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## THE BEAST FROM THE EAST: UNSETTLING CHINESE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN AFRICA

Jonathan Makuwira  
School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning  
RMIT University  
GPO Box 3476  
Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia  
Email: [jonathan.makuwira@rmit.edu.au](mailto:jonathan.makuwira@rmit.edu.au)

### ABSTRACT

Over the past decade China has emerged as an important global actor in the field of international development. Specifically, China's expansion into Africa has not only resulted in intensified social, political, economic and cultural links with Africa, but it has also seen China as a major source of bilateral aid. The current Chinese aid architecture emphasizes non-interference in domestic politics and non-conditional lending. This article argues that while China's emergence as a major actor in development assistance in Africa provides a number of opportunities and benefits, there is very little scrutiny of the effectiveness of Chinese aid. Chinese aid to Africa defies the Western donor aid architecture by eschewing conditionalities around governance and human rights. To date, the academic literature tends to focus on China-Africa relations from an international relations perspective, with limited critical analysis of the impact of Chinese '*tied aid*' system, '*project-based*' development approach, and the '*power dynamics*' in the aid, trade and investment processes. There is also a dearth in examining the complexity of development processes from an African perspective. This article posits that while the concept of development has been the subject of intense and sustained theoretical, philosophical, empirical and methodological debate in the post-war era, the neo-classical 'modernist' frameworks have, in many ways, neglected the fundamental ingredients of African social, political, cultural and institutional diversity.

## **THE BEAST FROM THE EAST: UNSETTLING CHINESE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN AFRICA**

Jonathan Makuwira  
RMIT University  
Melbourne, Australia

### **1. Introduction**

Africa is witnessing an unprecedented presence of Chinese investment companies and Chinese labor. Over the past decade, China has emerged as a global actor in the field of international development. Not only has China's expansion into Africa resulted in intensified social, political, economic and cultural links with Africa, but it has also seen China as a major source of bilateral aid. Its rapid economic inroads into Africa and the growth of its trade volume from US\$20billion in 2001 to US\$120billion in 2011 has attracted a lot of scrutiny by both African and Western commentators (Cheru and Obi, 2011). The current Chinese foreign aid architecture emphasizes 'non-interference' in domestic politics and non-conditional lending, although this is a controversial claim. While China's emergence as a major player in foreign aid, trade and investment in Africa provides a number of opportunities, there is very little assessment of the effectiveness of Chinese foreign aid. Chinese foreign aid to Africa defies the Western donors' foreign aid architecture by eschewing conditionalities around governance and human rights. To date, the academic literature (see Ansha, 2007; Lancaster, 2007; Power and Mohan, 2008; Davies, 2008; Brautigam, 2009; Kazianis, 2011) tend to focus on China-Africa from an international relations and trade perspective with limited analysis of the impact of Chinese 'tied aid' system, project-based development approach, and the power dynamics in the foreign aid, trade and investment processes. There is also a dearth in examining the complexities and multi-dimensionality of development processes from an African perspective.

In this article I argue that while the concept of development has been the subject of intense and sustained theoretical, philosophical, empirical and methodological debate in the post-war era, the neo-classical 'modernist' frameworks have, in many ways, neglected the

fundamental ingredients of African social, political, cultural and institutional diversity. The claim that China is responsible for the largest proportion of progress towards the Millennium Development Goal One (MDG1) (see Ravallion, 2008; De Haan, 2010) not only calls for a critical examination of the current development paradigm, but also a thorough documentation of the Chinese development approaches in terms of what works, how it works, why it works and, of particular relevance, examining how various popular development discourses such as participatory development, capacity development, partnership building and empowerment are deployed by the Chinese development agencies.

## **2. Chinese aid to Africa in Historical Perspective**

The flourishing ties between Africa and China are not a new phenomenon. Historically, these relations have existed long before the recent Chinese surge into Africa. Moody (2011), for example, observes that between 1950 and 1970, the Chinese influence over Africa was predominantly to strengthen its revolution and ideological position. Yumei (2007) makes the point clear by arguing that, “in an era when communist revolutions were the main theme, promoting the values of anti-colonialism, anti-hegemonism, economic self-reliance, global cooperation and independence won China friendship and influence on the African continent” (p. 2). Thus, by and large, the Chinese relationships with Africa in the first phase were principally governed by the support for Africa’s anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movement; liberation movement; non-alignment policy; respect for Africa’s sovereignty; and opposition to any form of foreign invasion and interference in African affairs (Moody, 2011, p. 2).

