Engaging China on Africa's agriculture

While China's involvement in Africa's development has triggered tremendous 'disturbances' in the West's policy towards Africa in recent years, it remains a puzzle what this will lead to in the global development landscape in general and the implications for sustainable development in Africa in particular. Yongjun Zhao argues that ongoing debates on China's role have been informed by taken-for-granted rhetoric and simplistic representations of fact,[1] which have failed to render well-informed, more critical or balanced perspectives on the policy and institutional processes of China's engagement with Africa.

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The National Grand Theatre in Dakar, Senegal.

Myths of China's role in Africa

There is a lack of empirical data on how the Chinese interact with African communities and the impact this has on their livelihoods and surrounding environments.[2] As Chinese investments in Africa are part of the global process of rising commercial pressures on agricultural land and natural resource use, policymakers and researchers have yet to grapple with the underlying challenges. Solutions to sustainable development in affected areas requires a re-examination of the multifaceted development processes, a realistic assessment of the current scenarios, and more practical guidelines on multi-stakeholder engagement concerning not only China's role, but also that of others.

The ineffectiveness of Western development aid to Africa provides China with the opportunity to deliver its own resources 'with no strings attached'. For some African recipients, the Chinese bring the desired capital, technology, skills and resources, enabling much faster delivery of development results than the West. By contrast, the West perceives China's expansion into Africa as a facilitator for stalling the progress made by 'traditional' donors in governance reform. Nevertheless, the fact that Africa's governments are more receptive to Chinese aid highlights their historical links, such as China's support for Africa's independence.[3] In this respect, the China model of development – if there is one – may provide an alternative to conventional approaches introduced by the West and imitated by some African peoples and nations.

However, what the China development model constitutes remains controversial and dubious. 'China going Latin' with regard to shared economic reform trajectories appears to be a strong criticism of this problematic, given that – despite its unprecedented economic growth – China continues to experience chronic poverty, rising social inequality and poor governance.[4] Despite this, the presumed China model has been entrenched in Africa's own development, which facilitates China's pursuit of its own political and economic agenda. Consequently, China's inroad to the continent is also facilitated by the scant input from African public and civil societies – a key factor in the lack of transparency in this development partnership. Failing to understand China's own development experiences and the way it does business in Africa will render engagement with China futile. The Chinese may also find Africa's experiences in terms of social and political reform particularly relevant. Thus, there is a need to bring these dimensions to the fore, something which will benefit both parties if they are serious about achieving the outcomes of sustainable development cooperation in the long run. Viewed from multidisciplinary angles and from the perspectives of different stakeholders, this can be better attained if the purpose of the development sector is to enhance the understanding of the nature of development cooperation and multilateral engagement for the benefits of the African poor. To this end, the study of land reform and agricultural development in China and Africa from comparative perspectives should generate thought-provoking lessons for developing more relevant research programmes tailored to a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of their cooperation.

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Contesting land reform and development in China and Africa

China's clinging to African land is partly a consequence of its domestic demand for food. China's arable land is depleting so rapidly that, already in 2006, only approximately 122 million hectares remained.[5] Food shortages and rising food prices have resulted in China becoming more dependent on grain imports. Thus, the rich soils of Africa and other countries have become a target for grain production by Chinese businesses aiming to export to the Chinese market. China has set up a number of investment schemes relating to food production in Africa.[6] Its agricultural aid to the continent is mounting through the establishment of agro-technical demonstration stations. Chinese businesses have explicitly rejected 'Afro-pessimism' and have invested in African agricultural production by bringing the equipment and expertise needed.[7] After introducing agricultural biotechnology developed in China to Mozambique, for instance, more drought resistant crops such as rice are now being cultivated to cope with increased pressure on the food supply. The Chinese appear to be investing in African land via cooperative projects rather than exclusive land deals. Coupled with other investments in improvement to infrastructure, education and technology, some believe that China can play a significant role in bringing better solutions to Africa's hunger problems.[8]

Yet, there is a lack of data on the impact of all these efforts on poverty alleviation. China's land management – sometimes criticised for, for instance, evicting smallholders and extracting their natural resources in a land rush for biofuels – underscores poor governance in terms of lack of transparency and inadequate prior consultation and impact assessments. All these issues interact with and partly derive from ongoing African governance processes. Given the economic, political and socio-cultural differences between Africa and China, the risks inherent in China's inroads into Africa cannot be underestimated. Moreover, China's programmes have yet to encompass innovative institutional approaches to accommodate the needs of the affected groups and remain trapped in local politics, particularly concerning customary land tenure.[9]

Despite all the pros and cons of China's role in Africa, a better understanding of China's own development issues will help illuminate China's engagement and influence in Africa. The China model with regard to land reform appears to be exemplary for many African countries struggling with rising inequality in land ownership. The lack of access to land and land tenure insecurity are often claimed to hamstring rapid rural economic development. China's acclaimed land reform success, seen as a result of the Communist-led revolution, has far-reaching implications for land reform in Africa and especially for countries like Zimbabwe, which has pursued a radical approach in recent years. It is also relevant for the case of South Africa's land reform, which has been heavily attacked because of its market-oriented and 'pro-Whites' approach and for its failure to deliver land faster to the landless.[10]

