China's Aid to Africa: Implications for civil society

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1. Introduction

China has recently become economically strong enough to significantly increase its presence as a donor of overseas development aid (ODA), a situation evoking both fear and interest among established aid actors. China's aid policy has been criticised for overtly supporting Chinese energy strategies and diplomatic goals. Its disbursement modalities risk undermining African capacity development and governance. China has even been implicated in 'the new scramble for Africa's resources'.[2] On the other hand, its Africa policy claims an ethos of solidarity and respect with developing countries, and provides all-round packages that combine investment with aid.

This paper provides an overview of China's ODA to Africa for civil society organisations (CSOs). Its scope spans Chinese aid, investment, trade and diplomatic ties, as the three are closely linked. In as far as CSOs – and development NGOs especially – work within the 'aid chain', changes to the aid landscape have implications for the ways in which NGOs function. Some of the most thought-provoking areas that China's engagement in Africa raises include:

- Governance and civil society space – finding the balance between an aid donor's role in supporting good governance and structural stability, and non-interference in internal affairs,
- Questioning empowerment, rights-based approaches and sustainability as central tenets of ODA
- Economic development: is the nature of Chinese investment and aid conducive to long-term economic progress?

2. Chinese aid to Africa: volumes, modalities, institutions

China has had development cooperation ties to Africa since the 1960s, with education exchanges and infrastructure construction based on ideology, solidarity and establishing cold war allies in rivalry with Soviet communism. Many of these projects were well received, such as the emblematic Dar es Salaam – Kapiri Mposhi 'Tazara' Railway. Tazara linked Zambia to a port city and allowed that country to maintain the blockade against Rhodesia and minority-rule South Africa. The Tazara railway is still used today by traders and travellers. Meanwhile, China's relationship to Africa has changed as much as the political landscape that made the railway a necessity. Africa has featured significantly in China's 'Going Out Strategy' and gestures such as Jiang Zemin's tour of state visits in 1996 signalled that China is serious

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[2] Melber et al 2007:5

about Africa.[3] Today, while small traders use the train to transport buckets of Zambian vegetables to Tanzanian markets, the Chinese government shifts billions of dollars in aid flows to the continent.

China's 'Go Global' or 'Going Out' strategy encourages Chinese enterprises to invest abroad. It has been made possible by an increasing accumulation of capital in China after its 1978 market-friendly economic reforms and high growth rates. President Jiang Zemin visited five African countries in 1996, formulating the basis of cooperation to: 'maintain traditional friendship and push for new development of Sino-African relations; maintain mutual assistance and benefit and promote common prosperity for China and Africa; maintain close co-operation and protect the interests of developing nations.'[4] The first Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was held in 2000, and in 2004 President Hu Jintao visited Morocco, Nigeria and Kenya 'in a bid to inject new energy into South–South co-operation'.[5] After Hu's tour and the second FOCAC in 2006, China announced its official Africa policy, including aid and investment. This is discussed in further detail below, but first an overview of the mechanisms of Chinese aid is appropriate.

Africa is the largest recipient of Chinese aid[6], receiving 44% of annual aid flows.[7] This includes all 53 countries on the African continent, but with Angola, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia and Ethiopia leading the list according to Chinese analysts.[8] The exact volume of Chinese aid is unclear, as it is administered in conjunction with export promotion and investment by several ministries[9]. Figure 1 below shows some current estimates of aid levels (in yellow), alongside potential 2009 figures (in orange) and current British and US aid (in blue) for comparison.