Although Africa’s importance to Beijing’s foreign policy declined in the 1980s, the rediscovery of China’s role on the global stage in the 1990s and the new millennium saw China’s importance surge into an entity that required tight and sustained links in politics, trade and investment. It was also during this period that we witnessed not only an unprecedented expansion of the Chinese economy, but also the Chinese desire to take advantage of its numerical advantage at the United Nations, which, in greater part, was supported by African states. There-

fore, since then the desire for resources has shaped Sino-African relationships (Taylor, 2007).

### **3. Global Domination Through Development Aid**

The 'Beast from the East', China, is conquering Africa at an unprecedented pace and much to the surprise of the traditional bilateral donor countries from the 'West'. Foreign development aid, as an instrument used by governments to achieve foreign policy goals, is China's "weapon of mass destruction" in shaking and shaping the world of development. Alongside the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, India, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Venezuela and South Africa, China is, perhaps, in a class of its own in its foreign policy priority of maintaining an independent, powerful, and united China in pursuing economic development (Lengauer, 2011). China's current global domination as an economic engine did not occur by default, but it has taken almost three centuries of strategic reform which have resulted in China's position as a global superpower economically; albeit still considered a developing country by the definition of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

China's foreign aid modality defies those of the (OECD), which, according to the organization, has to meet two criteria:

- The funding must meet and promote economic development of the recipient countries.
- The funding must be given on a concessional basis with a grant element of at least 25 percent (OECD, 2011).

While Chinese development resembles that of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), China is under no obligation to follow the DAC guidelines since it is not the member of the OECD. This aspect is of particular importance in understanding the politics of Chinese foreign aid not only to Africa but elsewhere as well. It has to be understood, though, that while there are some similarities in the overarching agenda between Chinese and the OECD development aid, the departure, on the Chinese aid system, is very much based on specific principles introduced by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964, which are:

- Equality and mutuality of benefits between donor and recipient counterparts
- Non-interference in internal affairs and respect for sovereignty of recipient country based on 'no conditions attached' philosophy
- Interest-free or low-interest loans
- Foster self-reliance of recipient country
- Support for result-oriented, time-bound projects that increase revenue and accumulate capital in recipient countries.
- Projects undertaken by Chinese quality equipment
- Provision of professional training and technological assistance of local workers
- Chinese aid workers implementing projects locally are required to adhere to local standards of living in recipient countries (State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, 2011)

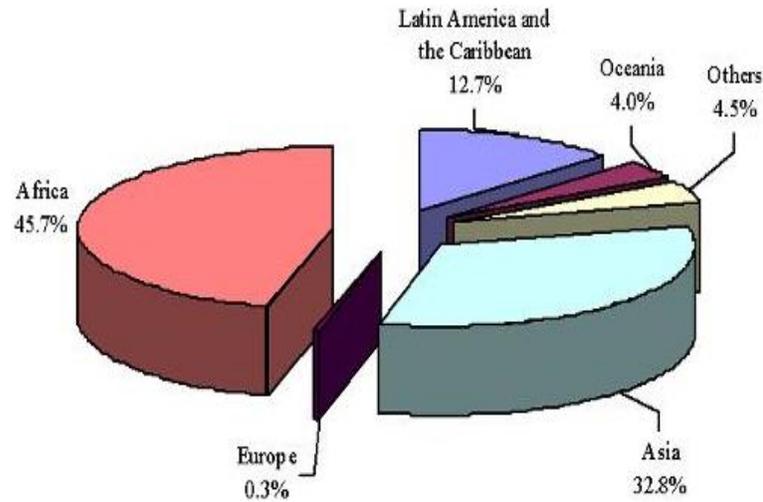
One would, however, argue that some of the principles are not different from the popular rhetoric and discourses of the Western donor agencies. In addition, while on the surface these principles sound rosy, they camouflage the subtleties of the politics behind foreign development assistance, as this article will highlight in the foregoing sections. Of critical importance to the debate is the fact that the administrative structure of Chinese foreign aid is slightly different from that of the Western donor counterparts in a number of ways. According to Brautgam (2009), China does not have a central foreign aid agency like many of the Western donor agencies do. It is the Department of Foreign Aid, within the Ministry of Commerce (MoFCOM), in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the China Export-Import Bank (Exim Bank), that China's foreign aid is organized.

