

The Dragon's Deal: Sino-African Cooperation in Education

MILTON O. OBAMBA

Milton O. Obamba is research associate, African Network for the Internationalization of Education, Eldoret, Kenya. E-mail: M.O.Obamba@Leedsmet.ac.uk.

China and Africa have a long tradition of bilateral cooperation. The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 has dramatically revolutionized Sino-African cooperation. It is an intergovernmental agency established jointly by China and African countries to provide a plan for strengthening bilateral cooperations between China and 50 African member countries. The emergence of FOCAC can be more accurately interpreted as part of the increasing institutionalization and intensification of Sino-African relations, at a time of deepening multilateral interactions, although critiques have intensified simultaneously. Since the establishment of FOCAC, trade volumes have significantly increased from US\$10 billion in 2000 to US\$160 billion in 2012. Similarly, the levels of China's official development assistance to Africa have also increased significantly, rapidly rising from US\$5 billion in 2006 to US\$20 billion in 2012. In short, China's cooperation with Africa runs deep and straddles a vast spectrum of strategic, economic, and sociopolitical spheres. To focus on the development, character, and scope of Sino-African cooperation in the field of education, the article is based on an analysis of policy documents produced by

the Chinese government and FOCAC. The aim is to contribute to a more systematic characterization of China's bilateral education cooperation with Africa.

HUMAN CAPACITY AND ACADEMIC MOBILITY

The earliest form of educational cooperation between China and Africa consisted of relatively small-scale and diffuse patterns of exchanges involving the outbound mobility of African students and inbound movement of Chinese teachers during the 1950s and 1960s. This pattern provided small numbers of Chinese government scholarships to African students. In the 1970s, short-term training programs in China were established for African professionals in various fields. The First FOCAC Action Plan (2000) reaffirmed China's commitment to increase the number of government scholarships and inbound Chinese teachers to Africa. Significantly, the Action Plan also established the African Human Resource Development Fund, to provide a more coordinated mechanism for training African professionals. Over the last decade, the volumes of Chinese scholarships and professional capacity opportunities have continued to increase. Scholarships, for instance, have grown from 2,000 in 2003 to 6,000 per year in 2012. This recent upsurge in Chinese initiatives in Africa has raised concerns regarding the transparency of criteria applied to training opportunities across all the 50 countries in Africa. Considering the vastness and diversity of the African continent, China's approach of an undirected continent-wide cooperation has triggered criticism around China's priorities and effective development cooperation of that scale.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Both within and outside the FOCAC framework, infrastructure development support has remained a significant agenda within China's engagement with Africa, for many decades. The third FOCAC summit contained Beijing's pledge to build 100 rural schools in Africa, while the fourth summit provided the construction of 50 China-Africa friendship schools and providing research equipment to African researchers returning from China. Some of the flagship Chinese educational infrastructure projects in Africa include the Ethio-China Polytechnic in Addis Ababa and the University of Science and Technology in Malawi. China's spectacular infrastructure projects have been criticized as a way for permitting corruption and political patronage by the ruling African elite rather than as initiatives to deliver sustainable development for the populations. However, China's role in infrastructure funding is vital for Africa, since traditional Western donors no longer support such initiatives and African governments also face severe financial constraints.

ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS

Although mutual academic mobility has been a significant feature of Sino-African educational cooperation since the 1950s, there has been little opportunity for direct interinstitutional engagement. This is because Sino-African engagement is predominantly engineered through intergovernmental bureaucracies, without scope for the participation of nonstate stakeholders. Interinstitutional cooperation is therefore a relatively recent and groundbreaking

development. The 2006 Beijing Action Plan provided the first attempt to create institutional-level collaboration through the establishment of Confucius Institutes, although these are also largely organized at the intergovernmental level—as part of China’s global “soft power.” The 20+20 cooperation program established 2009 is another significant initiative. This program entails the launch of structured one-to-one partnerships between 20 Chinese and 20 African tertiary education institutions, to promote capacity building and sustainable development.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The Fourth and Fifth FOCAC Plans of Action issued in 2009 and 2012 both portray a radical shift in the character, scope, and discourse underlying the emerging trajectory of Sino-African engagement. These blueprints demonstrate the emergence of a distinctive and dominant discourse of knowledge, science and technology, and its linkages to sustainable development and poverty reduction in Africa. Under this remit, China pledged to provide 100 postdoctoral fellowships for Africans and conduct 100 joint-research demonstrations. Significantly, the guides established three serious programs that are particularly critical to the emerging Sino-African development paradigm. These include China-Africa Technology Partnership Program, China-Africa Research and Exchange Program, and the China-Africa Think Tank Forum. All these flagship cooperation programs are generally focused on joint research and providing a range of initiatives to strengthen the capacity of African countries for science and technology development, policymaking, management, and technology transfer.

A new technical cooperation focuses on areas that are critically connected to people's livelihoods—including health-care, environment, agriculture, renewable energy, and water development.

This trajectory denotes a Chinese shift toward poverty reduction and sustainable development, as opposed to the traditional preoccupation with grand infrastructure funding. The Think Tanks Forum represents a new focus on providing the scientific backbone and gravitas, required to strengthen the knowledge-base and robustness of Sino-African cooperation in a complex world. However, China's growing dominance in Sino-Africa cooperation is widely questioned for reproducing new patterns of dependency.

CONCLUSION

Chinese assistance for education development in Africa has evolved over many decades and is currently quite diverse and institutionalized in its scope and architecture. More recently, there is a distinct and unprecedented shift toward strengthening science and technology capacity and learning how knowledge can be more directly applied to improve people's livelihoods in Africa. This obligation suggests that Chinese development assistance may be a good force in achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Africa. However, these potential gains can be severely threatened or eroded if China reproduces the same patterns of dependency associated with the contemporary North-South cooperation. The spheres of Sino-African development cooperation should be expanded to incorporate nonstate actors from both sides—in order to create

sufficient capacity and synergies for implementing Sino-African development engagement.