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# CHINA-AFRICA COOPERATION AND GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

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## INTRODUCTION

The thriving relationship between China and Africa today is a product of the interaction that started several centuries ago. One version has it that China's relationship with Africa dates back to the fifteenth century when Chinese traders visited East Africa. Another version has it that the cooperation of the parties can be traced to the sixteenth century following series of trans-continental voyages involving Chinese navigators and some African scholars. The relationship subsequently blossomed into socio-political cooperation and later cultural exchanges. However, it was not until the mid-twentieth century after the Chinese revolution that the framework of cooperation deepened to include the promotion of mutual economic growth and development.

Today, China is Africa's largest trading partner, cred-

itor and source of much needed infrastructure investment. The cooperation is also deepening along political, military and security lines. A position that is regularly, and almost emphatically, taken by scores of contemporary scholars is that self-interest is the driving motivation of China in Africa. However, it may be uncharitable to attribute all of China's influence to mere self-interest. What is equally relevant and true is that politics of power and economic growth have always been the driver of relations amongst states, all with a view to safeguarding interests and assets. What makes the difference is whether the stronger or more influential party is procuring the willingness of the other party by the force of an international system; or inducing the same by mutual favourable offers in return; or simply exploiting a party who is in a vulnerable position. The first scenario is what happens when dominant global powers use tra-

ditional global economic institutions to achieve unjust bargaining positions. Though such a position is legal, it certainly will be far from equity, fairness and justice, for the simple fact that the non-dominant party is helpless in the scheme of things. The other two scenarios will occur when the leadership of a non-dominant party failed to do what they ought to do to achieve a win-win negotiation in contract. In that circumstance, this will be the fault of the non-dominant party. A balanced rhetoric of the China-Africa cooperation capturing what is underlying China-Africa relations is that in 1971 when China was to return to the United Nations, it was her friendship with newly independent countries in Asia and Africa and the massive support which delegates from Africa gave that made it possible for China to be allowed back into the United Nations. China at the time reflected the popular hope of the majority of the developing countries; a hope she has continued to deepen through diplomatic ties with these countries.

China's relationship with Africa (both "north" and "sub-Saharan Africa") is without doubt on the rise. China is globally entrepreneurial and fiercely independent in international politics. China has accomplished the arduous task of eliminating extreme poverty. As of April, 2022, it was estimated that the number of people living in extreme poverty in China had fallen by close to 800 million. China's experience offers valuable insights from which African leaders believe they can benefit. Relating with China is seen by a number of African countries as an act of self-assertion from being pushed around by other traditional allies who simply dictate terms and exhibit undue interference in their domestic issues under the guise of friendship. Further, Africa is going through rapid urbanization which urgently requires the maintenance and development of relevant infrastructure. No other partner has shown a readiness to support Africa in funding these critical infrastructure as China has done.

On the premise established above, this article seeks to explore the possible impact of the China-Africa relationship on global climate governance. In doing this, it will present a brief overview of climate change and its impact on Africa, and examine the complex dynamics of the interface of trade and climate change. In addition, it will analyse the contributions of China-Africa cooperation to the global climate governance discourse. In its conclusion, the paper will interrogate the effec-

tiveness of these contributions to the global climate change governance.

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND AFRICA

As the world converge in November, 2022 for the 27th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 27) in Egypt, the need to consider Africa and the reality of the climate threat facing her will again come to the front burner. Compared with other regions of the world, the impact of climate change on Africa is much direr. Despite the fact that Africa contributes the least to global warming, the continent suffers the most from climate change impacts. For instance, in spite of Africa having the lowest per capital carbon emissions globally, majority of her people make their livelihood from land which had been degraded or affected by other climate-related vulnerabilities. Many of her inhabitants are displaced by flooding with further consequence of spread of disease, destruction of infrastructure and disruption of ecosystems. Diminishing agricultural yields and near famine are creating problems of food security. Water shortage has become a major issue for many communities in Africa. The competition for resources is deepening instability, violent conflicts between agricultural communities and pastoralist ethnic groups and some of these are being hijacked by terrorist cells and Islamist extremists. Women are repositories of knowledge about crops and climate, the environment and natural resources, yet, the gender gap has become more pronounced. Indeed, the list of the negative impacts of climate change on Africa is endless.