#### **4. How Much Foreign Aid Does China Give?**

In April 2011, the Chinese government, for the first time, published a '*Foreign Aid White Paper*', disclosing its aid volume to its recipient countries (State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, 2011). According to these statistics, at the end of 2009 China had provided approximately RMB256.3 (US\$40 billion) in foreign aid to its recipient countries since 1950. Of this amount, approximately 41

percent (US\$16.3 billion) is in form of grants; 30 percent (US\$11.7 billion) in interest-free loans and, 29 percent (US\$11.3 billion) in the form of concessional loans. Its geographical distribution is a matter of utmost interest to which this article seeks to make a contribution. As alluded to earlier, Chinese foreign aid is part of a larger politico-economic agenda often dictated by trade and investment interests. Hanson (2008) contends that even Chinese labor is considered part of the foreign aid package. To date, 161 countries have been recipients of Chinese foreign aid. Of these countries, 51 are in Africa, 30 in Asia, 18 in Latin America, and 12 are in Oceania and Eastern Europe, respectively (State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, 2011).

**Figure 1: Distribution of Chinese Foreign Aid by 2009**

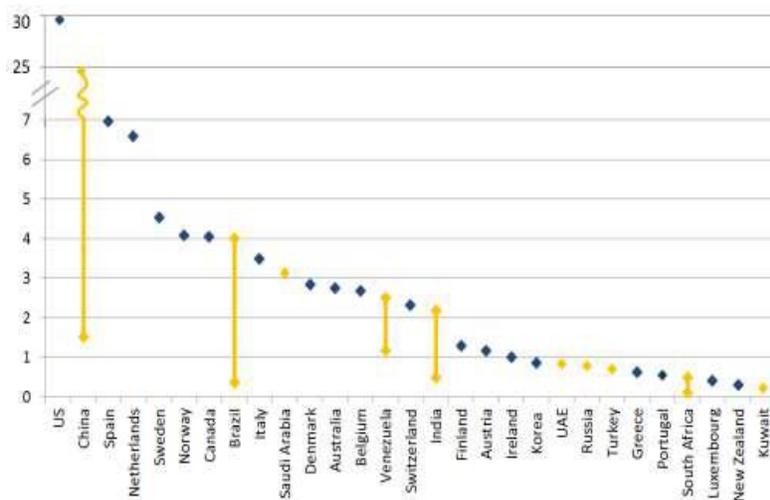


Source: State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, 2011

Relative to the DAC-OECD donors, China is the second largest provider of foreign aid in terms of gross ODA (in billions of dollars) and among the top 10 foreign aid providers in terms of net ODA as a percentage of GNI (Walz and Ramachandran, 2011).

There are several points to highlight in the April 2011 Chinese White Paper on foreign aid. As stated earlier, Chinese aid is also underpinned by Foreign Aid agenda. One of the key highlights of the White Paper was its emphasis and expansion of its overarching aid agenda. In fulfilling its international obligation as a global player, the White Paper reiterates that the Chinese foreign aid aims to “help recipient countries strengthen their self-development capacity, enrich and improve their people’s livelihoods, and promote their economic growth and social aspects (State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, 2011).

**Table 1: Gross ODA: Traditional Donors versus China**

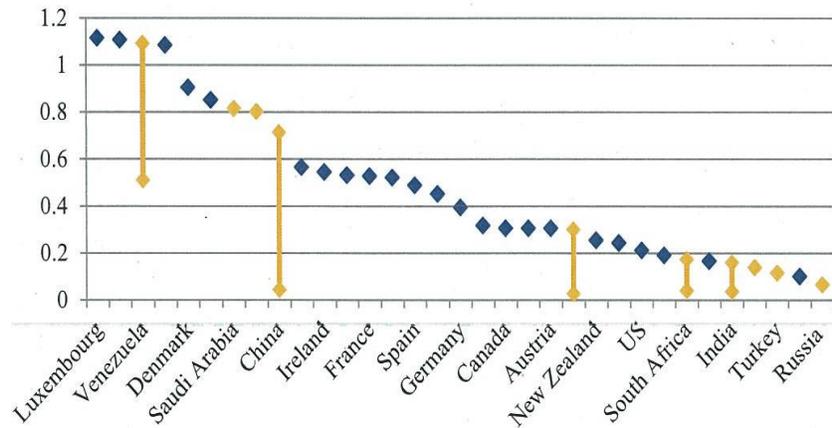


Pertinent to achieving these agendas are the Chinese foreign aid activities which, according to the White Paper, encompass complete projects, goods and materials, technical cooperation, human resource development cooperation, medical teams sent abroad, emergency and humanitarian assistance, volunteer programs in foreign countries and debt relief.

