for some European governments such as France, Germany, and the UK, there is an issue of *safeguarding*, that is, the degree to which BRI processes are aligned with established international standards and norms. In her address to the Second Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in April 2019, IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde argued that, what she termed 'BRI 2.0' could,

> benefit from increased transparency, open procurement with competitive bidding, and better risk assessment in project selection. The launch of the green investment principle at this conference is a further important step forward for the BRI – and a step forward for green, low-carbon and climate-resilient investment. Debt sustainability and green sustainability will strengthen BRI sustainability (Lagarde 2019).

1.3 Case studies

The contributions to this *IDS Bulletin* provide a rich diversity of further contributions to this important and ongoing debate. They supply much-needed detail of what is happening in practice on the ground, adding to existing evidence and further illuminating the issues being debated internationally about the relationship of the BRI to the SDGs. Though wide-ranging in their coverage, these studies are aligned around the central theme of this *IDS Bulletin*, namely, the opportunities and challenges involved in drawing these two global development initiatives together in a constructive, effective, practical relationship that can help to deliver, substantively, the SDGs by 2030. Taking this central theme, the respective studies focus on the question of how far the BRI is actually realising the potential to strengthen SDG delivery in practice. Specifically, the studies address the question as to what opportunities the BRI is offering to achieving the SDGs, and in what ways are opportunities counter-balanced by challenges and risks that limit the fulfilment of such opportunities.

As we have indicated above, at the core of the BRI is connectivity, building strong transport, communications, and energy connections between countries through policy cooperation, infrastructural investment, project implementation, and operational management to promote inclusive, equitable, and mutual economic growth through collaborative sustainable development. The contributing studies in this issue focus, thematically, on just what this overarching ambition means in practice. In the first of the studies, Gong Sen and Li Bingqin (this *IDS Bulletin*) move beyond the attention and investment concentration on energy and transport infrastructure to explain the opportunities presented by promoting greater information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure investment and the BRI as a Digital Silk Road. Whilst evidence indicates that some of China's own cities have had some economic gains by grasping digital connectivity and engaging robustly with the emerging digital economy, the transferability of the Chinese experience to other BRI economies to promote sustainable development has been unclear.

Utilising a wide range of sources for the first time, the authors show that a multiplicity of digital investments is underway. Yet, potential benefits to SDG agendas are limited by their predominantly business, rather than poverty or environment focus; the lack of coherence between Chinese investments and national plans, and the fact that most are imposed top-down, missing (digital) opportunities for local consultation, and the enhancement of voice; and raising concerns about the imposition of surveillance. Thus, they conclude that the benefits of ICT investment in the BRI should not be overestimated, and themselves carry risks. The authors argue that, crucially, enhancing activities in the virtual world need to be matched with those in the real world to deliver sustainable outcomes.

In the second study, by Jiang Xiheng (this *IDS Bulletin*), analysis centres on the growing debate over BRI infrastructure investments and their relationship to international standards. In this study, the author looks at the critical question of whether the BRI will contribute to environmental aspects of the SDGs, asking whether Chinese infrastructure investors will follow high environmental and social standards for greening BRI. They argue that it is critical to understand whether 'greening the BRI' will be translated into action, especially by Chinese investors. Analysing the environmental, social, and fiscal impacts and risks brought by large-scale infrastructure projects, the authors detail the pressures and incentives Chinese investors face, as well as their capacity to green BRI projects. Their analysis illustrates the way these pressures play out in practice and the impact and implications for standards. They argue that, while the frameworks are in place, significant gaps remain in operationalising these. Regarding management and communication capacities (more than technical capacities), the challenge is to implement standards in the fragile social and ecological settings of many BRI countries. Thus, risks to local environments and communities still prevail, despite good intentions.

Against the background and context provided by the present introduction and the two initial chapters, the following four articles provide country-focused studies. Zhou Taidong (this *IDS Bulletin*) examines the extent to which the BRI and Myanmar's national sustainable development plan and the SDGs are aligned. Zhou argues that, in principle at least, these are in alignment and the BRI presents an important opportunity to help Myanmar realise its development ambitions and achieve the SDGs. But in order to fully realise this opportunity, both countries still face huge challenges in security, social, environmental, and financial dimensions. Infrastructure and economic investments struggle amidst, and are sometimes fuelling, political conflict, community distrust, dispossession of land and resources, and ecological problems, in Myanmar's fragile setting. It is concomitant upon both governments to make strong efforts, including in consultation and community engagement, to ensure that the challenges are overcome and opportunities realised in practice.

In their article, Jing Gu and Shen Qiu (this *IDS Bulletin*) examine the BRI and Africa's sustainable development through a study of Kenya. They argue that many African countries are already realising the opportunities of the BRI and gaining practical results, particularly through infrastructural investment. However, their study also highlights continuing reservations in African countries about the challenges associated with the BRI. The authors illustrate the balance between opportunities and challenges in Kenya, illustrating Kenya's developmental needs, the BRI, and China's ability to meet these needs, the challenges of continued financing, debt management, project implementation and completion and, from China's own perspective, considerations of risk exposure, project monitoring, and outcomes assessment.