Lancaster (2007) estimates Chinese aid at US$1,5-2 billion annually, of which between a third and half goes to Africa - putting the African figure at between $500 million and $1 billion annually. Other estimates of Chinese ODA to Africa range from $2 billion in 2004, to $1.3-1.4 billion in 2007.[10] As a comparison, the OECD's aid statistics database cites that the UK and US disbursed $3.7 billion and $4.5 billion respectively in 2005.[11] [12] Hence, with China having promised to double its amount of aid to Africa by 2009 (taking it to between $1 and $2 billion) it is approaching levels of aid similar to the major donors.[13]

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[3] Presentation by Chris Alden, University of Oxford, February 2008
[4] Yu Wensheng, China Daily 24.4.2006
[5] Ibid
[6] For this paper, we use the OECD's definition of ODA: 'Official Development Assistance (ODA) is defined as those flows to developing countries and multilateral institutions provided by official agencies, including state and local governments, or by their executive agencies, each transaction of which meets the following tests: i) it is administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as its main objective; and ii) it is concessional in character and conveys a grant element of at least 25 per cent.'
[7] Alden 2007:6
[8] Davies 2007:12
[9] Lancaster 2007: 2
[10] Davies 2007: 46
[11] http://stats.oecd.org/wbos/default.aspx?DatasetCode=TABLE%202A This includes aid from multilateral institutions, non-OECD donors as well as traditional bilateral donors.
[12] Hudson 2006: 1
[13] Analysts like Reality of Aid might argue whether all of China's aid flows – comprising largely of export credits, technical assistance and tied aid – should be counted as ODA, according to criterion i) above. Such distinctions may diminish the amount of Chinese aid.

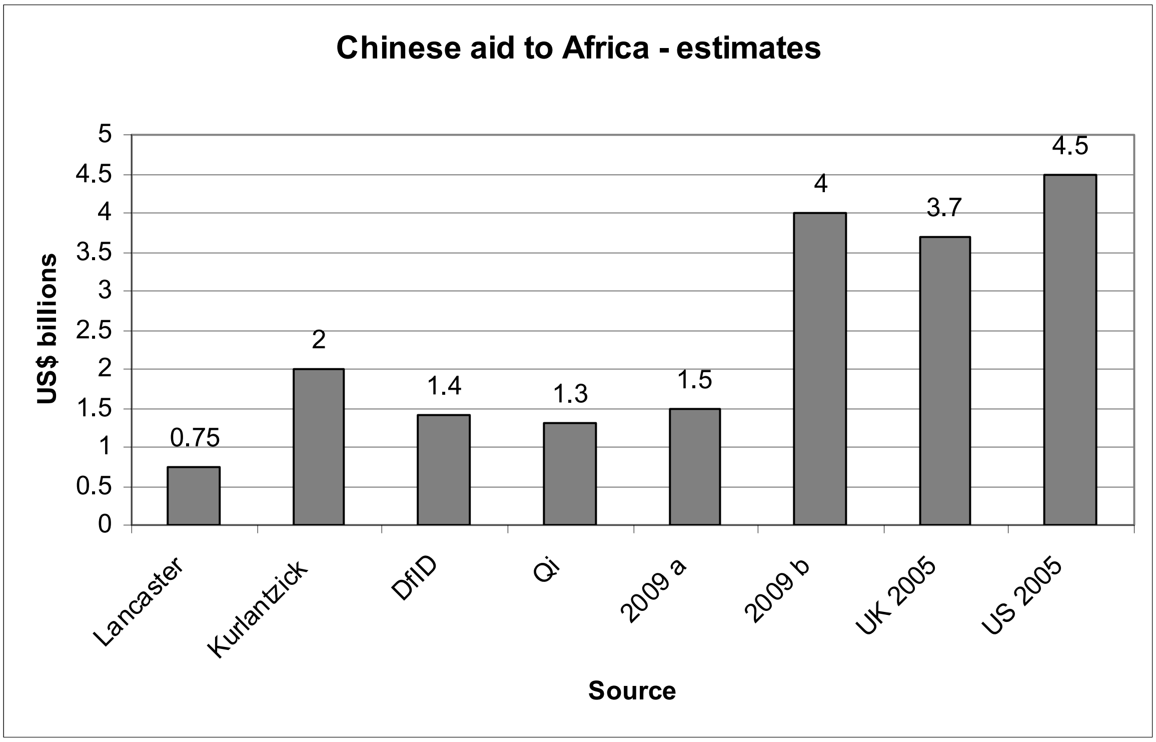

Figure 1: Estimates of Chinese aid to Africa at present (yellow), estimates for 2009 (orange), and current US and UK figures for comparison (blue). 2009 a and b show a doubling of the lowest and highest current estimates respectively.