A 2019 report on the State of the Climate in Africa published by the World Meteorological Organization identified Africa as vulnerability "hot spot" for climate variability and climate change impacts. In the same vein, in 2021, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization noted that the number of undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa has increased by 45% since 2012. Climate change without doubt has continued to add to the burdens of those who are already poor and vulnerable. Recent disruptions to the global economy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated the challenge of climate change for Africa.

It is, however, rather interesting that from time to time, and at regular COP meetings, all the nice statements are made as to why Africa's needs should be

elevated on the global climate agenda. Statements are made about a just transition from fossil fuel and coal, just as pledges are made to protect the forests and peatlands in recognition of their importance as global carbon sink. COP26 was no different. Yet, many of these pledges and promises are never fulfilled. They remained no more than mere platitude. Since the early 1990s, international negotiations have produced several important agreements and accords such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol (2005) and now the Paris Agreement (2015).

At Copenhagen (COP15, 2009), rich nations made a promise to channel US\$100 billion a year to less-wealthy nations by 2020 to assist them adapt to climate change and mitigate further rises in temperature. More than a decade after, the promise remains unfulfilled. In the absence of a precise approach on how to measure countries' pledges, some analysts have alleged that even the public funds that are said to be mobilised by some members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are inflated. Same issues of inadequate attention to the plight of Africa exist with global private capital initiatives such as the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet, and the green bonds. Commenting on the 2022 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) tagged Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change, the UN Secretary General described the report of the IPCC as a litany of broken climate promises. "It is a file of shame cataloguing the empty pledges that put us firmly on track towards an unliveable world".

A clear parallel to making empty promises could be established in how climate finance is expended. Despite the recognition that what Africa needs most is adaptation and the prescription of the Paris Agreement for equal proportioning of funds for mitigation and adaptation, significant proportion of climate finance is expended on mitigation projects. In 2019, less than half of the funds that was spent on mitigation project went to adaptation project. Even in that situation, many African countries could not benefit from the fund due to the complex technicalities guiding allocation and disbursement.

Clearly, the power equation at the global level of decision-making for climate governance is unlikely to see the needs of Africa fulfilled beyond the economic,

security or social interests of the selected few who have the monopoly of decision-making. There is a considerable mismatch between the magnitude of the climate challenge that Africa is facing and the regular rhetoric of support that offers no more than dashed expectations. This accounts for why developed nations are not able to convince African countries and other vulnerable nations that they are serious about climate change.

Propositions that seek to stop financing of fossil and coal investments without accommodating holistic discussions of alternatives and how countries (including public and private actors) affected are to treat extant financial obligations will not achieve just transition. A true and just transition will only result from sincere cooperation and engagement where all parties listen to understand and not merely to respond with flowery language. For as long as the needs of all are not balanced, unrelenting push for renewables will be unrealistic and not achieve much. That is the reality. The dictum *pacta sunt servanda* meaning agreements must be kept and must be balanced with *clausula rebus sic stantibus* which allows for unenforceability of contract due to fundamentally changed circumstances. If this is not done, climate change governance will continue to revel in lip-service and "greenwashing". It will also gravitate those who feel systematically side-lined to explore or nurture relationships which they feel can deliver meaningful partnerships and also enable them preserve their own margin of power.

## INTERFACE OF TRADE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Trade is recognised as one of the critical tools that can be deployed to meet the challenge of climate change and achieve shared climate goals. In the same way, trade can engender environmentally disastrous situations in a country.

Where a country lacks effective environmental policies and appropriate institutional frameworks, the impact of trade liberalization will result in pollution. With specific reference to climate change, international trade, just like other economic activities, generates greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). From the generation of the energy used during production to the final production, assembly, packaging, shipping and transportation of traded goods and services to the final consumer, carbon emissions will occur. Trade also increases emissions by

stimulating economic activities through increased income. The extractive industry in particular contributes to air, water and land pollution and toxic wastes. They are also responsible for half of the world's carbon emissions and more than 80 percent of biodiversity loss.

