

China and the politics of development in Africa



Diana Cammack

‘While Western nerves may jangle at China’s growing and muscular presence in Africa, the 48 African heads of state who shot off to Beijing to see what was on offer have fewer qualms’

It is no wonder that African leaders visiting Beijing for the ‘Third Ministerial Meeting of Forum on China-Africa’ were inspired to adopt the ‘Beijing model’ of development. After all, 30 years ago China’s GDP per capita was a third of Zambia’s and today it is three times larger. Three decades of economic growth have resulted from China becoming a ‘developmental state’, with a strong state apparatus that has established its own pragmatic policies, ‘shaping [a] national consensus of modernisation’, ensuring stability, learning the lessons of others (e.g., the role of the market), setting its own sequencing and priorities, and following a gradual approach to reform.

In the same period, the economies of most African states stagnated because, with a few exceptions (such as Botswana, South Africa and Mauritius), they were without leaders who were able to design and steer a national development course. Developmental states require effective public institutions, stable and legitimate regimes, a desire to innovate, and they feature an elite whose corrupt practices are less predatory than productive. Governance was therefore one factor among several others, such as the international economic climate, that slowed African growth.

With a burgeoning economy in need of raw materials, China has now fully engaged with Africa (as well as Oceania, Latin America and Asia). In addition to seeking minerals, timber and oil it has been building roads and hospitals, investing in a broad range of sectors, becoming a trading partner, and a ‘brother-friend’ that provides soft loans and other incentives. Recently it has likened its activities in Africa to bringing ‘wood to the snow’, recognising that large parts of the continent lack capital, skills, and markets to develop.

China is also stepping up its role as a donor. At the Beijing meeting last week it announced it is doubling its assistance to Africa by 2009 – providing \$5bn in loans and credits to Africans

and establishing a \$5bn development fund to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa and to support them. It also intends to cancel debts, train 15,000 Africans, provide scholarships, send agricultural experts and youth workers, build schools and clinics, give preferential customs treatment, establish trade and economic zones, and provide drugs.

As a ‘second-generation’ donor, China can avoid the mistakes of the past made by Western donors. One such lesson, Western donors surmise, is that ‘good governance’ should be at the heart of any aid programme. But even after drawing this conclusion, it took ten years for donors to stop treating governance as a technical ‘management’ issue and to prioritise politics and human rights. Western donors still wrestle with how to encourage the ‘right’ kind of politics to underpin development – for example the kind that encourages aid-recipient governments to find the ‘political will’ to reform.

But some lessons are better understood. These include an awareness that overloading aid-recipient governments with demands for change is unproductive. Instead, they argue that promoting ‘good enough’ governance by paring down the list of reforms, is more effective. Donors working in Fragile States – those prone to conflict and weak governance – have discovered that institution building and strengthening are fundamental to helping unstable countries. The Western focus on corruption has emerged from donors’ experience of ‘neopatrimonial’ states and the central role that commingling of public-private finances and patronage play in hindering development. They have also recognised that as political and economic actors they have sometimes behaved in ways that have slowed progress. Thus, they forged an agreement in March 2005 in Paris to work in a more coordinated, accountable and harmonised manner with one another and with aid-recipient states. Ways of doing that are still being worked out.

In the meantime, Africans have struggled to establish governance and human rights institutions because they have had to cope with imperialists, dictators, poverty and war for generations. Good governance, human rights and democracy are now widely seen as a cornerstone of long-term and sustainable development. The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) for example provides a strategic framework built on principles that include 'good governance as a basic requirement for peace, security and sustainable political and socio-economic development'. Then there are the international agreements which Africans support, such as the 'Equator Principles', the 'Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative', the 'OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises' and its related guidance on 'conflict resources' and promoting a corruption-free environment. Other measures to foster good governance embrace the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, with its initiatives on women's rights and the Court on Human and People's Rights. These initiatives and others are supported by Western donors because they promote stability and economic growth, while ensuring the more effective use of their aid.

While Western nerves may jangle at China's growing and muscular presence in Africa, the 48 (out of 52) African heads of state who shot off to Beijing to see what was on offer have fewer qualms. Western development actors have much they can share in terms of lessons learnt from the past – so it's time to talk. While Western agencies are keen to discuss the best ways to tackle the most intransigent problems in underdeveloped states, Westerners and Africans have a great deal to learn from the Chinese about what makes a state developmental. Let the dialogue begin!

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