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# The Social Dimension of the EU-China Relationship: A Normative and Pragmatic European Approach?\*

Hang YUAN & Jan ORBIE\*\*

*Recent decades have seen an expansion in EU-China relations. While this phenomenon has been examined extensively in the existing literature, bilateral interactions in the social field remain largely unexplained. This article investigates the evolution of the social dimension in EU-China relations and finds that social issues receive little attention until the mid-1990s, but increase in importance thereafter. To explore this phenomenon, we found both explanatory power and limits in the 'normative power Europe' versus the 'pragmatic power Europe' perspectives. Pragmatic concerns help to explain why social issues have become more closely linked to economic than to political ties. Yet they fail to account for the EU's relatively successful export of social security norms to China. The European Union's (EU's) normative power could be enhanced rather than inevitably threatened by China's rapid development. Analysing the social dimension also throws light on the complexity of the EU-China relationship; a complexity that is largely ignored by existing observations.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen an expansion in EU-China relations. Yet pessimistic views of this relationship seem to have increased. Scholars have noted the many divergent traditions that emerge from the European Union (EU) and China, such as historical development, political systems, the economy and foreign policy, and these have often resulted in dispute.<sup>1</sup> Given China's rapid development and the EU's financial crisis and economic recession, it appears that China's rise has negatively affected the EU's ability to act as a 'normative' power, such that China is

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., J. Holslag, *The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership*, 49(2) J. Common Mkt. Stud 293–313 (2011); J. Men, *The EU and China: Mismatched Partners?*, 21(74) J. Contemp. China 333–349 (2012).

a 'problem' for the EU.<sup>2</sup> However, EU-China relations extend beyond the fields of politics, economics and trade, on which the existing literature focuses. To what extent these studies reflect the true nature of bilateral relations between the EU and China is unclear.

To enhance their 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', both sides have recently signed up to the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Sustainable development has for the first time become a major theme, alongside three other policy areas, and receives more attention than the other three areas in terms of both issue points and word length.<sup>4</sup> Within the field of sustainable development, social issues including employment and social security have received growing attention. Yet few studies seem to have investigated the social aspect of the EU-China relationship or considered how and why both parties have addressed social issues in their bilateral relations.

This study explores the evolution of EU-China relations in the social field during 1975–2015, with a focus on the issues of employment, labour and social security.<sup>5</sup> In the next section we investigate how both sides have framed social issues in their bilateral relations. We find that China and the EU attached little attention to social issues until the mid-1990s, but expanded and deepened the bilateral dialogue and cooperation on these issues later. More specifically, both sides reach more consensus on employment and social security affairs than on labour issues. Moreover, they have linked social cooperation more closely to economic than political issues. In particular, China has shown interest in learning from EU expertise in matters of social security and workplace health and safety.

Existing arguments in terms of Europe's 'normative power' and 'pragmatic power' are useful but also have their limits as an explanation of these findings. While arguments stressing the EU's pragmatic approach help to explain why the EU links social issues more to economic than to political matters, they fail to account for the EU's export of social models to China, which have partially led to an expansion in bilateral dialogue and cooperation in the social field this century. Interestingly, China's learning from EU social security expertise supports the

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<sup>2</sup> A. Kaya, *The EU's China problem: A Battle Over Norms*, 51(2) Intl. Pol. 214–233 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., *Celebrating 40 years of EU-China diplomatic relations* (12 Feb. 2015), at: [http://ecas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2015/20150212\\_en.htm?utm\\_source=CRN+EUROCHINA+Mailing+List&utm\\_campaign=e600915cde-RSS\\_EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_2814b93a1f-e600915cde-16990513](http://ecas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/20150212_en.htm?utm_source=CRN+EUROCHINA+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=e600915cde-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2814b93a1f-e600915cde-16990513) (accessed 17 Feb. 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See, *The EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* (November 2013). The other three themes are peace and security, prosperity, and people-to-people. The theme of peace and security contains thirteen issue points (on two pages); the theme of prosperity twenty-eight points (four pages); sustainable development forty-one points (six pages); people-to-people exchanges ten points (two pages).

<sup>5</sup> We analysed the available data up to June 2015.

latter's normative power rather than poses a threat to it. We conclude with views on the likely future of bilateral relations.

## 2 STUDIES ON EU-CHINA RELATIONS

The social aspect of this relationship has not been studied. First, scholarship of political science, international relations and international political economy focuses on aspects such as political relations (including human rights),<sup>6</sup> economic and trade ties,<sup>7</sup> international affairs,<sup>8</sup> and to a lesser extent, other issues including environmental protection and climate,<sup>9</sup> science and technology,<sup>10</sup> as well as culture and education.<sup>11</sup> Second, and linked to this, few EU and China scholars have systematically investigated bilateral interactions in the social field. Even those authors who provide a comprehensive overview of several aspects of the EU-China relationship do not cover social aspects.<sup>12</sup> One recent study investigated five main sectors but did not address the social aspect as an independent one.<sup>13</sup> Third, sociologists, who customarily conduct domestic and comparative social policy analysis, have paid little attention to the international and global dimension