Paradoxically, China's land reform has yet to meet the challenges of scaled grain production, chronic poverty and rising social conflicts. Although land equality has been instituted, the current land tenure structure – characterised by individual household land use rights (house responsibility system, or HRS) under village collective landownership – has resulted in the fragmentation of local social institutions. It has contributed to poor governance and also rising conflicts among various actors in village affairs, in particular over land use and management. In fact, since its inception, the more economic-driven HRS policy has marked a watershed; a shift away from the communes of the 1960s, while still serving the political agenda of the state. To a certain extent, this land tenure arrangement, as evidenced by the loosening of inter-household relations and collective action in agricultural production, has facilitated unprecedented land grabs by businesses and local governments across the country in the name of public interest. It has also contributed to natural resource degradation and depletion – an indicator the vulnerability of the poor in coping with resource constraints and the effects of climate change and natural disasters.[11] Current reform measures, which increasingly emphasise improvements in land use and the transferable rights of smallholders (resembling the pro-market approach), have not achieved the desired objectives, especially concerning curbing the loss of farmland. The issues surrounding adequate compensation, resettlement, and access to productive land and job creation for the displaced groups are also hindering China's overall economic and social transformation under the banner of rural-urban integration.

Africa's ongoing land reforms, designed to legalise land tenure through titling and registering land under individual, group, communal and customary ownership, have had limited positive outcomes. In fact, these measures have contributed to increasing social inequality, poor political governance, the unsustainable use of land resources and they have exacerbated poverty. Although local social and political contexts are taken as important factors in the design of these reforms, they are far from being well understood and linked to feasible points of action. Academic debates on these issues need to go beyond the narrow domain of tenure security and enforcement of land rights. While land reforms may be innovative in pursuit of the 'third way' – that is, in prioritizing local concepts and practice in the flexible design of specific land tenure systems – they are far from practical to implement in the real-life local setting. Decentralisation in varying forms is crucial for coupling land reform with governance, in order to bring about genuine democracy and power transfers to local areas.[12] In a nutshell, current reform measures have failed to explain which land tenure arrangements, under what conditions, can be compatible with sustainable land resource use, governance and development. Moreover, current research efforts have failed to put forward a clear conceptual framework for further research and policy design. Questions over what constitutes and conditions land tenure from multi-stakeholder perspectives and from the perspective of land use, governance and development linkages have not been adequately and convincingly answered.

China's current land tenure structure, interwoven as it is with strong state intervention seen as necessary to safeguard Chinese interests and social stability, appears to have been a prerequisite for achieving economic growth. The marketisation of farmland, in terms of creating more favourable conditions for farmers to lease and transfer their land rights to other entities while keeping the village collective landownership intact, may sound attractive to African policymakers. However, collective landownership is solely determined by the government and not by the farmers themselves. This implies that the alliance of village elites, township, county and provincial government can play a dominant role in approving plans and applications for land use changes. As the lowest level of government representation, the village collective is essential in meeting the demands of its masters rather than its constituency. This institutional arrangement marks a difference from many African countries where local governance is too weak to exert effective control over land management and its underlying social and political relations. That said, the village collective in China can also be corrupt in striking lucrative land deals with businesses to the disadvantage of individual farmers. Neither land privatisation nor collectivisation/nationalisation are appropriate approaches to land reform unless underlying factors are taken into account. Again, the question remains how to develop appropriate land tenure and governance systems which protect farmers' rights and serve their needs for sustainable land use and development in the context of rising commercial interests and agricultural land loss in both China and Africa.

Comparative perspectives on land and development

Although different in terms of the social and political contexts underpinning development and land policy reform, China's and Africa's ongoing economic development agendas are similar in terms of their pro-market rhetoric. In both cases, it is hard to generalise what farmers want from the land they work as an owners, renters or labourers. But it is possible to speculate that not many farmers would like to maintain their rural status forever, an assumption that may even hold true for farmers in developed countries. Their pragmatic views on land use and governance, interwoven with cultural, social and political relations, may compound an understanding of their preference for a specific land tenure system. This contradicts the conventional view that land tenure security is essential for capitalising on farmers' incentives to farm and to make related investments. Notwithstanding the importance of understanding complex social and political contexts, it is imperative to investigate the basic conditions that make land tenure really work –not only for the sake of the farmers, but also in the interests of the wider public and the nation as a whole. This requires a more practical approach to understanding what land reform can really deliver for farmers and other stakeholders, which makes Africa-China comparative studies pertinent to questions of sustainable land use and food security.

