

Choose your own development path: providing advice without interference?

China's presence and influence on the African continent is rapidly increasing and other foreign powers in Africa are following this trend with suspicion. The growing influence of Chinese actors in Africa offers possibilities as well as challenges similar to those of the other foreign powers. The intense popularity of Chinese projects in Africa is largely due to the alternatives offered to Africa by the official foreign policy of Beijing; alternatives to the approaches of the so-called 'West' and their influential international financial institutions, previously virtually the only sources of funding for Africa's economic development.

Sanne van der Lugt

THIS ALTERNATIVE APPROACH from China is also known as the "no-strings attached" approach. The "no-strings attached" approach should be understood as a promise from the Chinese government to not intervene in what are considered to be national issues. According to the Chinese government "each country has the right to choose, in its course of development, its own social system, development model and way of life in light of its national conditions".¹ Why does the Chinese government stress independent economic development and how is this demonstrated in Africa?

The Chinese development model

The basis of Beijing's focus on independent economic development can be found in China's recent history. After the Second World War, and the subsequent civil war, China evolved as a communist country and became involved in the worldwide struggle for alliances on an ideological basis. When they realised that the United States was about to win the Cold War and become the sole global superpower, China and the Soviet Union signed an agreement to promote a multi-polar world order as opposed to hegemonism. Since that moment, the Chinese government has actively promoted diversity and an inclusive world system. In line with this argument, the Chinese government does not aim to impose an alternative development model, but instead encourages countries to choose their own. Furthermore, and importantly, the Chinese government will not accept any interventions regarding its own national issues and is therefore a staunch supporter of sovereignty in general.

Another important reason for the Chinese government to take a different approach towards international development cooperation, than the more traditional donors, is to distance itself from the latter. In so doing, it is also distancing itself from the practice of colonialism and stressing that China shares the experience of having been colonised; the Chinese have herewith won much credit in Africa. Furthermore, the Chinese government is also distancing itself from traditional donors, and emphasising its own position as a developing country, in order to temper the expectations from their partners in Africa, and to minimise critique from Chinese nationals who advocate for more economic development in their own country first. A fourth and last reason for China to promote sovereignty and to not impose a development model on other developing countries, is that it is the intention of the Chinese government to develop long-term economic and political relations with these countries. It is believed that this can best be achieved by showing mutual respect, rather than by imposing.

Ironically, the fact that the Chinese approach advocates independent development paths based on the specific national conditions, has created the assumption that the Chinese offer a new model for development as an alternative to the Washington Consensus. Besides offering a different approach to international development cooperation, it is the very success of China's own economic development, based on choosing its own development path, that aroused interest in 'the Chinese model' for development. However, Chinese government officials deny the existence of a Chinese development model and emphasise that China's development should be regarded as an example for other developing countries: that it is possible to choose your own development path and be successful.

Balancing between Chinese and African economic interests

Chinese development cooperation in Africa is especially focused on the agricultural and infrastructural sector; the two sectors that comprised the motor of China's own economic development. When China needed to modernise its resource base and infrastructure, it used Japan's interest in their oil to build infrastructure for transport, and energy and export capacity. The Chinese government now uses this experience to construct similar resources-for-infrastructure deals with various African governments.² Likewise, the recent development of Chinese Special Economic Zones in Africa



also derived from positive experiences within China itself. Chinese government representatives and investors in Africa are often asked to explain China's economic development and to provide advice about what might work in Africa. However, it must be noted that these (often) solicited recommendations from Chinese investors and government representatives are not only meant to contribute to economic development within Africa, but also to the further economic development of China. In other words: to a win-win situation.

The Chinese aim for a win-win situation is often misunderstood by Western scholars and government officials as a claim that Chinese development cooperation with Africa is well-balanced. However, the Chinese aim for a win-win should be understood as opposition to the rhetoric of the West, claiming to be in Africa just to assist with its development. Instead, Chinese government representatives state their intentions clearly by saying that they are in Africa to do business and that development cooperation should also serve China's own development goals.

Critics also seem to worry about the environmental and social impacts of Chinese projects in Africa. The Chinese, in turn, accuse these critics of getting involved in national issues of other countries. Entirely in accordance with the official Chinese position that countries should have the right to choose their own development path, Chinese government officials and investors argue that these issues are the responsibility of the African governments. During a study in the DRC I found, for example, that most Chinese construction companies did conduct detailed studies of the social and environmental impacts of the projects they had planned, which were then sent to the Congolese government for approval.

