

Civil society participation and China–Africa cooperation

<http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/60701>

As the African and Chinese ministers gathered to negotiate and bargain at the current ***Forum for Cooperation between China and Africa*** (FOCAC), it has become necessary to determine the impact of civil societies from both regions on this intergovernmental process. Driven by the accentuation of the globalisation process, and the need to seek potential energy and mineral sources, China in October 2000 organised a Cooperation-Ministerial meeting in Beijing which culminated in the formation of FOCAC.

Due to FOCAC, ***foreign direct investment*** (FDI) in Africa has increased over the years. Africa registered 5.2 per cent economic growth in 2005, its highest level ever, in part because of Chinese investment. Despite the continent's economic growth, FOCAC has come under immense criticism by the West as most of its critics argue that China's non-adherence to the West's approach of imposing aid conditionalities has the potential to nullify all the progress made in fighting corruption and improving governance in Africa.

The rivalry between China and the West is due to competition for natural resources such as oil, minerals and others. The concerns raised by the West were soon demonstrated by scholars through various case studies such as Sudan and Mozambique. China's corporate practices became sensational news that guaranteed immediate research funding as scientific evidence was necessary to demonstrate the problems that could result from doing business with China. The West, which has always used civil society as a tool of democratisation, loudly proclaimed the need for civil society's involvement in order to monitor China's errant ways.

Recently China hosted a ***China–Africa Civil Society Dialogue*** which I attended in Beijing. According to the organisers, this workshop was held in the context of FOCAC. The theme they maintained was on increasing mutual understanding, promoting exchanges and cooperation through various strategies that include developing a platform of exchanges and cooperation for NGOs from China and Africa within FOCAC. Given China's stance of non-adherence to the West's approach of imposing aid conditionalities on African governments, one questions what approach will be applied to civil societies. This is critical as ***most civil societies in Africa have now become an extension of the particular donor's foreign policy objectives***.

In the 1990s, the concept of civil society made inroads into the mainstream development and democratization discourse. There is, however, an ongoing debate on the applicability of the concept of civil society, with its inherent links to institutions based on Western ideologies such as the rule of law, individualism and capitalism within non-western contexts. The question is whether China will also utilise civil societies to influence a different level of thinking, and whether China will also apply its non-interference approach with civil societies with a focus strictly on partnership and collaboration?

The fact is international donors have always viewed civil society as a key ingredient in the processes of democratisation. The United States's foreign policy, which is steeped deep in promoting democracy in all corners of the world, viewed civil societies as a tool that could hold governments to account, serving as a watchdog on governments and thereby promoting governance. The official American developmental agency USAID funds civil society organisations as one of its four democracy sectors. Sweden's ***International Development Agency*** (SIDA) maintains that Sweden funds NGOs in order to contribute to the democratic development of society.

In April 2009, the World Bank implemented a new initiative called the ***Social Accountability Initiative*** which they argued is designed as a tool to expand good governance through transparency and accountability with a view to improving aid effectiveness. I was therefore not surprised to hear some African societies during their

presentations request the Chinese government and its civil societies to assist them in promoting democratisation in their respective countries. It demonstrated how African civil societies are conditioned to assistance in exchange for aid.

The high level of support for civil society that we witnessed in the 1990s has begun to decline. Over the past five years, donor agencies have begun shifting more towards supporting governments directly, which has led to a reduction in the amount of aid flowing directly to CSOs (civil society organisations). This has not, however, reduced the proliferation of CSOs, which are now forced to spend considerable time competing for donor funding, proposal writing, submitting reports according to different donor requirements, monitoring their activities and being monitored.

The fact of the matter is that African CSOs have not necessarily managed to become the agents of democracy and development. Some CSOs have painted this industry as a fickle one that is only concerned with jet-setting for conferences, jostling for leadership positions and mismanaging funds. Some of the CSOs that attended the dialogue with me were actually defunct as donors had booted them of the funding list due to financial misappropriations. These CSO problems make it problematic to impose government accountability when they themselves are also involved in corrupt acts. Currently most international donors have CSOs on a tight leash regarding productivity and budget expenditure.

From the perspective of the Chinese government, the role of the civil society is to provide welfare gaps and to fill the holes where state support is diminishing, and not necessarily to become a tool to promote democratisation or to focus on being a government watchdog. Given the role and influence by most African civil societies dependent on Western aid and agendas, it is interesting how China will reconcile this under the FOCAC umbrella. How will Western mouthpieces, so to speak, objectively establish a relationship for mutual benefit between China and Africa?

Equally, Chinese civil societies, even though government-supported, are developmental-based with very tangible outputs. The relationship between the China government and civil society is very collaborative and productive. This is not the case with many African CSOs and their governments. Most governments cannot afford to fund their local CSOs and, unlike their counterparts in China, most African governments are not necessarily promoting a strong governance agenda that will promote developmental growth. Therefore, even if some African CSOs wanted to collaborate with their governments to improve their country, they would not necessarily get the necessary support to succeed.

There is no doubt that a fruitful civil society relationship between the two regions is essential in establishing a win–win situation for both regions. It is essential that African civil societies become more citizen-focused and work more cohesively in establishing an Africa–China blueprint for FOCAC. China presents an alternative for African countries to develop and grow their economies. However, it is up to African governments as to how Africa benefits from FOCAC.

African CSOs also play a significant role in helping African governments in creating the win–win situation. African CSOs however are also going to have to be willing to pull their weight and not expect the Chinese to do everything on their behalf and then complain that they are being treated like children.

Many questions therefore remain

How can China–Africa engagement among civil society benefit both regions effectively? Is the West along with various other critics not mistaken in thinking that civil society actors on both sides can engage one another and hold their respective governments accountable? Is it realistic for scholars to call for Chinese and African civil societies to engage their governments on human rights issues?

The assumption by some African scholars is the view that Chinese civil rights groups will automatically join African civil societies to assess governance issues. The fact is that Chinese civil societies, unlike African civil societies, are not backed by international donors bent on implementing democratisation. Most Chinese civil societies are sponsored by their government and have good relations with it. This difference is essential for the African Union (AU) and China to determine the role of civil society in this process.

African civil societies have also become a cut-throat industry requiring constant financial injections to survive. Besides requesting that Beijing come to promote democracy through development, some of the other civil societies have continued promoting their own interests and calling for China to come and perform miracles in their backyards. The dialogue has demonstrated a stark reality to me that despite our history, ***Africans still have not grasped the understanding that there is no such thing as free aid.***

The AU needs to get its internal house of civil societies in order. The current legal framework they operate under may not be adequate in ensuring accountable and honest conduct. African CSOs need to also strategise ways of effective implementation. Chinese CSOs are productive and do not waste time in endless meetings or become bogged down by the countless stories of misappropriation. It is not for the Chinese to produce the miracles that African civil societies are craving for. One good thing about this collaboration of civil societies is that African civil societies may learn what productivity means.

China needs to find a way to make the collaborative tool effective in the same way they have managed to establish aid assistance projects such as infrastructure that have made FOCAC a success.

****Yazini April is a research specialist with the China–Africa programme, Governance and Democracy Unit, Africa Institute of South Africa, Arcadia, Pretoria.***