

Assessing the growing role and developmental impact of China in Africa: An African perspective

African Forum and Network on Debt and Development (AFRODAD)

Introduction

Economic cooperation arrangements, in particular for promoting intra-South trade, have been a long-standing feature of relations among the countries of the South. The resurgence of South-South trade in the last decade – after it took a lull in the early 1980s due to a sharp contraction of the global economy associated with oil price hikes and the ensuing debt crisis particularly in Latin America and Africa – has seen the emergence of economies such as China.

China-Africa relations have become the subject of much speculation and controversy in recent years. In January 2006, China announced its desire to increase cooperation with African countries by issuing *China's African Policy*, a paper intended to guide relations with the continent by continuing what it calls a “non-interventionist and non-ideological strategy.” It envisions stronger ties with Africa, including increased trade, more aid, and more debt relief. During the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2006, President Hu also pledged to build a conference centre for the African Union to “support African efforts to strengthen them through unity and support the process of African integration.”¹ The 50th anniversary in 2006 of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and African countries did step up the focus on China's role in Africa, which has become the centre of serious analysis and debate as never before.

China in Africa

China's rising profile as a donor in Africa has placed infrastructure firmly on the developmental agenda. This is particularly in war-ravaged countries such as Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which, while resource-rich, are underdeveloped and need such infrastructure to revitalise their economies.

More precisely, Chinese development assistance or barter trade with Africa has been in the areas of transportation, communication, water conservancy, electricity, technology, and management cooperation. These projects are usually undertaken by Chinese state-owned enterprises in line with the “go out” strategy — driven by the Chinese government to promote the internationalisation of Chinese companies.²

Through the structure of China Exim Bank's concessional loans, substantial funding has been allocated to refurbishing and constructing infrastructure networks in many African countries. As Lucy Corkin rightly observed, China's development assistance to Africa in the form of infrastructure boasts a long history, dating back to the TAZARA railway line, completed and handed over to the Zambian government in 1976.³ China's current engagement in Africa, while more commercial in nature, has no less of a focus on infrastructure development and rehabilitation.

In 2000, a new China-Africa cooperation forum agreed on a joint economic and social program, one that is grounded on the developmentally defined doctrine “the five principles of peaceful co-existence” namely: ‘win-win’, ‘non-interference’, ‘respect for diversity’, ‘economic development’, and ‘sovereignty’. At the Sino-Africa Conference in December 2003, China cancelled US\$10 billion of debt owed by African countries, long before the G8 started debating the famous multilateral debt relief initiative (MDRI) of 2005.

As noted by Xinhua (2007), during the annual meeting of the African Development Bank (AFDB) held in May 2007, in Shanghai, the Chinese State Council approved the creation of a US\$5 billion China-Africa Development Fund, to be administered by the China Development Bank targeted at providing capital for Chinese enterprises engaged in development, investment, economic and trade activities in Africa. The fund also provides support for African countries’ agricultural, manufacturing and energy sectors, as well as support for urban infrastructure and the extractive industries.

China’s benefits

The current Sino-Africa partnership that is marked by China’s rising power in geopolitical and economic spheres has been described by some as a new case of colonialism where African countries supply their raw materials to China while the latter sends its manufactured goods to Africa under the paradigm of free trade. The alarm bells that are ringing in various policy circles, the academic community and activist groups emanate from what appears to be China’s duplication of the same social and environmentally destructive economic model already being followed by the West. The lack of benchmarks in Chinese investments and

development financing is indeed worrisome. But many are also questioning whether the concern being raised is genuinely about Africa and the welfare of the African people or is it actually about protecting Western interests in the region.

The race for Africa is certainly due in large part to the same causes of Europe’s 19th century scramble for Africa. China is transforming itself into one of the top economic and commercial powers of the world. It is out-bidding most Western contractors on major infrastructure projects, providing soft loans and other incentives to bolster its competitive advantage. The World Economic Forum of 2006 which had a panel on Chinese trade with Africa, acknowledged that China is about to become the third largest trading partner of Africa.⁴