In contrast to Ramo's 2004 claim,³ sustainability and equality are not regarded to be first considerations by Chinese investors or Chinese government representatives in Africa. On the contrary, both argue that the first priority for Africa is to create a good investment climate for foreign investors as well as for local investors. According to Chinese experience, it is important to attract foreign investors in order to gain knowledge. Foreign investment is attracted by favourable investment climates with competitive advantages, such as low labour costs and sympathetic tax laws, for example. Many Chinese investors in Africa complain about the poor investment climate due to the relative high wages, bad infrastructure and strict labour and environmental laws. Chinese investors and government representatives alike try to convince African governments that it is not yet the time for strengthening labour and environmental laws. They argue that Africa needs to temporarily compromise on these issues in order to attract the much needed financial and technological capital from abroad.

Conclusion

The term "no-strings attached" means that the Chinese government does not wish to intervene in national issues of other countries. The Chinese government does not have a predetermined plan to impose a certain model on African countries, like the West and its liberal democracy model. However, China needs Africa to further realise the economic development of China. When African trade unions and/or (international) NGOs have demands that might obstruct the progress of a Chinese project in Africa, Chinese government



officials and investors could advise the respective African government strongly to follow the Chinese example and ignore these requests, arguing that China made the same sacrifices in order to achieve their impressive economic growth. The main motives behind this advice, however, seem to be selfish economic interests.

The Chinese do not differ, in this respect, that much from the West, whose efforts to develop Africa are not primarily altruistic either. However, an important difference between the Chinese approach and that of the West is that the Chinese are much more open about their economic intentions. For African government officials it is important to realise that the advice given by their Chinese partners is based on a combination of their experiences and economic interests, and that each is carrying the responsibility for their own citizens. The Chinese approach to African government leaders as equal negotiation partners with their own responsibilities, might lead in the most optimistic case to a greater awareness of these responsibilities among African leaders.

In order to strengthen their negotiation position, it is important for African leaders to study the motives of foreign investors. When weak regulations are the most important factors for attracting foreign investment, strengthening these regulations might result in fewer investments and the advice from their Chinese partners should be taken seriously. However, when other factors are more important for attracting foreign investment, strict laws and regulations might be enforced without jeopardising potential investment. The attractive power of African countries towards foreign investors differs per country and per foreign investor. Since the factors that attract foreign investors to African countries are not exactly the same as for China, the lessons learned in China, are not automatically applicable to Africa. This is acknowledged by Chinese government officials, as can be derived from the official Chinese sentiment that each country has the right to choose its own path. However, the request from Africa to share their experiences, combined with China's own economic interests, sometimes tempts these same officials to promote what has worked for China. This applies even more to Chinese investors in Africa whose main interests are economic. It is up to African leaders to take the advice of foreign actors into account, without letting them interfere in national issues, in order to guarantee the interests of their citizens.

Sanne van der Lugt is an associate at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, and a former research analyst at the Centre for Chinese Studies at Stellenbosch University. Her research focuses on China's economic and political cooperation with African countries (sannevdlugt@operamail.com).

Notes

- 1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC. 2000. *Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation*; <http://tinyurl.com/6w3duvj> (accessed January 2012).
- 2 Brautigam, D. 2009. *The Dragon's Gift: The real story of China in Africa*, Oxford: University Press.
- 3 Joseph Cooper Ramo popularised the concept 'Beijing Consensus' and linked it to a Chinese model for development. Ramo, J.C. 2004. *The Beijing Consensus: notes on the new physics of Chinese power*, London: Foreign Affairs Policy Centre.

Above left: Photo taken in DRC, August 2010, on premises of a large Chinese construction company involved in, among other projects, the construction of roads as an element of the Sicomines Agreement. Image courtesy of author.

Above right: Photo taken from the roof of a hospital in Kinshasa, built by a Chinese construction company. In the forefront you can see the barracks in which the Chinese labourers live, and the Chinese and Congolese flags. In the background you see the Stade des Martyrs and the Palais du Peuple, both a gift from China to the DRC. Image courtesy of the author.