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., M. Li, *China-EU Relations: Strategic Partnership at a Crossroads*, 7(2) *China-an Intl. J.* 227–254 (2005); J. Men & R.P. Pardo, *Convergence and Divergence between the EU and China*, 12(1–2) *Asia Eur. J.* 1–3 (2014); A. Sautenet, *The Current Status and Prospects of the 'Strategic Partnership' between the EU and China: Towards the Conclusion of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement*, 13(6) *Eur. L.J.* 699–731 (2007); F. Umbach, *Strategic Partnership of Multilateral Kowtow? The EU-China Relations and the Abolition of the Embargo*, 60(3) *Internationale Politik* 70–77 (2005).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., T. Grzegorz Grossea, *Geoeconomic Relations between the EU and China: The Lessons From the EU Weapon Embargo and From Galileo*, 19(1) *Geopolitics* 40–65 (2014); M. Smith, *EU-China Relations and the Limits of Economic Diplomacy*, 12(1–2) *Asia Eur. J.* 35–48 (2014); D. Scott, *Trust, Structures and Track-2 Dialogue in the EU-China Relationship: Resetting and Resettling a 'Strategic Partnership'?*, 12(1–2) *Asia Eur. J.* 21–34 (2014); Y. Luo, *Engaging the Private Sector: EU China Trade Disputes under the Shadow of WTO Law?*, 13(6) *Eur. L.J.* 800–817 (2007); F. Algieri, *EU Economic Relations with China: An Institutional Perspective*, 169 *China Q.* 64–77 (2002).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., M. Otero-Iglesias & M. Zhang, *EU-China Collaboration in the Reform of the International Monetary System: Much Ado About Nothing?*, 37(1) *World Econ.* 151–168 (2014); W.A. Callahana, *Future Imperfect: The European Union's Encounter with China (and the United States)*, 30(4–5) *J. Strategic Stud.* 777–807 (2007); U. Wissenbach, *The EU's Response to China's Africa Safari: Can Triangular Co-operation Match Needs?*, 21(4) *Eur. J. Dev. Res.* 662–674 (2009); T. Narramore, *China and Europe: Engagement, Multipolarity and Strategy*, 21(1) *Pac. Rev.* 87–108 (2008); D. Scott, *Multipolarity, Multilateralism and Beyond ...? EU-China Understandings of the International System*, 27(1) *Intl. Rel.* 30–51 (2013).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., D. Scott, *Environmental Issues as a 'Strategic' Key in EU-China Relations*, 7(2) *Asia Eur. J.* 211–224 (2009); J. Men, *Climate Change and EU-China Partnership: Realist Disguise or Institutional Blessing?*, 12(1–2) *Asia Eur. J.* 49–62 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> O. Bräuner, *Beyond the Arms Embargo: EU Transfers of Defense and Dual-Use Technologies to China*, 13(3) *J. East Asian Stud.* 457–482 (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Z. Yongjin, *Culture, Knowledge and Diplomacy in Contemporary EU-China Relations-Reflections on the Legacies of Matteo Ricci*, 12(1–2) *Asia Eur. J.* 5–19 (2014); C. Pinna, *EU-China Relations in Higher Education*, 7(3–4) *Asia Eur. J.* 505–527 (2009).

<sup>12</sup> See J. Men, *EU-China Relations and Diplomacy*, 19 (Special Issue) *European For. Affairs Rev.* (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Holslag, *supra* n. 1.

of China's social policy.<sup>14</sup> While some studies document international influence on China's social policy, such as the United Nations; the International Labour Organization (ILO); and the World Bank (WB),<sup>15</sup> EU influence remains relatively unexamined. Further, it is unclear whether the EU itself has benefited from exchanges and cooperation with China in social policy.

Limited research of the social aspect has at least two consequences. First, existing literature offers no direct answers to questions concerning bilateral interactions in the social field. It remains unclear how both sides frame their dialogue and cooperation in the social field in their general relations, and how and why these interactions have on the increase. Second, it is uncertain to what extent these observations reflect other dimensions of bilateral relations, and whether the views based on the study of other fields would provide useful analysis of the social aspect of EU-China relations. Studies of political ties would stress political differences between the two sides and reveal the difficulties of bilateral dialogue and strategic partnership.<sup>16</sup> Insights from an economic angle would no doubt reveal a growing number of exchanges based on common interests.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore important to survey the existing observations and arguments regarding this relationship to understand how they might elucidate social phenomena.

Scholars have sufficiently explored the EU's perspective. Current accounts of EU external relations encompass positions between the two limits: they either emphasize the EU's capability to socialize others, or underscore the limits of this socialization. On the one hand, some EU scholars have noted that in an increasingly interdependent world, the EU has been actively exporting its norms through European external governance or Europeanization.<sup>18</sup> Some have stressed the uniqueness of this bloc, such as its particular constitutional nature and the normative underpinning of its external actions, and tended to view Europe as a 'civilian power' or a promoter of 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE).<sup>19</sup> Ian

<sup>14</sup> H. Obinger, C. Schmitt & P. Starke, *Policy Diffusion and Policy Transfer in Comparative Welfare State Research*, 47(1) *Soc. Policy & Administration* 111–129 (2013).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., J.B. Williamson & C. Deitelbaum, *Social Security Reform: Does Partial Privatization Make Sense for China?*, 19(2) *J. Aging Stud.* 257–271 (2005); as is Dongmei Liu, *The Impact of International Institutions on China's Reforms of Social Security Institutions and Laws*, 5 *Comp. Leg. Res.* 22–36 (2011) [刘冬梅, 论国际机制对中国社会保障制度与法律改革的影响, (5), *比较法研究*, 22–36 (2011)].

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., P. Taneja, *China-Europe Relations: The Limits of Strategic Partnership*, 47(3–4) *Intl. Pol.* 371–387 (2010); Men, *supra* n. 1.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Li, *supra* n. 6; Scott, *supra* n. 7.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., S. Lavenex, *EU External Governance in 'Wider Europe'*, 11(4) *Journal of European Public Policy* 680–700 (2004); S. Lavenex & F. Schimmelfennig, *EU Rules beyond EU Borders: Theorizing External Governance in European Politics*, 16(6) *Journal of European Public Policy* 791–812 (2009); F. Schimmelfennig, *Europeanization beyond Europe*, 4(3) *Living Rev. in Eur. Governance* (2009).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., F. Duchene, *Europe's Role in World Peace*, in *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead* (ed. R.J. Mayne, Fontana 1972); I. Manners, *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 40(2) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 235–258 (2002); I. Manners, *Assessing the Decennial, Reassessing the Global: Understanding European Union Normative Power in Global Politics*, 48(2) *Coop. & Conflict* 304–329 (2013).