China’s sharply accelerating domestic energy demand, combined with declining domestic petroleum production and insufficient coal output, has spurred Beijing to pursue stable overseas sources of hydrocarbon fuels. Chinese oil consumption is expected to increase by 10% per year while China’s oil and gas imports are forecast to increase from the present 33% of China’s total oil and gas demand to 60% by 2020.⁵ The China National Petroleum Corporation has invested billions of dollars to take control of Sudan’s oil production, estimated at 15,000 barrels per day and growing. In January 2006, another Chinese company agreed to pay US\$2.3 billion for a major stake in a Nigerian oil field. South Africa and Zimbabwe remain Beijing’s major sources for platinum and iron ore.⁶ Beijing is investing in many parts of Africa from an oil refinery in Sudan to ferrochrome joint project in South Africa

Meanwhile, for China, engaging Africa is a way of dealing with employment challenges at home. *Granta* journalist Lindsey Hilsum made a poignant conclusion in her article, “We Love

China”, written after a visit to West Africa. She concluded, “It seems Africa looks to China and sees success. The Chinese have lifted 400 million of their own people out of poverty in the past two decades.” All the while, no one forced the Chinese government to have elections or allow its opponents to start newspapers.

“Many African leaders would love to do to their oppositions what the Chinese did to theirs in Tiananmen Square, but if they want western aid money, they must abide by the Western conditions.”⁷ In Angola, the construction of a major highway has brought in more than 700 Chinese workers, and in Zambia the Chinese population grew from 300 in 1991 to 3,000 in 2006 as the number of Chinese projects increased.”⁸

For most Chinese investors the main reason for building up their activities in Africa is to circumvent the competition in their home market and bring down production costs to levels that are even lower than in China. In Zambia, Chinese and Indian mines are employing people on short-term contracts and, in some cases, Zambian workers are forced to sign forms before going underground to declare that they are working at their own risk so that there would be no compensation in case of an accident.⁹

Africa is increasingly an important market for Chinese exports and a good incubator for Chinese state-owned transnational corporations (TNCs). In fact according to Chinese trade data, most African economies already import more from China than they export to it. In the construction sector, Angola is a particularly favourable market for Chinese TNCs. Angola needs significant outside investment and there is relatively little competition. As a result Chinese firms have found profitable deals.

The whole Sino-Africa idea by China seems to be driven by: the need for new markets and

investment opportunities; resource security; the need for symbolic diplomacy, development assistance and cooperation; and forging strategic partnerships. It is not a secret that China is the fastest growing economy in the world with a huge appetite for cheap natural resources and raw materials and in search of markets for its growing industry and enterprises. China’s broad energy, trade, political, diplomatic, and even military interests in Africa threaten to undermine American and European efforts to promote ‘peaceful, pluralistic, and prosperous’ societies in the region.

Africa’s benefits?

Ironically, it appears that China’s appetite for natural resources has come as a blessing for Africa. After all, China’s demand for raw materials has contributed significantly to Africa’s exports. Between 1996 and 2006, the region’s exports soared from US\$86.3 billion to US\$172.4 billion – a 99.7% increase. The export of raw materials to China accounted for 21.2% or US\$18.2 billion of the mentioned total exports value. In the period from 1996 to 2005, China purchased African crude materials for an accumulated value of US\$40 billion.¹⁰

China is also gaining importance as a source of foreign direct investments (FDI). Flows of Chinese capital to excavation projects are anything but excessive compared to the massive investments of the leading global firms, but nevertheless African governments are well aware that the China is prepared to offer a lot for uncertain or small returns.

China’s demand for resources has resulted in gross domestic product (GDP) gains in many Africa countries. Sub-Saharan Africa’s real GDP increased by an average of 4.4% in 2001-2004, compared with 2.6% in the

previous three years. Africa's economy grew by 5.5% in 2005 and did even better between 2006 and 2009.¹¹ Chinese firms are building roads, rehabilitating infrastructure, and bringing in wireless communication systems where landlines have not worked especially in the rural areas. China has educated thousands of African university students and it sends hundreds of its professionals to Africa.

As a result of intensified trade links with China, Africa has enjoyed better terms of trade, increased export volumes, and higher public revenues.¹² Observers suggest that China has encroached into the traditional domain of influence and control of the African economies by the international financial institutions (IFIs) through less stringent lending terms. An important goal of the Chinese debt-relief programmes is to restore African credit-worthiness, thus encourage new investments and boost economic potential. Flexible Chinese lending terms undermine the traditional control of domestic policy and affairs of the debtor nations by the West.