Further to its grand agenda highlighted above, there are several priorities that are set as benchmarks for its Five-year plan of operation, which are examined later in this article. For example, there is an

emphasis on the involvement of recipient countries in the design of projects while, at the same time, enhancing the quality of foreign aid and projects. In addition, the White Paper also makes a case for improved aid effectiveness; partnerships with other donors; increasing the proportion of grant aid; giving more aid to heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) and least developed countries (LDCs), and strengthening international cooperation and exchanges in learning and good practice (State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, 2011, pp. 19-20).

**Table 2: ODA as a Percent of GNI: Traditional versus New Donors**



Source: Walz & Ramachandran, 2011, p. 2

At present, 40 percent of Chinese foreign aid expenditure is in the form of 'complete projects'. This is no coincidence, considering that 61 percent of Chinese sectoral distribution of concessional loans is in economic infrastructure. As Lengauer (2011, p. 48) observes, "China has provided concessional loans to 76 countries, supported 325 projects, of which 142 had been completed by the end of 2009. The entire operational process of these projects from draft to construction is supervised by the donor and handed over to the recipient country after completion". It is from these principles that the article now examines

the tensions and contradictions of the 'no strings attached' Chinese foreign aid debate.

### **5. Projectization of Foreign Aid: Tensions and Contradictions**

Over the years, foreign aid modalities have evolved from 'project' to 'program' aid (Yamada, 2002). Projectized development approach has long been the principal means through which the traditional donors have disbursed their development assistance over the past 60 years. Predicated on the assumption that the lack of physical investment was the main obstacle to development and, similarly, the belief that separate project management and accounting structures of independent projects provide the most appropriate arrangements for mitigating fiduciary risk, irrespective of a country's policy and institutional framework (Mosley and Eeckhout, 2000), project aid was favored by donors for infrastructure and poverty alleviation programs (Lancaster, 1999). The justification, according to Mosley and Eeckhout (2000), was its visibility of results. It was and still continues to be technologically straightforward, and the ease with which technology from donor countries can be transferred to recipient countries makes it the most favoured alternative.

As time progressed, the overall results of projectized aid came into question and close scrutiny. Many of the critics (see Honadle and Rosengard, 1983; Lancaster, 1999; Mosley and Eeckhout, 2000; Cox and Healey, 2000; World Bank, 2001; McGillivray and Morrissey, 2004; Riddell, 2007) argue that the project aid is largely donor driven which, by inference, undermines local ownership, commitment and sustainability. They also argue that project aid results in fragmentation and lead to duplication of efforts. Furthermore, there is also the issue of lack of attention to policy, administrative and institutional environment, and fungibility, that is, diverting development aid for non-priority areas. The fundamental question, then, remains: why does China prefer projectized aid rather than sector-wide approach or budget support modality?

*Contradiction One:* Zhou Enlan's second principle, which calls for 'non-interference' in internal affairs, and respect for sovereignty with 'no conditions attached', is contrary to what happens on the ground. In the first instance, the contradiction is even more glaring

when the sixth principle calls for Chinese 'development projects to be carried out with Chinese quality equipment'. This is a big catch because the principle calls for the procurement and purchase of project equipments produced in China. Put simply, this is aid tying. Given that over 70 percent of Chinese development cooperation gravitates around infrastructure development, it makes sense in this context to formulate a strategy that ultimately takes foreign aid back to its origin. Infrastructure, construction, industrial and commercial activities require equipments. These equipments may not be readily available in the countries where these projects are being implemented but may sometimes be available within the neighboring countries or, at worst, within the region. The operation of some of these equipments may require some expertise. Thus, China imports expertise from home into Africa. For example, in 2004, the Angolan Ministry of Interior issued 192 work visas to Chinese nationals. In 2007, 22,043 work visas were issued (Campos and Vines, 2008). The increase of nearly 22,000 migrant workers into a recipient country like Angola defeats the whole purpose of enhancing the local economy when a foreign labor force largely replaces the locals. The 'boomerang aid', as it is commonly known, because it is tied to the procurement of equipment and importation of labor, does not do any good to a recipient country but further marginalizes and pushes the locals into the abyss of poverty.