Manners argues that the EU ‘exists as being different to pre-existing political forms’ and ‘act[s] in a normative way’, meaning that it can better be viewed as a normative power rather than as a civilian or military power.<sup>20</sup> These liberalisms or liberal justifications of EU external action suggest that it is the ‘duty’ of the EU to advance certain liberal norms outside its borders in order to shape the world.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the EU has been trying to promote the so-called European social model and international social initiatives advocated by the ILO and the OECD, including the social dimension of globalization in the world.<sup>22</sup> Literature has documented the EU’s varying degrees of success in exporting European norms to its ‘near abroad’ and beyond.<sup>23</sup>

These approaches would suggest that the EU has been promoting its social norms towards China. For example, an NPE would act through ‘living by example’ in principles; ‘being reasonable’ in actions, and ‘doing least harm’ in consequences.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the EU should demonstrate the attractiveness of its social models to the world. These models include welfare systems, policies to protect social rights, and initiatives to promote Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The EU should also persuade China to accept these norms and policies through bilateral dialogue and cooperation as well as other policy instruments, preferably embedded within international agreements such as the ILO conventions. Finally, the EU’s efforts to export its social norms should also do the ‘least harm’ to China’s society.

On the other hand, scholars have contended that the EU’s ambition to socialize China has been faced with difficulties such as differences in political values and systems, the rising power of China, and the EU’s shrinking leverage in

<sup>20</sup> Manners (2002), *supra* n. 19, at 242.

<sup>21</sup> B. Rosamond, *Three Ways of Speaking Europe to the World: Markets, Peace, Cosmopolitan Duty and the EU’s Normative Power*, 16(1) *British J. Pol. & Intl Rel.* 133–148 (2014).

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission: The Social Dimension of Globalization – the EU’s Policy Contribution on Extending*, COM(2004) 383 final (18 May 2004); Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission: Promoting Decent Work for All: The EU Contribution to the Implementation of the Decent Work Agenda in the World*, COM(2006) 249 final (24 May 2006); Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission: Renewed Social Agenda: Opportunities, Access and Solidarity in 21st Century Europe*, COM(2008) 412 final (2 Jul. 2008); Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission: A Renewed EU Strategy 2011–14 for Corporate Social Responsibility*, COM(2011) 681 (25 Oct. 2011).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., J. Orbie et al., *JESP Symposium: The European Union’s Global Social Role*, 19(2) *J. Eur. Soc. Policy* 99–116 (2009); J. Orbie, *Promoting labour standards through trade: normative power or regulatory state Europe?*, in *Normative Power Europe Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives* (R. Whitman ed., Palgrave 2011).

<sup>24</sup> I. Manners, *The Normative Ethics of the European Union*, 84(1) *Intl. Affairs* 45–60 (2008); I. Manners, *The Social Dimension of EU Trade Policies: Reflections from a Normative Power Perspective*, 14(5 *Special Issue*) *European For. Affairs Rev.* 785–802 (2009). For studies on social dimension of EU trade policies, see *European Foreign Affairs Review*, *Special Issue* (2009).

comparison.<sup>25</sup> The EU's confidence in socializing China has not resulted in the expected convergence of the two on the norms enshrined by Europe.<sup>26</sup> The normative or idealist perspectives do not explain why the EU has failed to convince China on political values and human rights.<sup>27</sup> The EU is facing an 'uneasy coexistence between normative concerns and material interests' in its policy on China's human rights issues.<sup>28</sup> Some authors have identified the EU as a 'pragmatic power' rather than a 'normative power' in the case of China.<sup>29</sup> They note that the EU is formulating a more pragmatic policy towards China<sup>30</sup> – from a values-based to an interests-based engagement.<sup>31</sup> Further, some argue that China is a 'problem' for the EU because the former's rise is negatively affecting the EU's ability to act as a 'normative' power.<sup>32</sup>

These authors would expect the EU to take a pragmatic approach that balances normative and material objectives. Since the EU has been frustrated in its attempts to increase political pressure on China in recent years, it would lose too much if it continued to confront this emerging power. Instead, if the EU takes a soft approach or employs constructive engagement, it would both integrate China through exercising its normative power and enjoy the economic returns of cooperation with China. Accordingly, this would suggest a shift in the EU's emphasis from political pressure to a more pragmatic approach, focusing on dialogue and cooperation in the social-economic sphere.

### 3 THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF EU-CHINA RELATIONS

The social dimension of EU-China relations refers to their bilateral interactions on a range of social issues, including employment, labour, social welfare, health, and education. This dimension is interrelated and overlaps with political, economic and other aspects of EU-China relations. We focus in this article on two issues: employment and labour, and social welfare. Employment and labour issues include

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., G. Balducci, *The Limits of Normative Power Europe in Asia: The Case of Human Rights in China*, 27(1) *East Asia* 35–55 (2010); K. Chan, *Images, Visibility and the Prospects of Soft Power of the EU in Asia: The Case of China*, 8(2) *Asia Eur. J.* 133–147 (2010); Holslag, *supra* n. 1; M. Mattlin, *Dead on Arrival: Normative EU Policy towards China*, 10(2–3) *Asia Eur. J.* 181–198 (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Holslag, *supra* n. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Mattlin, *supra* n. 25.

<sup>28</sup> W. Shen, *EU–China Relations on Human Rights in Competing Paradigms: Continuity and Change*, in *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations* (T. Christiansen, E. Kirchner & P.B. Murray eds, Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

<sup>29</sup> S. Wood, *Pragmatic Power Europe?*, 46(2) *Coop. & Conflict* 242–261 (2011).