There has rarely been as rapid and intense investment in African infrastructure as is going on today with the Chinese. China engages mostly in infrastructure for resource extraction, telecommunications and transport. As business is often operated on a barter basis, financial transparency is difficult to establish.¹³ Take the *Angola Mode* – where funds are not directly lent to the recipient country – in which the Chinese government would mandate a Chinese construction company, which usually receives support credit from China Exim Bank, to undertake the construction work after the approval of the recipient country. Then, in exchange for the infrastructure provision, the borrowing government will give to a Chinese

company operating in the field of natural resources (mostly oil or minerals) the right to mine natural resources through acquisition of equity stakes in the national oil company or through acquiring licenses from host state for production. This was the case in Gabon, where Sinopec gave a new lease of life to a couple of dried-up oil wells that had been abandoned by Total and Agip.

In 2006, China provided US\$2 billion to refurbish the run-down Kaduna oil refinery in Nigeria. The decision of Minmetals to start up iron ore excavation in Gabon's remote Belinga region came after the local government had already been trying for years to attract other investors. The same goes for Zambia where the Chambishi copper mine was closed in 1988 due to declining production. Apart from the direct gains, African countries also profit indirectly. China's economic growth has facilitated a better price for African of raw materials since China does not restrict itself to pay for this as per the World Trade Organization's (WTO) agreed rules.¹⁴

In regard to 'debt sustainability' issues, China has become, by a large margin, the largest creditor in the group of 'new' donors active in Africa. 'Old' donors are accusing China of "free riding" on the development efforts deployed by the international community and impairing debt sustainability in low-income countries (notwithstanding the fact that China has also granted debt relief). For this reason its competitors in the West have argued that corruption is enhanced, democracy impaired, and debt tolerance weakened by China's financing practices yet empirical research has demonstrated that China has had a positive impact on debt tolerance through stimulating exports, infrastructure, investment and GNP.¹⁵

China on governance and democracy

For most African countries that seem to be more concerned with getting rid of Western interference in their domestic issues and preserving national sovereignty, China seems to be an alternative to the Western economic prescriptions that are marred by aid conditionalities and the unnecessary foreign interference that seem to continuously disrupt their national sovereignty. China's non-interference policy in the governance and human rights issues of these countries seems to be one of the more attracting factors than anything else.¹⁶

China generally has an appalling human rights record. Over time, differences between China and full-fledged Western democracies over respect for human rights and basic political and civil rights will sharpen. For example, in September 2004, the United Nations (UN) Security Council passed Resolution 1564 which condemned the mass killing of civilians in the Darfur region but stopped short of imposing oil sanctions if Khartoum did not act to stop the killing. China abstained from the vote and threatened to veto any further move to impose sanctions.¹⁷ The Chinese government has actively advocated a Chinese-style economic development model to African countries based on a restricted market system constrained by the overarching priority of maintaining a single-party, totalitarian government. Many authoritarian African regimes, desperate to invigorate their fraying economies while maintaining a strong grip on political power, seem to find the Chinese economic development and reform model preferable to the free-market and representative-government policies promoted by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU).¹⁸

In most parts of Africa where resentment of the West prevails, China is perceived by governments

as the new "economic messiah", a new investor and new friend in a world where there is growing uneasiness over what African governments perceive to be patronizing attitudes of the West. China is actually taking great advantage of this growing resentment of the North and is presenting itself as an alternative.¹⁹ China has offered aid without insisting on onerous conditions as Western donors do. This is sweet music to African nations, who have for so long protested the hypocritical insistence by Western countries that African nations must open their markets while Western nations heavily subsidize their own agriculture sectors and maintain prohibitively high tariff barriers.

It is also true that China's interest in Africa has given African nations more options to negotiate better trade deals with Western competitors. Western corporations and governments now face competition. This can give African states more room for manoeuvre, and an alternative to accepting the dictates of the IFIs. In the past African countries had to accept the poor deals Western countries forced on them. In terms of global politics, many Africans now see China as a potential ally in a world where African interests are either ignored or dismissed by the big powers.

One area of concern expressed by African civil society and social movements in regard to Sino-Africa relations is their fear of the resurgence of the debt problem that has for years torn down schools, clinics and hospitals. China is still not transparent enough on the size and pace of commercial and preferential lending to Africa to allow tracing the China-caused debt build-up. Transparency is not in China's interest as it invites 'happy bashing'.²⁰ Although China checks on viability of the projects and insists on production of a credible repayment plan by recipient countries before any loan

advancements, these are done without need to consult civic organizations. For China, business is done on a government-to-government basis regardless of the impact it can have on ordinary citizens now or in the future.²¹ This definitely does not distinguish China from the Bretton Woods institutions' 'sin' of conspiring with African governments to assault their citizens with hardships associated with structural adjustment programs and irresponsible lending.