As alluded to earlier, trade can help in diffusing green technology by offering consumers lower-emission goods and services and facilitating the deployment of climate-friendly technologies. Well-structured economic incentives and environmental policies will encourage promotion of trade diversification in the transition to a low-carbon regime, and so would international cooperation.

In the context of the cooperation between China and Africa and as part of foreign direct investment, there are a number of Chinese business entities operating in sectors of the economy that are vulnerable to environmental concerns and climate impacts in Africa. The China-Africa Overseas Leather Products S.C is operating in Ethiopia; Jeronimo Group of Industries & Trade PIC is in Somaliland; China is involved in the development of oil fields, pipelines and refinery infrastructure in Sudan, Angola, Gabon and Nigeria; Chinese companies are also involved in mining projects in Guinea, Zambia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, and Gabon; Chinese fishing companies are involved in activities in Mauritania and Senegal; Chinese logging and timber companies are trading or operating concessions in Gabon, Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea, Congo, and Cameroon. China is also a significant source of financing for telecommunications, roads, railways and builder

*Wind power project equipment operated by Chinese company in South Africa.*



Photo/Xinhua

of hydropower dams in Sudan, Ghana, Mozambique and Ethiopia. The country also has joint ventures for solar and power holding companies in Sierra Leone, Benin, Mozambique, Ghana and South Africa; and is also involved in intensive mechanized agriculture and in the health sector.

China's policy towards Africa undoubtedly has been expanding and strategic, and despite being classified as a developing country, not many developed countries can match the clout that China is currently enjoying in Africa. China's foreign policy expressed in five principles: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence, resonates so well with many African leaders. These leaders are convinced that the capitalistic approach of the current international system which is reflected in the way interests are reconciled from time to time is intensely dismissive of their position or indifferent to their situation. With such a background belief, conversations are commenced in a stereotyped environment of mistrust and suspicion. On the contrary, many African leaders have come to view China as a partner who can set the tone for knowledge creation, and with whom they can share, receive and interpret information convivially in the implementation of common interest. Already, the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat and the Ministry of Commerce of China have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on establishing an Export Group on Economic Cooperation. The goal is to use this platform to collaborate in such areas as experience-sharing on intellectual property rights, customs procedures, digital trade, competition policy, as well as on institutional capacity and implementation of the AfCFTA.

Against the background of the above, the key question that arises is what does the synergy between China and Africa portend for climate governance? What strategic goals should the parties aim for? What priorities need to be set for the future of the cooperation?

### **CHINA-AFRICA COOPERATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE GOVERNANCE**

Climate governance has been defined as the institutions and processes that have been put in place for the effective management of the global climate system.



*African diplomatic envoys to China watching videos about cooperation with Africa in China's Sunward Intelligent Equipment Co.*



*A modern farm built by Chinese company in Namibia.*

Climate governance promotes opportunities and prompts action to avoid or, as may be necessary, redress climate change impacts. The governance process which operates at different levels may be formal or informal. Its level of operation may also be local, national, regional or international. Governance processes invariably reflect the moral and ethical principles of the social order it seeks to regulate. Applying this to China-Africa cooperation, we can decipher the synergy of the relationship for climate governance from the moral and ethical principles of the parties.

Not many will deny that contribution to corruption, over exploitation of natural resources, abuse of workers, and illegal multinational strategies among others have always been fingered as the negatives of globalization. Thus, they are not new grounds of social corporate irresponsibility peculiar to Chinese entities and from

in 2009 underlined African countries' urgent need for stronger capacity to adapt to climate change and support their legitimate rights in combating climate change. The 5th Ministerial Conference which held in Beijing agreed that China help African countries enhance capacity building in meteorological infrastructure and forest protection and management, and scale up assistance and training to Africa in disaster prevention and reduction, treatment of desertification, ecological protection, and environment management.

At the 6th Ministerial Conference which held in 2015 in South Africa, leaders from China and Africa agreed to setup the China-Africa Environmental Cooperation Centre. The Centre was unveiled at the UNEP Secretariat in Nairobi in 2018. It is anticipated that the Centre which already has a US\$1 million commitment from the China Trust Fund will serve as:

(i) a forum for environmental policy interaction and dialogue;

(ii) a clearing house for information exchange and technical co-operation on sustainable development;

(iii) a platform for capacity development in support of environmental policy and best practice to achieve Sustainable Development Goals;

(iv) a catalyst for joint environmental programmes and project development and implementation;

(v) a platform for mobilisation of funds for environmental projects and programs that will contribute towards Africa's development priorities.