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *supra* n. 7.

<sup>31</sup> P.I. Crookes, *Resetting EU–China Relations from a Values-Based to an Interests-Based Engagement*, 50(5) *Intl. Pol.* 639–663 (2013).

<sup>32</sup> Kaya, *supra* n. 2.

workers' rights and conditions in the workplace. Social welfare includes social security, social inclusion and social development.

We investigated how policy-makers have framed social issues over time. We examined both policy documents and events with the basic assumption that if some issues have been conceived important and urgent to address, both sides would probably move forward from rhetorical commitments to action. The general trend of social issues in EU-China relations proves to be as follows: they received little attention in the first two decades since bilateral relations were established in 1975, but increasing attention in the second two decades (1995–2015), in particular during the years since 2003.

Social issues, in particular those of employment, social security and labour, received little attention prior to the mid-1990s. Trade relations were the centrepiece of bilateral ties during that period. Yet no special clauses addressed these issues in the two major bilateral legal documents which were signed during this period and have been shaping the EU-China relationship – the Trade Agreement of 1978 and the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation signed in 1985. Neither have other legal documents on specific issues, such as the EU-China Agreement on textile trade signed in 1979, or bilateral meetings between governmental branches, given particular attention to these issues, such as the inter-parliamentary meeting<sup>33</sup> or political consultations at ministerial level.<sup>34</sup>

In the years since the mid-1990s, however, we witness increasing attention to social issues. The framework of a structured EU-China political dialogue was established in 1994 and upgraded in 1998, 2002 and 2010. The current bilateral political dialogue framework consists of Annual Summits,<sup>35</sup> annual 'executive-to-executive' meetings and other regular dialogues at various governmental levels, covering a wide range of issues. Social issues appear in a number of concrete channels, including Human Rights Dialogue, Sectoral Cooperation and Dialogues on Employment and Social Affairs, Development Aid projects, as well as various bilateral academic seminars on specific issues including employment, working conditions and the CSR.<sup>36</sup> The remainder of this section focuses on this phase. We firstly examine official documents to see how policy-makers view the social dimension of these bilateral relations. We also survey the bilateral actions taken in the social field.

<sup>33</sup> The first inter-parliamentary meeting was held in Strasbourg between 16 and 19 Jun. 1980.

<sup>34</sup> The first political consultations at ministerial level in the context of European Political Cooperation were held in 1984.

<sup>35</sup> It is the Chinese Premier who usually attends these Summits. In April 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Brussels and held a summit with the EU leaders, which however was not the one of regular EU-China Summits at premier level.

<sup>36</sup> For the whole dialogue architecture, see European External Action Service, *EU-China Dialogue Architecture*, at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/eu\\_china\\_dialogues\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/eu_china_dialogues_en.pdf) (accessed 25 Feb. 2015).

We analysed official documents through automatic content analysis on key terms and hand-coding (substantial reading). The documents under automatic content analysis include the Joint Statements (or Communiqués) of the fourth–seventeenth EU-China Summits (2001–2015).<sup>37</sup> These documents have clearly organized common concerns and consensus in different fields, despite varying word lengths, drafting styles and even structures from year to year. While they would not necessarily reveal the precise ways in which top leaders conceive and frame social issues in their minds, they still provide us with a good reflection of policy-makers' perspectives on these issue and priorities in the policy agenda.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, we assume that: (1) the issues appearing in the joint press statements usually reflect the common concerns of both sides; (2) the issues which have been intensively discussed and/or agreed on actions were often mentioned in sufficient detail with specific terms in the joint press statements, and vice versa. The coding scheme of automatic content analysis includes general terms, which refer to social issues such as social reform and social development, and specific/technical terms, which focus on three issues: employment, social welfare and labour (see Table 1, in the Annex).<sup>39</sup> In this way, we try to capture the whole status of social issues in the bilateral relations while focusing on three issues of interest.

Our automatic content analysis indicates the general trend of attention paid to social issues. The terms referring to social issues increased during 2001–2007 and 2012–2013, but did not appear in documents in 2009, 2010 and 2014 (see Table 1, in annex). There are interesting changes in general terms. China's 'economic and social reform' was mentioned until 2004, but never appeared again in subsequent years. By contrast, 'economic and social development' appeared in 2006, 2007, 2012 as well as 2015. The year 2013 witnessed new terms such as 'social progress', 'social policy' and 'social challenge'. The 2015 EU-China Summit Joint Statement mentioned 'social field'. In addition, the frequency of specific terms has indicated more detailed trends on three issues. Employment was mentioned between 2003 and 2007 (except in 2006) but not in the following three summits until the fourteenth in 2012 when it was stressed again. Specific terms around labour and social security increasingly appeared during the seventh–tenth (2004–2007) and fifteenth–sixteenth (September 2012–2013) summits, indicating that these years

<sup>37</sup> The Joint Statements of the EU-China Summits before 2001 are not available. The sixteenth EU-China Summit in Nov. 2013 did not issue a joint statement, but a press release and the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, which could be viewed as a joint statement in terms of structure and word length.

<sup>38</sup> The existing research has analysed these joint statements for different purposes. For instance, Jonathan Holslag examined seven statements (2001–2007) to assess how the EU-China strategic partnership had been formulated in general. Yet that study did not focus on the social dimension of this relationship. See Holslag, *supra* n. 1.

<sup>39</sup> We generated this scheme after iterative efforts to both keep the original use of these terms in the joint statements and to keep our aforementioned research focus.

were of interest. Social security issues were mentioned only in 2004, 2007 and 2012–2013. Some specific labour-related terms also received much attention, such as occupational safety and health, the International Labour Organization (ILO), decent work and CSR. In summary, the frequency of terms on social issues help to highlight a couple of interesting time points such as 2003, 2007, 2012 and 2013.