*Contradiction Two:* The projectization of development aid by China to Africa assumes that the success in the model, from China's standpoint, is replicable elsewhere. The multi-dimensionality of the social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which the Chinese project-based approach is implemented is diverse and challenging. There are also structural issues which, left unchecked by focusing only on micro-issues, can easily exacerbate the structural causes of poverty in the African context. Thus, Chinese emphasis on project-based approach to development is contrary to the fundamental principles of sustainability. In actual fact, this is an exact duplicate of the former aid modality by the traditional donor from the west. The warning by Li Zhibiao affirms this argument:

If African nations really want to study and learn from the Chinese experience, firstly, they must thoroughly understand the difference between their national situation and China's. Secondly, they must in earnest research the complete contexts of China's and even other countries' development experiences (Lagerkvist, 2010, p. 177).

The manner in which many projects are conceived, designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated matters a lot for the sustainability of the projects (Makuwira, 2004). Africa has her own tradition, and the indigenous knowledge system has been suppressed by a failed model of development cooperation imported into Africa and operationalized for 60 years with minimal impact on poverty alleviation (Moyo, 2009). While the Chinese development approach looks innovative, the practical aspects of a community-led development process seems lacking in most of the literature, raising concerns on the fundamentals of ownership, social capital, community capacity development and sustainability of projects. Critical to this debate is the lack of evidence on how Chinese development projects build local capacities. For example, Davies (2007, p. 20) observes with concern that:

A number of different bodies play a role in monitoring the roll out of various projects, after implementation begins. For all projects, a second company is appointed by contract, purely to monitor the practices and implementation policies of the first company, which actually carries out the project. These companies have no link to one another. In addition, the local embassy, the economic counsellor's office, and visiting DAFC staff also provide some supervision.

*Contradiction Three:* China, according to Davies (2007, p. 64), does not give aid in cash but in kind. While this has the potential to mitigate corruption, it contradicts with the slogan of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Polgreen and French (2007) caution that since Chinese labor is counted as aid, it can be argued that Chinese aid is coercive.

*Contradiction Four:* While China uses the rhetoric of equality, mutual benefit and development partnerships in its engagement with Africa, these diplomatic discourses simply camouflage power relations.

The manner in which trade between the two blocs is carried out shed more light on this issue. Crude oil represents 71 per cent of Africa's trade with China.

**Table 3: Chinese Trade with Africa**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Economic Type</b>	<b>Average Annual Trade 2006-2010 (US\$ millions)</b>	<b>Share in total China-Africa Trade (Percent)</b>
Angola	Oil Export	18,6627	21
South Africa	Diversified Economy	16,686	18
Sudan	Oil Export	6,445	7
Nigeria	Oil Export	5,774	6
Egypt	Diversified Economy	5,384	6
Algeria	Oil Export	4,155	5
Libya	Oil Export	4,154	5
DRC	Oil Export	3,241	4
Morocco	Diversified Economy	2,548	3
Benin	Oil Export	2,097	2
Weight of top ten trading partners in total China-Africa trade			76 Percent

Source: Lu Yong, 2011

While it is not expected that Africa's export-import targets can be at par with China, the domination of one commodity in China-Africa trade should be carefully analyzed against the broader continental export production. If oil is Africa's major export, it is equally possible that the greater part of Chinese imports may originate from those oil-producing countries. In fact *The Citizen Newspaper* of September 14, 2010 reported exactly this point:

Some 70 percent of Chinese imports originate from four countries: Angola-34 per cent, South Africa-20 percent, Sudan-11 percent and Democratic Republic of Congo-8 per cent. The high concentration on China-Africa trade manifests itself not

just by country but also by sector. Approximately 70 percent of African exports to China consist of crude oil, particularly from Angola and Sudan, and 15 percent of raw materials. Agriculture products from other African countries have only a modest share...China exports are destined for relatively few countries. Some 60 percent go to six countries which include South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria, Morocco and Benin (The Citizen, 2010).

While it has to be appreciated that indeed trade between China and Africa doubled over the decade from 5 percent in 2000 to 10 percent in 2007, the increases, as shown below, have been localized in a region whose battle against unfair trade with the western trading blocs has been an issue of critical concern. Africa is diverse, and blanketing a skewed success story of ten countries out of 53 is unrealistic, considering the many concerns raised across Africa in relation to the invasion of Chinese local traders on the continent.