The language of Chinese aid does not use terms like poverty eradication, ownership and partnership, or democratisation and voice that characterise the bulk of western donor development discourse of the past decades. Western aid may or may not have had a beneficial effect on African economic development and integrity, but some of its more recent discourse about human development is an improvement that China could benefit from taking on board. Nonetheless, China's credentials as a development actor are based on creating an astonishing economic turnaround at home and on solidarity between developing nations. This will be discussed further in section 5.

As part of the Go Global strategy, Chinese ODA unambiguously follows Chinese commercial, strategic energy and diplomatic interests: ‘In financial terms, by far the most significant dimension of Chinese engagement in developing countries is the multi-billion dollar agreements it has concluded in the energy sector, especially in Africa. Indeed, Chinese aid follows investment.[14] Other economic activities and assistance pale in comparison.’[15] Based on strategic energy considerations, this includes bidding for oil extraction contracts in, for example Nigeria and Angola, offering additional transport and pipeline construction in return for the concessions.[16]

[14] Fraser, personal communication, January 2008
[15] Tjonneland et al 2006:vi
[16] Alden 2007: 4

Some characteristic features of Chinese aid are:

- Modalities: grants, investment/tied aid, concessional loans, and government guarantees for investment. China has also cancelled African foreign debts in 2003 and provided low-tariff market access for exports from Africa's least-developed countries[17]
- It is official Chinese policy to disburse aid in ways that benefits China economically, i.e. tied aid in kind, technical assistance and infrastructure construction for initiatives that favour Chinese investment.[18]
- Delivery: much Chinese aid is delivered through private-sector or state-owned enterprises. There are few, if any, mentions of Chinese social development projects in the available literature.

There is no Chinese 'development constituency' – development line ministry, large overseas NGOs or equivalent pressure groups – pushing for poverty reduction goals in ODA[19]. Establishing such a constituency could do much to improve the effects of Chinese aid. There are signs that China is revising some of its aid practice according to existing models. For example, there is a volunteer corps sending members of the Communist Youth League overseas to undertake capacity building work[20], and Chinese civil servants working with ODA are undertaking study visits to longer-established development departments. Chinese aid also includes scholarships for training in China, medical assistance and concessional loans[21]. With a new government expected in 2008, a development ministry may be on the cards.[22]

China's economic presence in Africa has, however, been widely met with 'panic discourse' from western commentators.[23] Beijing-based analysts China Development Brief argue that this has less to do with China's aid flows, and borrows its tone more from the worldwide anxiety sparked by China's growing economic muscle.[24]

Yet, in a telling indication of priorities, Chinese ODA currently comes mainly from the Ministry of Commerce, MOFCOM. Within the Ministry of Commerce, there are said to be less than 100 civil servants dedicated to ODA administration, so these officials are severely overstretched by their expanding workload.[25]

The initiative and funding for development projects can also come in parallel through Chinese embassies, who propose projects to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[26] The Export-Import Bank (Eximbank) has a more significant aid role, administering export credits and foreign direct investment (FDI) for aid-disbursing private enterprises. Eximbank's activity raises concern because of reported abuses – e.g. in terms of environmental impact and social standards – in projects financed by it[27], more on which in the section below.