To further reveal how social issues have been framed in the EU-China relations, we conducted intensive text analysis of these and other official documents, including the Joint Statement: Deepening the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for mutual benefit (2014).<sup>40</sup> We identified three features of bilateral dialogue and cooperation in the social field.

Firstly, compared to political, economic and trade ties, the social dimension remains small, but has been extending in more issue areas, deepening (from general concerns to more specific and technical topics) and materializing (from rhetorical commitments to actions and projects). China's 'economic and social reform' had been mentioned until 2004, but in the following years 'sustainable development' began to appear. The social issues discussed here have been viewed as components of the inter-sectoral dialogue and cooperation, later labelled as the second pillar of the EU-China dialogues. These issues have usually been framed around the theme of 'sustainable economic and social development'.<sup>41</sup>

Since the 2004 Summit, leaders decided to take concrete steps to facilitate China's social reform. They endorsed the EU-China Social Security Reform Cooperation Project, one of the four financial agreements for China's economic and social reform, through providing European expertise (points 14 and 18). They also emphasized the initiative on establishing an EU-China dialogue and cooperation mechanisms on employment and social affairs, including a regular dialogue between the civil society organizations of both sides, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the China Economic and Social Council (CESC) (point 16). At the 2005 Summit, the two sides endorsed a Memorandum of Understanding on labour, employment and social affairs.<sup>42</sup> In 2006, they continually stressed exchanges and cooperation in fields such as environmental protection, labour and social affairs (point 30), as well as energy to support sustainable economic and social development (point 21).

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<sup>40</sup> This Joint Statement in April 2014 was issued after the Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the European Union in Brussels.

<sup>41</sup> This theme also includes associated issues such as China's economic and social reform, energy and cyber issues.

<sup>42</sup> The Memorandum of Understanding on Labour, Employment and Social Affairs was signed by Commissioner Vladimír Špidla and the Chinese Minister of Labour and Social Security, Tian Chengping at the EU-China Summit in Beijing on 5 Sep. 2005.

The 2007 Summit issued the longest joint statement of the period of study, with a number of details in all fields, including social issues such as social security, labour law (labour dispute settlement), health and safety at work, social assistance, social welfare and social affairs. Both sides expressed their satisfaction with cooperation in the field of employment and social affairs, ‘as an important element of the dialogue on sustainable development and decent work’ (point 41). They emphasized the contribution of the Second High Level Round Table on Social Security in Berlin (2007) to China’s reforms. They took note of the cooperation in the field of labour law, and the exchange of experience in labour dispute settlement in Beijing (2007), and pledged to establish a structured dialogue in the field of health and safety at work, and to sign a Memorandum of Understanding in early 2008. Further, the two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation on social assistance, social welfare and social affairs (point 41). Additionally, they stressed the need to support sustainable development through more support for CSR (point 19) and attention to the energy issue (point 23). Meanwhile, both sides also noted the importance of the exchange of best practice in economic and social management and public service (point 26).

The summits between 2008–2011 (there were no summits in 2008 or 2011) did not mention social issues. However, the two summits in 2012 highlighted social issues again. In the fourteenth Summit (February 2012), the EU and China express the importance of bilateral strategic cooperation for both their sustainable economic and social development and for addressing common challenges facing the world (point 1). They also took note of the status cyber issues in promoting economic and social development (point 21). In the fifteenth Summit (September 2012), they were satisfied with ‘exchanges of policy experience in social security, occupational safety and health, youth employment, inclusive growth models and labour relations’. They explicitly referred to the ILO as the framework to promote a decent work agenda, through the cooperation project on occupational safety and health in high-risk sectors and continuing cooperation on social security, pensions and social inclusion (point 30). While the Joint Statement issued by the Presidents in April 2014 did not note social issues, the seventeenth EU–China Summit (June 2015) explicitly mentioned the social field along with political, economic and environmental fields (point 2).

Second, within the social field, social security and employment have become two key themes. As one of the bilateral sectoral dialogues, cooperation on employment and social affairs has advanced remarkably since the signature at the 2005 Summit of the MoU on Labour, Employment and Social Affairs. In 2009, another MoU on Health and Safety at Work was signed, focusing on the pressing

problem of safety in the coalmine sector in China.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the biannual EU-China Round Table, the semi-official dialogues (viewed as organized by civil society) co-established by the EESC and the CESC since 2007, have intensively discussed environment and social development, economic and social rights.<sup>44</sup>

They also launched development projects to facilitate exchange of experience and best practices on social issues. These led to the transfer of expertise and experience from the EU to China. On social security, they launched the EU-China Social Security Reform Project (2006–2011) targeting China's policy development and capacity building through the EU's expert assistance in four areas: pensions benefiting both urban and rural residents, and health, unemployment and work injury insurance schemes. This project, which is the largest in China's external cooperation in the social field, has been viewed as 'one of the flagship cooperation projects between the two sides'.<sup>45</sup> This cooperation has stimulated more platforms for China's learning from European expertise, such as the EU-China High Level Round Table on Social Security (2006–2011) and the China Social Security Forum (2006–2013). Both sides are continuing their cooperation through the EU-China Social Protection Reform Project (2013–2018) to 'support China in further developing social equality'.<sup>46</sup> In addition, based on the two MoUs signed in 2005 and 2009, they are implementing the EU-China Occupational Safety and Health Project in High-Risk Industries (2012–2016) to facilitate China's improvement in workplace safety and health.