## **6. The Missing Link in the China-Africa Development Cooperation**

The current scenario of China in Africa paints a rosy picture that only satisfies short-term agenda. The Chinese approach to business, which is less paternalistic than their western counterparts, needs to be acknowledged as a positive step in the right direction. Likewise, Africa needs to take advantage of Chinese 'soft power' and harness resources and leap Africa onto the next level. This, therefore, will require utmost prudence to economic governance and management. However, there are several missing links to the entire debate on the role of China in Africa.

### **6.1. The Silence of the 'Agency'**

Like the development approaches of the western donor agencies which rolled back the state in favor of the market (privatization), the current Chinese approach to project implementation often leaves the core 'agent of change' in the development process. When development projects are completed, implemented and handed over to governments without the active participation of the intended users, it raises the fundamental question of ownership. It seems apparent from the lit-

erature that the results-based approach to development is at the core of Chinese development paradigm. That is fine. However, without capacity development and empowerment, these will turn out to be short-lived development gains despite the effort.

### **6.2. Diversification**

Africa, like many other continents, is constantly under a wave of relentless exogenous shocks. For example, Africa's primary external driver of growth has been high commodity prices (Africa Progress Panel, 2012). The likelihood of commodity-dependent export countries slumping into an economic slow-down is very high if the importers of such commodities are vulnerable to global financial crises. Given that Africa holds around 60 percent of the world's uncultivated arable land, diversification of business opportunities in various sectors, in the wake of economic uncertainty, cannot be overemphasized.

Africa's agrarian change should not slip off the radar, given that most African countries are agrarian economies. It is for this reason that the Chinese approach to development in general offers less sustainable alternative, as it does not emphasize, for example, capacity development and empowerment of local communities. For example, in any agrarian debate, women play a crucial role. Part of Africa's diversification agenda should be the empowerment of women and the development of sustainable infrastructure to support any initiatives that may solidify gains made in their active participation in the process. Small economic enterprises that women get involved in are less successful due to the lack of a proper physical infrastructure such as cold storages for perishable goods. Diversification, in this case, would also support human capital as a long-term development agenda.

### **6.3. Visionary Leadership**

The former United Nations General Secretary, Kofi Annan, once said during the 2011 World Economic Forum: "The primary responsibility for progress remains with ourselves — with African leaders and their population — who need to translate the continent's wealth into results and the benefit of the people. On one hand we've seen encouraging

success stories, but there is no doubt that we have a lot to be done and there are many challenges” (Karen Allen, BBC News Business, 2011). It takes a leader with a vision, a leader who can inspire and steer the population into thinking strategically and both short- and long-term plans. This only happens when the citizenry are on board, actively shaping and determining their future and taking ownership of such plans. Africa needs an empowered leadership that can demand control of aid packages based on their national interests — leaders who have negotiation skills to balance short-term and long-term partnerships.

#### **6. 4. Inter-state and Regional Trade Agreements**

One of the key weaknesses of the African continent leadership is poor strategic thinking in the context of global trade competitiveness. Inter-state trade between and among African countries account only for 10 percent while inter-continental trade accounts for over 50 percent (Africa Progress Panel, 2010). While African economies currently enjoy an economic boom heavily reliant on China as the main trading partner, they need to intensify inter-state and regional trade activities in order to mitigate external shocks from global markets whose impact during global financial crises can be devastating to emerging and developing economies like those in Africa.

#### **7. Conclusion**

This article has highlighted the complexity of China-Africa relations from various perspectives. Noting the current Chinese-African aid modalities, the article has provided a snapshot of the subtleties of the politics of development cooperation. While China does not seem to mirror the overt western donor aid modalities which, over the past 60 years, have been very paternalistic, and often loaded with conditionalities in form of tied aid and structural reform, China has behaved in the direct opposite. However, while this is the case on a piece of paper, in practice, Chinese foreign aid is equally tied to conditionalities with less emphasis on structural reform. The article argues, therefore, that while non-interference dictates the philosophical platform on which Chinese foreign aid is administered, the system is prone to abuse by African

leadership whose accountability and transparency practices leaves a lot to be desired.

The article has further highlighted the major flaws of Chinese development approaches which, by and large, focus less on capacity development and empowerment. This, the article points out, defeats the whole debate about sustainability of development projects. Attention is brought to the following key issues: encouraging Chinese aid system to be conscious of Africa's cultural diversity and encouraging community engagement; diversification; visionary leadership; and increased inter-state and regional trade within Africa.

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