Furthermore, land tenure and the role of land cannot be understood in isolation from the overall challenges of development and governance. If sustainable land resource use and poor farmers' livelihoods are considered more seriously by decision-makers and investors, a practical roadmap for change may emerge. A match between a land tenure system and sustainable land resource use should be pursued as fundamental to good governance and sustainable development. Thus, a specific sustainable land use plan concerning farmland, forests, water, woodlands, etc., should be instituted to determine the design of an appropriate land tenure regime. It may even be that several land tenure systems need to be present in one village. A reorganisation of existing land tenure relations and forms of governance is needed. This may sound daunting, but is necessary for sustainably managed land use systems. Land tenure, livelihoods, land resource use and governance are intermingled; one cannot be sustainable without the other. Land tenure systems designed from a sustainable development and governance perspective can deliver a useful paradigm shift away from the conventional approaches mentioned earlier. This would provide the opportunity for both Chinese and African policymakers, business actors and even farmers to work together towards a feasible framework of action; a framework that would contribute to the attainment of sustainable development and agricultural investment goals on both continents.

New research agenda on Africa-China development cooperation

African and Chinese researchers, practitioners and decision-makers with common interests in sustainable land use and agricultural development need to find effective communication channels to share experiences and learn lessons in order to improve their understanding of and capacity to tackle development challenges. Empirical knowledge is imperative to increasing knowledge and understanding and thus, to contributing to more constructive interactions among the major players; something that is key to addressing the fundamental question of Africa's land reform. Such research collaboration from comparative perspectives would be a timely contribution to the process of knowledge attainment and capacity building for Africa's smallholders and would foster participatory land governance and sustainable development. This collaboration would provide feasible strategies for the creation of appropriate pro-poor social institutions at national, regional and international levels to facilitate models of social and political change, especially in Africa. In brief, this new research agenda should address the major research questions as follows:

- What are the entry points for the study of linkages between land tenure, resource use, development and governance to mark a paradigm shift away from the ongoing approaches to land reform?
- How can the lessons of China's land reform and development inform Africa's land struggles and reform agenda?
- How can we develop a more critical framework for the analysis of farmers' responses to land policy reform and the roles of community governance in policymaking concerning sustainable land use and development?
- How can China's African development policy and practice be improved in light of local, national and global contestations over its role and effects?
- How can the roles of African and Chinese researchers, civil societies and businesses be enhanced in order to foster more sustainable and equitable development outcomes in Africa?
- What lessons can be learnt from China's development aid to Africa and donor harmonisation, and what are the implications for the roles of other emerging powers (e.g. Brazil and India) in Africa?

The research agenda is expected to create synergies among the existing research initiatives and to offer opportunities for more innovative and collaborative efforts among the members and others. Its success is contingent upon the support of all corners of society in Africa and China with a strong will to be the change agents in helping the poor find more feasible solutions to poverty and under-representation.

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Notes

1 Ong'ayo, Antony Otengo. 2010. 'China-Africa relations: a review of the civil society-academic dialogue process 2007-2010', *Perspectives on Emerging Powers in Africa,* Issue 4, December, pp 2-6.
2 Many criticisms point to China as a colonial power whose invasion of Africa cannot sustain itself in the long run, as reported recently in two consecutive articles in *The Guardian* by Rice and Mbaye on 6 and 7 February 2011. See www. guardian.co.uk.
3 AFRODAD. 2008. *Mapping Chinese Development Assistance in Africa: A Synthesis analysis of Angola, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (draft report), Harare: AFRODAD.
4 De haan, Arjan. 2010 'A defining moment? China's social policy response to the financial crisis', *Journal of International Development,* 22, pp 758-771. See also, Fischer, Andrew. 2010. 'Is China Turning Latin? China's balancing act between power and dependence in the lead up to global crisis', *Journal of International Development* 22, pp 739–757.
5 Brautigam, Deborah. 2009. The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 234.
6 For details, see a complete list of foreign investors in Africa complied by the ILC and other organisations, in GLP 2010 *Land Grab in Africa: Emerging Land System Drivers in a Teleconnected World,* GLP Report No. 1, pp 24-35.
7 ChinaAfrica 'China's food and agriculture fund for Africa', www.chinafrica.asia/china-food-agriculturefund-for-Africa. See also: Alden, Chris et al. (eds). 2009. *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace,* London: Hurst Publishers Ltd.
8 Rubinstein, Carl. 2009. 'China's eye on African agriculture', *Asian Times Online,* www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/KJ02Cb01.html.
9 Brautigam, Deborah. 2009. The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 234.
10 See Mkodzongi, Grasian. 2010. 'South Africa: The next frontier for land occupations', *Pambazuka News,* Issue 477, www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/63718.
11 Zhao, Yongjun. 2010. *China's Rural Development Challenges: Land Tenure Reform and Local Institutional Experimentation,* Groningen: Centre for Development Studies, University of Groningen.
12 For debates on Africa's land tenure reforms, see Peters, Pauline E. 2009. 'Challenges in land tenure and land reform in Africa: anthropological contributions', *World Development,* Vol. 37, No. 8, pp 1317-1325. Also see: Ubink, J.M. et al. (eds). 2009. *Legalising Land Rights: Local Practices, State Responses and Tenure Security in Africa, Asia and Latin America,* Leiden University Press.

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A typical mixed smallholding in Tanzania.