Third, social issues have recently been linked more closely to non-political issues – more specifically to economic ones.<sup>47</sup> While the Summit documents often mention international human rights standards, they do not explicitly include labour rights and standards when discussing human rights affairs. Similarly, as one channel of bilateral political dialogue, EU-China human rights dialogues have barely discussed social rights or labour rights.<sup>48</sup> Further, as mentioned above, both sides have shifted wording from 'China's economic and social reform' to 'sustainable economic and social development' since 2004.

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<sup>43</sup> It was signed by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission and the State Administration of Work Safety of the People's Republic of China, to set up a policy dialogue and cooperation in the field of health and safety at work.

<sup>44</sup> They held thirteen meetings up to February 2015.

<sup>45</sup> T. Yingzi, *China, EU Focus on Social Security Schemes*, China Daily, 19 Oct. 2009, at: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2009-10/19/content\\_8812676.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2009-10/19/content_8812676.htm) (accessed 10 Jan. 2013).

<sup>46</sup> The institutions involved include China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Commerce (MOC), Ministry of Finance (MOF) and Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) as well as members of EU consortium, mainly from Foromez Institute of Italy. See also, *EU-CHINA – Social Protection Reform*, <http://www.foromez.eu/node/1603> (accessed 10 Sep. 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Social issues are also linked more to the cultural field. But compared to their relations to economic issues, the link to the cultural dimension is of marginal importance.

<sup>48</sup> We gained this observation by analysing available documents released after the 27–33 EU-China Human Rights Dialogues during (2009–2014) and discuss them in more detail in the next section.

In particular, social issues have recently been linked to trade and investment. We found no direct evidence of incorporating social issues such as labour standards into the EU-China negotiations on China's accession to the WTO in 2000 or the 2005 EU-China Textile Agreement. Yet the High Level Economic and Trade Dialogue has incorporated the social dimension as a sustainable development issue in bilateral economic cooperation since 2007.<sup>49</sup> Bilateral negotiations on the new bilateral trade agreement and bilateral investment (BI) agreement, which began in 2006 and 2013 respectively, have also covered issues of sustainable development, including social standards and CSR.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4 EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: PRAGMATIC AND NORMATIVE

Understanding the social dimension of this relationship, including its general trends and features, involves seeking answers to a number of questions. We focus on two here: why have social issues received increasing attention since the early 2000s and why have both sides linked social issues more to economic than to political affairs? Answering these questions would have implications for at least two research themes: EU external relations and EU-China relations.

We found both explanatory power and limits within the literature on EU external relations. On the one hand, arguments stressing the EU's pragmatic approaches can help to explain why social issues have been linked more closely to economic affairs than to political affairs. They denote a shift in the EU's emphasis from political pressure on China to a more pragmatic approach focusing on social-economic dialogue and cooperation. In fact, in its China policy articles in the 2000s, the EU began to stress improving the efficiency and effectiveness of encouraging China's social reform and development through expanding sectoral dialogues.<sup>51</sup> Our analysis of the EU-China summit statements also indicates a shift in the linkage of social issues to other fields, from high political issues such as human rights to low political and more technical issues. Since 2004, as mentioned above, both sides have shifted from stressing 'China's economic and social reform' to realizing 'sustainable economic and social development.' While these documents have often mentioned international human rights standards, they have not

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<sup>49</sup> Four meetings were held up to February 2015. See *Inaugural Meeting of the EU-China High Level Economic and Trade Dialogue Mechanism (HLM)* (25 Apr. 2008), at [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2008/april/tradoc\\_138632.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2008/april/tradoc_138632.pdf) (accessed 2 Feb. 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Four rounds of negotiations were held on the bilateral investment agreement up to February 2015.

<sup>51</sup> See European Commission, *EU Strategy towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy*, COM(2001) 265 final (15 May 2001); European Commission, *A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations*, COM(2003) 533 final (10 Sep. 2003).

explicitly referred to core labour standards. The ILO has only recently been referred to (since 2012) but not in direct relation to core labour standards.

Although the EU-China Human Rights Dialogues sometimes noted certain social rights such as women's rights and the right to housing,<sup>52</sup> they did not stress core labour standards as fully as political and civil rights. There are a few exceptions, for instance when the EU mentioned re-education through the labour system in China,<sup>53</sup> and when China expressed its concern about the social rights situation in Europe.<sup>54</sup> The EU also noted progress in completing the social security system in China.<sup>55</sup> The relatively infrequent mentions of labour issues and labour rights denotes less emphasis and little consensus on these issues.

This is in accordance with assessments stressing the EU's pragmatic concerns when dealing with disagreements with China on differences in their political and social system. While the EU recognizes economic and social rights as components of human rights,<sup>56</sup> it has not attached sufficient importance to these issues when engaging with China. Although the EU could raise social rights issues in bilateral dialogues with China, it did not take the opportunity to do so in recent years. By contrast, the EU often attempts to highlight civil and political rights issues, which dominate the agenda of human rights dialogues.<sup>57</sup> In a sense, this is not surprising because it has tried to balance the ideal objectives of promoting human rights and political values on the one hand, with keeping open dialogue and cooperation with China in economic and other fields on the other.<sup>58</sup>

Yet scholars noting realistic aspects of this relationship might find it hard to understand why China has valued European expertise in sustainable development and social policy. Literature from this perspective would not sufficiently explain

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., EEAS, *33rd EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights*, Press Release (9 Dec. 2014), at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2014/20141209\\_en.htm?utm\\_source=CRN+EUROCHINA+Mailing+List&utm\\_campaign=f745e68b4e-RSS\\_EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_2814b93a1f-f745e68b4e-16990513](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20141209_en.htm?utm_source=CRN+EUROCHINA+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=f745e68b4e-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2814b93a1f-f745e68b4e-16990513) (accessed 25 Jan. 2015).