[17] Ibid:10
[18] Alden 2007: 6
[19] Lancaster 2007: 4
[20] Alden 2007: 7
[21] Lancaster 2007: 1
[22] Lancaster 2007: 6
[23] See e.g. Obiorah's (2007) overview of media coverage.
[24] Sautman & Hairong cited in China Development Brief 2007(A relationship still in the making)
[25] Lancaster 2007: 5
[26] Lancaster 2007: 4
[27] Alden 2007:7

The structure of these aid channels is conducive to funding large, capital-intensive development projects. Indeed, Chinese aid is often disbursed through state-owned corporations and joint ventures. Much of it consists of construction and engineering (providing the contracted firms with opportunities for making further business links on the continent in addition to the aid contract)[28], mostly focusing on the energy sector but also logging, agriculture, railways, manufacturing and telecommunications.[29]

November 2006 saw the third Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the main Sino-African cooperation forum, where political leaders and business representatives meet. At the 2006 summit, President Hu Jintao promised substantial new preferential loans, export credits and FDI funding for Africa, in addition to promising to double Chinese aid to Africa by 2009. Sino-African relationships have been criticised for bypassing multilateral forums. China is unlikely to enter non-duplication and basket funding arrangements[30] with other donors in the short term, potentially detracting from aid harmonisation efforts. However, think tank IPPR point out that China has not been invited to other potentially productive coordination forums such as the Africa Partnership Forum (a group of bilateral and multilateral donors and African governments), and that the European Commission's China partnership strategy provides another overlooked coordination tool.[31]

Considering the wider Paris Declaration principles (harmonisation, alignment, mutual accountability, ownership and managing for results), China seems to foster 'government ownership' rather than 'citizen ownership' and channels for mutual accountability are unclear. It does, however, follow the principles of aid alignment, favouring recipient country priorities.

3. Eximbank and governance implications

Eximbank's funding practices raise concern as they do not conform to OECD best practice standards – e.g. in terms of environmental impact and social standards.[32] Such tied aid through Chinese companies makes it difficult to scrutinise the aid flows to check against corruption or to uphold environmental standards[33], giving rise to accountability concerns.[34] There are hard-hitting reports of Chinese companies violently displacing Sudanese people who compete with use of water resources claimed by the Chinese[35]; of buying the Zambian copper mine at Chambishi and running it with the worst labour- environmental- and safety standards of all foreign investors[36]; and of colluding with the Sudanese government in its repression of the South.[37] On the other hand, Chinese scholars state that aid in kind is less susceptible to misuse and corruption[38] and Chinese investment guidelines stress complying with local law.[39] Such statements can be interpreted with scepticism.

[28] Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2(5) 2006
[29] Alden 2007:4 or 6
[30] An aid coordination tool where donors pool their funds to specific sectors (e.g. education, health) in a developing country instead of running many parallel funding streams.
[31] Wild & Mepham 2006: 66
[32] Alden 2007:7 – examples include the Kimberley Process for diamonds and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI).
[33] China Development Brief 2006 (Growing Critique)
[34] Open Democracy quoted in China Development Brief 2006 (Growing Critique)
[35] In the Merowe dam project – Askouri 2007: 82
[36] Fraser & Lungu 2007: 48
[37] Askouri 2007:73
[38] Davies 2007
[39] Marks 2007: 5

Chinese ODA enjoys high recipient ownership - as far as ‘ownership’ can be interpreted as the incumbent government’s priorities. In contrast to donors following country strategies, Chinese aid is disbursed on a request basis, often initiated by recipient governments and Chinese firms together.[40] Eximbank finance is flexible and ‘responsive to African governing elite needs’[41], indeed, China has lent generously to the governments of Burma, Sudan and Zimbabwe.[42] One explanation is that China is not deliberately seeking out fragile states and repressive governments, but rather that the less globally competitive Chinese enterprises are to some extent forced to invest in countries that are too high-risk for better-established western corporations[43] – expanding Chinese enterprises are seeking out investment targets with lower margins out of necessity. With aid following investment, this would lead to aid partnerships with unstable and internationally condemned countries.