China's ideological support of African despots somewhat lends them international legitimacy and influence in the UN and other international arenas. This helps to blunt pressure from the Western democracies on issues such as human rights, economic openness, and political freedoms. At the same time, when it serves Chinese interests, Beijing succours would-be junta leaders and illiberal rebels who want power and would roll back political reforms in immature democracies. For example, China provides for Mugabe's military needs without interfering in his 'internal affairs' and praises Mugabe as "a man of great achievements, devoted to world peace and a good friend of the Chinese people."²² In 2004, despite the US and EU arms embargo against Zimbabwe, China sold Zimbabwe fighter aircraft and military vehicles worth US\$200 million.²³ In addition, China provided a military-strength radio-jamming device which the Harare government used to block broadcasts of anti-government reports from independent media outlets during the 2005 parliamentary election campaign.

Convergences and divergences between the international development agenda and Chinese engagement

While the expansion of China into Africa has been welcomed by a number of African countries as a less intrusive source of finance, traditional

donors and civil society groups argue that it could frustrate efforts to develop international consensus on reform, accountability and transparency, and regulate export credit agency projects that may slide Africa into a new debt trap and environmental degradation.

Chinese assistance under the framework of South-South cooperation goes beyond the concept of aid or official development assistance (ODA) as defined by traditional donors. It includes various types of economic and political cooperation, such as aid, loans, export credits, trade and investments – some of it are equivalent to the ODA concept while others are not.

China is also using debt relief as part of its aid packages to Africa. Since 2000, it has taken significant steps to cancel the bilateral debt owed by 31 African countries. In 2000, it wrote off US\$1.27 billion in debt and forgave another US\$750 million in 2003.²⁴ Debt relief, alongside low-interest loans and large-scale infrastructure projects, is one of the main types of aid to the countries cited in the studies and, therefore, an incentive to develop and nurture close ties with them. China's debt relief in Africa has been mostly the cancellation of interest free loans, and to a lesser extent, the write-off of concessional loans. By relieving these governments of the principal (and interest) payments of preferential loans, these are effectively converted into grant aid. During his visit to Mozambique in early 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao announced the cancellation of all of Mozambique's debt to China worth a total of US\$20 million.²⁵

In contrast to Western countries' aid, Chinese aid is used in concert with debt relief, trade agreements, FDI and other instruments in a package deal specifically designed to further Chinese strategic objectives in each African country engaged.²⁶ Chinese foreign aid is thus

so closely tied to the facilitation of state-directed commercial interests, particularly where Africa's mineral and energy resources are concerned, that it is often difficult to separate aid from investment in China's portfolio in Africa. Such distinctions remain difficult to establish, particularly as there is a lack of consensus among the Chinese government departments involved. Consequently, exact figures for Chinese aid to Africa remain difficult to establish.²⁷

It must be remembered, however, that African countries deal with China not from a single purpose or perspective. In cases where the government of a particular African country is democratic and developed such as with South Africa, the South-South rhetoric is often used to get genuine cooperation.²⁸ The other perspective that is certainly appealing to Africa's more repressive regimes is the idea that the Chinese model represents a refutation of the view that democracy is an essential precondition for development.²⁹ China's re-entry into the region, especially its "no questions asked" approach runs counter to the whole notion of participatory democracy and in particular to the letter and spirit of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which seeks to promote transparency, accountability and good governance

Most African regimes threatened by internal dissent and external pressure to reform, or even slammed by sanctions from the West, normally find a safe refuge in China-Africa relations. For this reason, most human rights groups and advocates for good governance and democracy view with suspicion the role that China seems to be playing in supporting regimes that are regarded to be undemocratic. It reminds many of the days of the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural

adjustment programs where many citizens who tried to revolt against unpopular economic policy were hindered from doing so as the two institutions would back the African governments in suppressing local dissent. Money was used to pay the army or security agencies to manipulate or control them.