<sup>53</sup> See, *The EU and China Hold the 29th Round of Their Human Rights Dialogue*, at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/droi\\_20100715\\_4china3\\_/droi\\_20100715\\_4china3\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/droi_20100715_4china3_/droi_20100715_4china3_en.pdf) (accessed 2 Jan. 2013); EEAS, *EU Special Representative for Human Rights visits China*, Press Release (Brussels, 20 Sep. 2013), at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/130920\\_02\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/130920_02_en.pdf) (accessed 4 Oct. 2013).

<sup>54</sup> At the 32nd round of the 'EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights' in Guiyang (Guizhou) (China, 25 Jun. 2013). See *EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights*, at: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137607.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137607.pdf) (accessed 1 Sep. 2013).

<sup>55</sup> At the 30th Round of the EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights. See *EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights* (16 Jun. 2011), at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2011/20110616\\_01\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2011/20110616_01_en.htm) (accessed 15 Nov. 2012).

<sup>56</sup> See the Council of the European Union, *EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (11855/12)* (Luxembourg 25 Jun. 2012).

<sup>57</sup> We gained this observation by analysing available documents released from the 27–33 EU-China Human Rights Dialogues during (2009–2014).

<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., Mattlin, *supra* n. 25.

why China would choose to draw policy lessons from EU expertise in the social field, especially in social security and social inclusion. In fact, China has shown interest in EU models and expertise,<sup>59</sup> especially in economic and social policies.<sup>60</sup> This offers the EU opportunities to demonstrate and enhance its normative power. These observations would challenge the current argument that China's development is a threat to the EU's 'normative power'.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover the expanding and deepening ties in the social field also indicate that interpretations from a purely political perspective would run the risk of simplifying our understanding of the complexity of this bilateral relationship. While differences in the political field might result in disagreements and disputes on certain human rights issues, social development is not necessarily the source of dispute or tensions between the parties. Overstating the differences between the two sides would lead to an unnecessarily pessimistic assessment of their relations. Differences in the social field can offer opportunities for policy learning and interdependence. China's learning from the EU in the social field actually becomes a driver for continuous bilateral dialogue and cooperation. Therefore, the observations based on either political or economic aspects of bilateral relations can be different from those made on social phenomena. Research into the social dimension can in turn enrich our understanding of the complex nature of this bilateral relationship.

On the other hand, EU external governance and the NPE perspectives have explanatory power in predicting the normative efforts of the EU, which facilitated the trend of a growing social dimension in EU-China relations in the 2000s. The EU has issued a series of official papers towards China since 1995 that have demonstrated its intentions and strategies to engage China through encouraging stable reform, good governance and sustainable development.<sup>62</sup> In these official papers, the EU noted the social situation in China and urged social reforms in areas including social rights, social security and social cohesion. For instance, on social security and social cohesion, regarding the potential consequences of economic and social reform in China, the EU suggested that it could 'help China

<sup>59</sup> X. Song, *European 'Models' and Their Implications to China: Internal and External Perspectives*, 36(3) *Rev. Intl. Stud.* 755–775 (2010).

<sup>60</sup> H. Zhou, *EU Social Policy Studies in China*, 2(3) *Asia Europe Journal* 415–427 (2004).

<sup>61</sup> Kaya, *supra* n. 2.

<sup>62</sup> The EU has explicitly claimed these objectives and strategies in a series of official documents on policy towards China. See, e.g., European Commission, *Communication from the Commission: A Long Term Policy for China-Europe relations*, COM(95)279 final (1995); European Commission, *Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China*, COM(1998) 181 final (1998); European Commission, *supra* n. 51; European Commission, *EU – China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities*, COM(2006) 632 final (2006); The Council of European Union, *EU-China Strategic Partnership* (2006); European Parliament, *EU Foreign Policy towards the BRICS and Other Emerging Powers*, 2011/2111 (INI) (2012); European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution of 14 March 2013 on EU-China relations*, 2012/2137 (INI) (2013).

address<sup>63</sup> social issues such as social cohesion and social stability by providing expertise to ‘reduce side-effects of company restructuring, notably welfare reform’;<sup>64</sup> and search for ‘new models of welfare’;<sup>65</sup> and by developing cooperation to ‘reduce regional disparities, alleviate poverty and improve social cohesion’.<sup>66</sup> On social rights, in particular labour rights, the EU mentioned the lack of ‘adequate social protection including freedom of association for employees’ and the use of enforced prison labour in China.<sup>67</sup> The EU expressed its concerns about ‘China’s failure to observe internationally agreed core labour standards as set out in the relevant ILO Conventions and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work’.<sup>68</sup>

The EU has policy instruments at its disposal such as dialogue, development cooperation, trade and investment to pursue its objectives. Since 1995 it has tried to update and improve dialogues with China including the human rights dialogue and sectoral dialogues to promote China’s reform and transition. In enhancing the effectiveness of dialogue, it has also attempted to extend bilateral development cooperation projects and assistance programmes to cover issues such as social security and social development.<sup>69</sup> Chinese scholars have noted European experience/approaches in the social field and have called upon officials to learn from international expertise, particularly those models in Europe.<sup>70</sup> The EU also considered using trade to promote social norms and standards. China was the main beneficiary of the EU’s GSP system<sup>71</sup> but has never been eligible for GSP+. Recently, the EU has placed emphasis on including social standards and CSR in the topics of sustainable development in negotiations on the bilateral investment agreement.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>63</sup> European Commission (1998), *supra* n. 61, at 19.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, at 22.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, at 19.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, at 22.

<sup>67</sup> See European Commission (1995) and (1998), *supra* n. 61.

<sup>68</sup> See European Commission (2000), *supra* n. 61, at 6.

<sup>69</sup> The current major cooperation projects in social field include the EU-China Social Protection Project (2013–2018).