British think-tank IPPR point to the need for the international community to hold the Chinese regime to account for human rights violations – like any other country.[44] Similarly, civil society voices should not shirk from ‘criticising equally’ - condemning reprehensible aid-related practices that have been used by all donor powers to a greater or lesser extent.
One of the main points stressed in Fahamu’s volume, *African perspectives on China in Africa* (2007), is that, to keep its aid presence sustainable, China needs to look beyond the ruling elites and work with African civil society. There is protest brewing in China too against the increasing polarisation and immiseration that follow from the economic boom[45] – providing potential Chinese grassroots counterparts for African protests.

4. China’s effect on Africa in global markets

China engages in trade, investment and aid in Africa. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that in economic terms, the effect of China on global markets by itself affects African economies more than China’s direct presence on the continent. China’s (and India’s) economic acceleration and demand for raw materials has pushed up commodity prices worldwide; benefiting African mineral, oil and timber exporters[46] who now receive higher world market prices. China also imports African products[47] – a welcome change from the near-monopsony of traditional export markets. The product mix of these exports leans towards extractive industries and commodities. These are sectors that may bring Africa foreign exchange and more bargaining power in world markets. However, they are associated with increasing inequalities and low innovation and value-added levels; are unlikely to support related spin-off industries; are capital-intensive and polluting, and raise the risk of ‘Dutch disease’.[48] Hence, although this export boom is welcome in terms of foreign exchange earnings and economic growth it is not of the most constructive type in the long- or even medium term.

The OECD’s Development Centre recommends that African economies benefiting from higher commodity prices and trade with China should use the windfall gains to support

[40] Lancaster 2007: 4
[41] Alden 2007:7
[42] China Development Brief 2006 as above
[43] Fraser, personal communication, January 2008
[44] Wild & Mepham 2006: 64
[45] Marks 2007: 12
[46] Goldstein et al 2006
[47] Ibid
[48] Dutch disease – a situation where one high-value export drives up the value of the currency so that other, less valuable exports suffer.

labour-intensive manufacturing[49] and diversify their industrial makeup; initiatives with the highest potential to improve peoples' living standards. Aside from consumer goods, China also offers a source of cheap capital goods that benefit African industry and could underpin the development of such a labour-intensive manufacturing base – to the extent that African industry is able to compete against Chinese imports and world market dominance.

African urban consumers also benefit from cheap Chinese imports[50] – the downside being that these imports compete with domestic African consumer goods. It is debatable whether African consumer goods (outside of a few 'economic powerhouse' economies) have really been a viable manufacturing option for a long time, but Chinese imports are certainly not supporting the development of light manufacturing capacity. Worldwide, too, China is increasingly dominating the production of labour-intensive, low-value consumer goods which have traditionally been the first step towards developing a manufacturing base on which to build a country's economic development. African countries may find their manufacturing capacity undermined, their resources depleted and their export market niches filled by China.

5. Non-interference, governance and civil society space

Non-interference in internal African affairs is a central part of Chinese foreign policy language and underpins its appeal to recipient governments. The tenets of China's Africa policy are 'sincerity, equality and mutual benefit, solidarity and common development'[51], using language that stresses developing-country solidarity, respect, peace and friendship. Whether this is manifest in reality as well as in policy is a different matter – commentator Ali Askouri, for example, accuses Chinese companies of 'opportunistic involvement with dictatorships'.[52]

The international image China is fostering is one of a privileged relationship of south–south cooperation, with shared problems of poverty and the ability to overcome those problems.[53] And in addition to the mercenary flavour of Chinese aid, it contains an aspect of authentic south–south solidarity that gives it potency and clout. China has been a poor country for a long time and has recently reduced the number of its population living below the poverty line by hundreds of millions. Without any assistance from multilateral financing institutions, structural adjustment, good governance or other external development interventions, it has combined free market mechanisms with strict government control to achieve its awesome growth rates[54] – albeit at a heavy price of accelerating social inequality and environmental degradation.