The case of Sani Abacha in his last days of power in Nigeria is a case in point. Of late, the Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe who is currently reeling from Western sanctions has declared a look at East Policy: "We have set our back at the West where the sun sets and have now looked East where the sun rises."³⁰ The Sudanese government has had backing from China in the midst of human rights and economic justice groups calling for sanctions and UN Security Council action on the regime. Thus, China's rising profile in Africa as a development partner has been controversial, not only because of the speed with which China has emerged as a significant donor to Africa, but also because China's aid policies and priorities are not necessarily in line with those of the traditional aid organisations.³¹

Recommended policy shifts

- African governments need to channel the windfall revenues from export commodities into developing local capacity to ensure that the opportunity for infrastructural and economic rejuvenation is seized. Policy frameworks to facilitate the emergence of a private sector that can stimulate economic diversification are required, rather than maintaining a state-led economy reliant on a single export commodity.
- China is a state actor driven by national interest, and it is important for African

states to harness growing commercial and political ties with China in order to leverage them for sustainable domestic growth.

- Another important issue that needs to be addressed by developing countries, in the context of efforts to improve South-South cooperation in trade and economic integration, is the emergence of new trade blocs that for the first time include countries from both the North and the South. The implications of these mega-trade blocs for sub-regional and regional cooperation among developing countries in particular, and for South-South cooperation in economic and trade matters in general, need to be carefully examined, as they are likely to be far-reaching and profound.³²
- If the relationship between China and Africa is to enhance sustainable development and participatory democracy, the following key issues are worth considering:
 - i. Both the Chinese and African governments must be engaged on issues of human rights, environmental protection, and impacts on communities of joint development projects, among others. At the same time, China must be pushed to follow international conventions and universal standards.
 - ii. The international community needs to continue to engage China especially on its non-interventionist and “don’t ask questions” approach to Sino-Africa relations. China will be well-advised to share common loan criteria and to cooperate on recommendations for a potential *Debt Transparency Initiative* involving both official and private lenders.
 - iii. There is no citizens’ involvement in the whole scheme of Sino-African relations. As a crucial step for increasing public awareness of the threats and the opportunities presented by China’s engagement with Africa, there needs to be greater awareness amongst civil society organizations, media workers and others. Only when civil society organizations are able to engage in a dialogue with their own states will a wider public discussion be possible about the nature of the deals being made between African governments and China.
 - iv. There is a need to balance power relations. Africa is always depicted in problem-solving meetings as in a subordinate position. There is a need to reframe relations and give it a more people-centered emphasis.
 - v. There is a need for different levels of exchange programs and interaction between Chinese and African societies to build familiarity and harmonious relations. These could include: the promotion of sports, competition and cultural activities; university to university linkages; joint field missions to projects; side events to annual meetings; and Sino-African conventions. The exchanges and planning will identify possible arenas and strategies for intervention and influence from which to build future cooperative and solidarity endeavours between Chinese civil society and international groups.
 - vi. Civil society organizations (CSOs) from both sides need to deepen

knowledge, understanding and sharing of resources (this implies sharing examples, experiences and lessons with peers). There is a need for partnerships and programmes focusing on learning more about how CSOs influence policy processes, improving information and communication activities, etc.

- vii. Push African government to be more responsive to citizens' needs and uphold their interests. There is a need to avoid the exploitative problems that Africa experienced with many institutions of global governance like the WB and the IMF. There is therefore an urgent need to ensure that they are not repeated in Sino-African relations. At the same time, the historical relationship of China with Africa must be well-understood, owned and driven by citizens.
- viii. The African Union has a centre in Beijing, but there is no effective non-

government organization (NGO) liaison desk. In this regard the African Union must be encouraged to set up one.

In all these recommendations, one must hastily say there are some major challenges. These include: What can be done to change the relationship between the Chinese government and the NGOs in a positive manner? Will China change its foreign and trade policies and can the NGOs push them to do so?

China's engagement with Africa is driven by myriad factors including the need for new markets and investment opportunities. But the question of getting indebted to China in the long process raises serious questions on how accountable and transparent the cooperation is. There must be further research and critical evaluation of the role of both the West in general and China in particular, as well as the implications of their policies on resources, economies and societies in order to protect Africa from yet another scramble.

The African Network and Forum on Debt and Development (AFRODAD) is a civil society organization born of a desire to secure lasting solutions to Africa's mounting debt problem which has impacted negatively on the continent's development process. AFRODAD aspires for an African and global society that is just (equal access to and fair distribution of resources), respects human rights and promotes popular participation as a fundamental right of citizens (Arusha Declaration of 1980). AFRODAD's mission is to secure policies that will redress the African debt based on a human rights system.

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