<sup>70</sup> See, e.g., as is Jianming Zhou, *Social Policy: Implications from Europe and Challenges Facing China* (Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press 2005) [周建明, 社会政策: 欧洲的启示与对中国的挑战(上海社会科学院出版社, 2005)]; Hong Zhou, *Foreign Social Welfare Systems* (China Social Sciences Press 2002) [周弘, 国外社会福利制度(中国社会出版社, 2002)]; Zhuoqi Wang & Huo Jia, *Conceptual Transformation in Western Social Policy and Implications for China’s Welfare Institutions Development*, 5 Soc. Res. 44–50 (1998) [王卓祺 & 获加, 西方社会政策概念转变及对中国福利制度发展的启示, 社会学研究, (5), 44–50 (1998)]; Dewen Tian, *EU Social Policy and European Integration* (China Social Sciences Press 2005) [田德文, 欧盟社会政策和欧洲一体化(社会文献出版社, 2005)].

<sup>71</sup> The Commission Regulation 1421/2013 removed China from the list of GSP beneficiaries from 1 Jan. 2015. See European Commission, *Amending Regulation (EU) No 978/2012 of the European Parliament and the Council as regards the vulnerability threshold defined in point 1(b) of Annex VII to that Regulation*, COM(2015) 596 final (9 Feb. 2015).

<sup>72</sup> See, e.g., European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution on the EU-China Negotiations for a Bilateral Investment Agreement*, 2013/2674 (RSP), B7-0436/2013 (1 Oct. 2013); European Commission, *Follow up to the European Parliament Resolution on the EU-China Negotiations for a Bilateral Investment Agreement, Adopted by the Commission on 29 January 2014*, SP(2014)61 (6 Mar. 2014).

In addition, the EU has stressed its cooperation with the UN system and other organizations. Since 2000, the ILO and other UN agencies on labour and social affairs have been involved in offering suggestions for China's economic and social policy.<sup>73</sup> The UN has had influence on China's social security, through development assistance frameworks for China and the synthesis of UN activities with China's national plans.<sup>74</sup> Since the 1990s, the ILO has offered technical assistance for China's legislation and reforms around employment, social insurance, pensions as well as promoting a decent work agenda, through signing the MoU and country programme with China.<sup>75</sup> This cooperation and the dialogue on social affairs constitute an important context and the foundation for more attention to be paid to sustainable development by China's policy-makers.

The EU has therefore exercised its normative power towards China in the social field through dialogue and cooperation. In encouraging China's economic and social reforms, it has made efforts to promote social norms and policies towards China. While notable differences between the EU and China in the social field exist, the EU has managed to exhibit and export its social security expertise to China through dialogue and cooperation projects, which are welcomed by China as it experiences rapid economic and social development.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, China's rapid economic and social development did not ultimately have a negative impact or threaten the EU's normative power. Instead, it is bringing opportunities for the EU to transfer its expertise to China.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This article found that the social dimension of the EU-China relationship has been expanding since the early 2000s. Although there has been more emphasis on employment and social security than on labour-related issues, and even though social issues have been framed more in terms of economics than human rights, the growing relevance of social aspects is certainly remarkable. It has been argued that both pragmatic and normative approaches contribute to explaining these findings. Importantly, and contrary to what has been suggested in the literature, this implies that the EU-China relationship is not merely based on pragmatic concerns. We

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<sup>73</sup> See, e.g., as is Liu, *supra* n. 15.

<sup>74</sup> These plans were designed for the periods of 2001–2005 and 2006–2010.

<sup>75</sup> In May 2001, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security on behalf of the Government of China, and the ILO signed an MOU, defining the mutually agreed objectives and priorities for cooperation within each of the four strategic objectives of the Decent Work Agenda. Since 2006, China has issued two decent work country programmes (DWCP) for 2006–2010 and 2013–2015 respectively.

<sup>76</sup> One related example is the current EU-China partnership on urbanization. See *the Joint Declaration on the EU-China Partnership on Urbanization* (3 May 2012).

have indeed identified indications of learning processes, most notably in the area of social security.

China's process of learning from European practices is facilitating exchanges and cooperation with the EU in a range of areas. Despite having achieved formidable economic development, China remains a developing country in many ways and will need expertise to address various social problems and challenges in its process of industrialization and urbanization in the coming decades. This will potentially bring more opportunities for the EU to export its established practices and models.

Further research should elaborate on the different social aspects of EU-China relations, on the various types of norm diffusion (e.g., learning, emulation and socialization), and on the different mechanisms behind these processes. In doing so, particular attention should be paid to the Chinese perspective, thereby showing China to be neither merely a passive receiver nor a fierce opponent of EU norms. It would seem more fruitful to examine the dynamic complexities of the interrelationship of both parties, considering the various ways and extents through which EU and Chinese norms interact.<sup>77</sup> A better understanding of China's perspective would help to avoid an oversimplification of its response as either rejection or acceptance of norms and policies advocated by the EU, and would further capture the truer relational nature of bilateral relations.

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<sup>77</sup> See A. Björkdahl et al., *Importing EU Norms? Conceptual Framework and Empirical Findings* (Springer Publisher 2014).

Table 1 *Word Frequency in the Joint Statements of the EU-China Summits (2001–2015)*

Summit	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th
Year (month)	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009 (May)	2009 (November)	2010	2012 (February)	2012 (September)	2013	2015 (April)
Human rights	2	6	7	6	6	11	11		4		3	3	2	5
Social reform	1	1		3										
Social development						1	2				2			1
Social progress													1	
Social policy													1	
Social challenge													1	
social field														1
Employment			1	1	1		1				2	5	3	1
Social welfare							1						2	
Social security				1			1					2	2	
Social inclusion												1	1	
Social cohesion													1	
Social assistance							1						1	
Labour					1	1	2					1		



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