Although African internal markets are far too small to replicate the Chinese economic success path, its example of autonomous non-western development is empowering and compelling. And as Sautman and Hairong[55] point out, the infrastructure built by Chinese companies is a significant resource for wider African industrialisation and economic development. Building the basis for industrial development may well be a more constructive contribution to Africa than the western focus on social development – in a changing economic world order, Africa's industrialisation and endogenous growth may have a new chance of developing.

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[49] Ibid
[50] Ibid
[51] China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, section I 2006
[52] Askouri 2007: 82
[53] Lancaster 2007: 5, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2(4) 2006
[54] Alden 2007:14
[55] Unpublished paper 2007, cited in China Development Brief 2007 (A relationship still in the making)

On the other hand, as with other international actors, Chinese economic assistance is a carrot for supporting China in multilateral forums: in the White Paper on China's African Policy, the formulation is 'China will strengthen coordination with Africa in the UN and other multilateral systems by supporting each others' just demand and reasonable propositions'.[56] One such example is African support for Chinese positions in the UN General Assembly.[57] The most obvious Chinese concern on the international arena is the diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan, clearly stated in the White Paper[58]. In this sense, China's support for African development has the potential to influence African behaviour on international arenas, even though Taiwan is the only issue China is championing at present.

China's political discourse provides a contrast to western dominance and 'democratisation' and 'neoliberal' ideology. The dominant donor institutions have long used their advantage to laud the combination of political and economic liberalisation as the only possible model for reaching western levels of prosperity – choosing to ignore the significant role of state direction in early stages of economic development in the west as well as in East Asia. China's economic and political space has always been far more tightly state-controlled than in western donor countries but its economy has nonetheless grown enormously. Hence, China provides a double-edged example: while demonstrating a success story of economic growth without an explicit neoliberal ideology, with some concern for sharing the fruits of development, it also shows economic growth without civil liberties or participatory democracy.

The appeal of this 'development without democracy' has been noted by several African civil society analysts, who are wary that the Chinese example (undermining the much-lauded link between development and political liberalisation) will be used to the political advantage of incumbent African governments.[59] China's approach to development excludes, and hence implicitly discredits the notion that an autonomous, vibrant civil society is central to development.

6. Recommendations for civil society advocacy

China's aid presence (as opposed to its commercial presence) in Africa is important to CSOs who work in areas such as budget monitoring, aid policy and democratisation. African governments' relatively free access to loans, investment and aid from China means decreased reliance on other income sources, such as traditional donor aid and internal tax revenue. Hence, inasmuch as funding buys accountability, government accountability may shift away from donors (providing aid) and African citizens (who pay taxes, albeit in far lower volumes than aid donors and foreign investors). Pressure from traditional donor conditionality – which has at times favoured civil society as an aspect of good governance and democratisation – may lessen. Hence, CSOs may need new avenues for putting advocacy pressure on the Chinese to prevent their aid funding repressive governments, damaging industry and resource extraction, or socially divisive 'mal-development'.[60]

Although African civil society has benefited from a privileged position in western donor funding, a more independent position is preferable for African civil society to build their

[56] China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, section III 2006
[57] Alden 2007: 11
[58] China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, section III 2006
[59] Obiorah 2007
[60] INTRAC would argue that one of African civil society's first tasks is to hold their own governments to account. This is to a large extent separate from civil society's role in the aid chain.

integrity and legitimacy when tackling problems at home. Therefore, decreased western donor influence proportional to Chinese influence (which would imply proportionally lower levels of civil society funding) can be seen as a blessing in disguise: a chance for African CSOs to disassociate themselves from their reputation as donor-led government antagonists. Independence from all non-civil society institutions, be they western or Chinese donors or domestic governments, is something that African CSOs should work towards.