The 8th Ministerial Conference of the Forum which held in Dakar adopted four documents, namely: The Dakar Action Plan (2022 – 2024); the 2035 Vision for China-Africa Cooperation; the Sino-African Declaration on Climate Change; and the Declaration of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of FO-CAC. Two of the documents (the 2035 Vision and the Sino-African Declaration) were quite

which entities from Europe, United States and other developed nations are immune. The only difference in the country's policies is that, unlike other traditional allies of Africa, China does not influence domestic policies of others or dictate policies to them. With respect to the right of parties in international contracts on the other hand, the question to ask is why are African leaders not determining Africa's priorities? African leaders are the ones who bear a primary responsibility to support entities from Africa achieve win-win in international negotiations. This will involve putting in place right policies, effective enforcement of laws, deepening of confidence in national institutions relevant to international trade and transactions, and a strong determination by these leaders to make a difference in the diversification of the economy of their respective countries.

With particular reference to climate governance, China has been very proactive in its cooperation with Africa. Reference can be made to a flurry of initiatives aimed at promoting the implementation of climate governance principles and mobilising corporate entities to address climate change in their businesses. Under the auspices of the China-Africa multilateral cooperation platform, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) announced in 2000 that parties will fulfil many environmental conventions, and that in implementing cooperation projects, parties will be bound to specific plans for environmental protection in general, but, forestry exploitation in particular. This was followed by the 2003 Addis-Ababa Plan (2004 – 2006) of the 2nd Ministerial Conference of FOCAC which agreed on a number of concrete measures with potentials to support climate mitigation and adaptation.

In 2005, FOCAC, jointly with the UN Environment Program (UNEP), held the China-Africa Environment Cooperation Conference, the goal of which was to promote environmental cooperation with African countries and also provide training. The 4th Ministerial Conference which held in Egypt

significant steps in pushing the ambition of African countries to develop a green economy and tackle climate change. They also expressed clear support for the implementation of African countries' initiatives such as the Great Green Wall Initiative, Initiative for the Adaptation of African Agriculture, and the Initiative for the Adaptation of Africa. The 2023 Vision for China-Africa Cooperation is aligned with China's own 2035 vision for development and is in sync with the long-term aspiration of Africa as outlined in the 50-year development blueprint, Agenda 2063, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations. The ideas, strategies and commitment underpinning all the documents sum up to the fact that in Africa's resources, if utilized and managed effectively, reside the key to its green development.

## CONCLUSION

The challenge of climate change and its governance is intricately linked to every aspect of human endeavour; be it food, water, security, energy, transportation, trade, housing, investment, development, or land-use, among others. This is why its governance consistently calls on the involvement of all stakeholders: in politics, public administration, private sector, civil society and the citizens. Looking at the China-Africa Cooperation, one can tick the boxes that affirm the existence of all the appropriate framework that is required to give effectiveness to climate change governance. Connecting the initiatives and bringing them to reality in order for them to deliver sustainable development to Africa is the task ahead. The clear potential of what the relationship can deliver is the motivation for traditional allies such as the United States in seeking a renewed partnership with Africa.

There, however, is a big question begging for an honest answer: "Are African leaders ready?" Regrettably, many African countries are in an uneasy state reflecting a dismal state of affairs courtesy of bad governance arising from deficit of leadership. African leaders must define Africa's relationship with China in ways that will be mutually beneficial. First steps have been taken to put laudable initiatives on the ground. The next step is for African leaders to be able to measure their worth and achievement by what "good" they are able to bring collectively for the continent and their respective countries. This is the time to take full advantage of the market opportunity that the relationship has to offer; work with China to share knowledge, skills and technology; and proactively get Africa's academic institutions to become more vibrant in research and development that will result in innovations. China-Africa cooperation presents a great opportunity for Africa to become a respected collaborator in the global climate governance discourse. ■