The study of Sino-Greek economic cooperation through the case of COSCO's investment in the Port of Piraeus by Liu Qianqian and Polyxeni Davarinou (this *IDS Bulletin*) argues that the port investment is mutually beneficial, grounded in opportunities for stimulating infrastructure investment, enhances the competitiveness of the port, and boosts the local economy and job creation. However, the authors' assessment of this high-profile major project also identifies difficulties; in this particular case, concerns of some European countries to hold onto a common EU position on the BRI, and inflexibility in corporate overseas companies. The Port of Piraeus has a broader role in enhancing Sino-Greek economic cooperation (and by extension, Sino-European cooperation), but for this to unfold effectively, it will be necessary for Chinese and European actors to reconcile interests and goals with internal and international politics.

The next article, by Mustafa Hyder Sayed (this *IDS Bulletin*), takes us to South Asia as it explores the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The study explains the background and development of the CPEC, identifying the factors that offer opportunities to Pakistan, China, and other regional BRI partner economies. The study notes key projects such as non-renewable and renewable power generation projects, strategic motorway construction, as well as the high-profile Gwadar Port, Gwadar Free Trade Zone, and Gwadar International Airport projects. However, Sayed argues that there are substantial challenges, including an important lack of a communication strategy and a need to engage non-governmental stakeholders.

The final article by Namsuk Kim (this *IDS Bulletin*) broadens the perspective once again to consider the relationship between the BRI and the SDGs as the crucial bridge to *leave no least developed country behind.* The article critically reviews the financing and cooperation needs for least developed countries as they work towards the SDGs, identifying a serious financing gap. It suggests that the BRI could contribute to this, but only if some critical enabling conditions are met – including aligning the BRI and the SDGs.

2 Conclusion

Collectively, these studies contribute a more diversified analysis and understanding of China's international development policies and practices, especially concerning the BRI and the SDGs. The evidence assembled through these reviews and detailed case studies offers insights into interlinkages between the BRI and the SDGs. A number of cross-cutting lessons emerge, including the diversity of these interlinkages. Both BRI and SDG investments and practices are immensely varied, and whether or not alignments or contradictions emerge depends very much on the set of issues in question. Context also matters; the social, economic, and political settings of the countries and places where BRI investments are taking place shape their impacts and outcomes, and their effects in relation to the SDGs. How BRI investment benefits are distributed between different social groups also has a profound impact on whether they contribute to the SDGs around poverty, inequality, gender equality, and the cross-cutting principle of *leave no one behind*. China has a long historical presence in most of the countries now part of the BRI, and the implications of this latest, largest episode in China's presence cannot be understood outside these embedded historical experiences.

The examples in this *IDS Bulletin* expand the context-specific evidence base but they are only a few. Another lesson concerns the gap between rhetoric and practice around the BRI and the SDGs. Much is claimed, and at the level of official discourse – whether of national governments, Chinese companies, or supportive international agencies – the right vision, commitments, frameworks, standards, and technical expertise are now in place to ensure that BRI investments align with national sustainable development priorities, and avoid risks. Yet evidence on the ground, whatever the country or issue, reveals a more complex and mixed picture, in which implementation, practice, and capacity struggle to meet these claims. Meanwhile, the image of the BRI providing neat technical and financial solutions to countries' development problems is often contradicted by more complex entanglements with social and political issues and interests.

Looking ahead, more evidence of the synergies and tensions between the BRI and the SDGs is clearly needed. A bank of case studies which captures these relationships, and that highlight best practice and examples of maximising the synergies and reducing the tensions in different contexts, needs to be developed and made globally available and accessible.

We also need a strengthened evidence base around what works in terms of aligning financial and sustainable development outcomes, understanding and managing risk, implementing and applying standards, and building the capacity of national governments, local communities, and private contractors to work together successfully to manage projects.

There also needs to be investment in consultation and capacity building. Donors, including development and multilateral agencies and development banks, should consider how they could invest in building the necessary capacities within BRI countries to more effectively manage and prioritise investment, in alignment with their own national sustainable development goals. They should also identify ways in which they can facilitate and support consultation and engagement between BRI national governments, civil society, local communities, and project investors, so that those directly affected have a greater say.

Thus, the potential exists to align the ambitions of the BRI around policy coordination, connectivity, trade, financial integration, and cultural exchange with the SDG framework and its focus on people, the planet, and power. Given the scope and scale of the BRI, it has the potential to contribute to global public goods. However, partners across national governments in developed and developing countries, investors and private sector organisations, multilateral agencies, and regional banks need to work together to conceptualise how this might be achieved, as in essence this was not the original intention or ambition of the BRI. There is sometimes a mismatch between the BRI recipient countries and Chinese companies around how far investments and their outcomes can or should be aligned with the SDGs. National governments in countries have a role to play in articulating their own development strategies in relation to BRI investments.

Finally, to discuss these issues properly requires also that we embrace the reality of the power relations at stake in BRI investments, and discussion about them – both material power and resources, and the power to narrate what is going on through political statements and the media. We need to attend more closely to whose voices are being heard and whose are excluded – and to how this might need to change. Analysing power and politics, and supporting developmental alternatives to be surfaced and articulated, is a key task ahead in this dynamic context.

Notes

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