Meanwhile, depending on each CSO's priorities, Obiorah has the following recommendations for African civil society's engagement with China.[61] These are especially relevant for ways forward in improving the human rights, environmental and redistributive impact of China in Africa:

- Creating a parallel Sino-African civil society, business, labour and consumer groups' meeting at the China-Africa Cooperation Forum would be very productive for enhancing people-to-people links, exchanging ideas and establishing lobbying positions.
- In terms of African civil society lobbying Chinese institutions, the best way is probably to take advantage of western China-related concerns through 'coalitions of interest' with western governments and NGOs, providing an opportunity for more international lobbying. Options include mass boycotts of Chinese products on human rights and environmental grounds: 'China is not totally oblivious of potential harm to its global reputation if it came to be perceived as the principal patron and protector of Africa's tyrants'. This can be used as a lever to embarrass the Chinese government at international fora.
- African CSOs may be able to mobilise coalitions and relationships with China and about China relatively quickly – certainly faster than African governments. This gives more room for manoeuvre for African CSOs who choose to mobilise together.
- Although 'name and shame' campaigning tactics that are commonly used to pressure western companies to improve their policy are less likely to work on unresponsive Chinese SOEs (state-owned enterprises), it is worth persisting with policy levers linked to China's economic interests. 'Name and shame' can work on Chinese transnational corporations, especially as these move up the value chain and invest prestige in the reputation of their brands.
- Setting up China studies in African education institutions is a much-needed step for better-informed engagement.
- The increasing Chinese reputation of colluding with repression puts Chinese citizens at risk from violence from rebel groups - e.g. in the Niger Delta. Such threats underscore the importance of peace and stability for continued prosperity and safe operations in Africa
- African CSOs can also make efforts to connect directly to the Chinese government for support. With the changing aid priorities in China and availability of resources, China's engagement can present new opportunities for Africa's development among CSOs..[62]

The methods suggested by Obiorah mainly fall into the category of activist advocacy, as there are presently few existing platforms for formal civil society engagement with China. African as well as northern CSOs would do well to start long-term campaigning coalitions with Chinese CSOs now. Within the Chinese government there will be different institutions and levels with 'pressure points' that can be used for advocacy as well as constructive engagement; provincial governments being one example. China's involvement in African development can be seen as an opportunity to foster links between people and as a new power shift away from the entrenched world order.

[61] Obiorah 2007 pp. 49-52
[62] op cit

Conclusion

'China in Africa' is a topic that arouses both concern and fascination in the development community. On the one hand, there are the many retrograde facets of China's growing presence: the tied aid; the no-strings-attached cooperation rhetoric; the lack of conditionality and of standards; the investments and trade; the energy politics, the military support.

China's combined aid and commercial presence resembles the kind of early postcolonial modernist development efforts from western countries that have been found not to work, namely sending technology and experts; large-scale infrastructure from donor-funded companies; and aid in return for UN General Assembly loyalty. Among OECD donors these instruments have largely been superseded by empowerment, sustainability and rights approaches – perhaps at the expense of serious investments into an industrial base for African economic development. Nevertheless, although traditional western donors may have changed their language and developed their ODA departments, foreign policy, security and trade priorities still dwarf their ODA concerns. The alarm which accompanies China's entry into Africa mirrors the western countries' fear of China's position as a challenger in the world economy.

Aside from the legitimate and serious concerns about China's ODA approach, the tone of the development literature on China in Africa exposes the comfortable and paternal position of northern aid in Africa, and the profound threat to this position from the emerging aid providers. We begin to realise the extent to which African countries still are reliant on multilateral policy conditionality; to what extent northern aid agencies relish the role of benefactor despite the all-pervasive 'partnership' and 'ownership' jargon, and the gulf between small benefits from aid and enormous damage from world trade structures. China's activities may put pressure on northern donors to make more serious efforts to lead by example and give recipient governments autonomy, to untie aid and to push for sustainability in binding global fora. The emergence of China as an ODA partner for Africa may have more radical consequences in its knock-on effects on existing aid than in its immediate impact on the African continent.

February 2008

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