

Sustainability in China-Africa relations – ‘Greening’ FOCAC

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China’s economic development has been one of the large global development success stories of the last generation: China’s GNI has grown tenfold over the last 25 years. Given the size of China, not least so its demographic weight, this impressive economic growth is a basis for global political weight (cf. Kaplinsky/Messner 2008). After having pursued a policy of ‘opening up’ under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, China is increasingly ‘going out’ since the late 1990s. Under President Hu Jintao, the country was engaging increasingly with global politics, including increasing cooperation with in African states.

One of the challenges in Africa is the work on nature conservation while promoting development at the same time. The UNDP report on progress on the MDG notes that targets for the provision of basic sanitation (which is also related to sustainability questions) is out of reach for the 2015 deadline, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. UNDP continues by clearly stating: “The world has missed the 2010 target to slow the decline in biodiversity. Nearly 17,000 species of plants and animals are currently at risk of extinction, and the number of species threatened by extinction is growing by the day” (UNDP 2012). Specifically in some biodiversity hotspots like South Africa, Madagascar or the DRC, this is a worrying trend (cf. Burgess 2012b). And while deforestation rates might have slowed down, they continue to be particularly high in highly biodiverse forests that, once destroyed, cannot be brought back by tree-planting programmes or the like (UNDP 2012). Development endeavours in Africa thus have to be sensitive to environmental concerns, including investments and industrial developments in the realm of South-South Cooperation.

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In China-Africa relations, new institutions such as the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) were created and economic cooperation sky-rocketed in the last decade (Cissé, forthcoming). As a Chinese business participant in South Africa enthusiastically stated at a CCS workshop in Stellenbosch in August 2011: “China will change the face of this continent”. The Chinese government might be more cautious in the presentation of its influence, but there is little doubt that China’s developmental rise changes the global settings and, also directly, changes development prospects in Africa. This global and African change, however, is not a solution to all development problems on the African continent.

Chinese environmental concerns

Besides the vast opportunities for Africa, and much like any other outside assistance and cooperation, the Chinese contribution to development comes with challenges that need to be managed and mitigated. The challenges evolving from the engagement of

Chinese actors, however, will be specific to China and have a lot to do with the development paths chosen in the 'Middle Kingdom'. Much discussed are the governance challenges that China might or might not present to African states and societies (Taylor 2006; Hackenesch 2011; Hodzi et al. 2012). Environmental challenges are discussed to a lesser extent. They are often discussed as linked to the type of Chinese investment in rather environmentally hazardous investments in mining or timber logging in Africa (cf. Bosshard 2008; Conservation International 2011). Yet, environmental challenges are part and parcel of development through industrialisation and will also impact on the long-term development prospects of African states.

In China herself, development is happening at breath-taking speed, literally. Challenges are manifold: land use, water pollution, air quality – and the big picture: climate change. The economic growth has led to numerous environmental problems (water, soil, air pollution, waste management, etc.) that are increasingly addressed by policy makers, not least so as environmental pollution has reached a level that it clearly comes with economic costs (World Bank 2007; Economy 2007). And pollution increasingly is a topic around which Chinese citizens organize and challenge state decisions (Li Wanxin et al. 2012; Chen Gang 2009: xxi; Burgess 2011). It might be a lesson from the fall of the communist regimes in Central European states that environmental pollution is one of the crystallising points for a dissident civil society if the complaints and immediate threats to citizen's health and well-being are not addressed. In Africa, the massive environmental pollution in the Niger Delta with little to no developmental gains for the affected communities is one of the prime examples of ignorance towards the ecology and people's livelihoods as a driver for conflict (e.g. Obi 2008).

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Chinese politicians, for their part, seem to be increasingly aware of the challenge. Policy measures to react to these economic and political challenges are taken in China. In 2005, President Hu Jintao called for a more scientific path towards development, reacting to environmental concerns (cf. Li Wanxin 2011). Environmental issues raise higher on the political agenda in China, with legislation as well as law enforcement tightened (see also the 12th Five Year Plan of the PRC). Furthermore, environmental protection institutions like the relatively weak State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) were upgraded to a full-fledged Ministry for Environmental Protection (MEP). Yet, the challenges are manifold and China is facing persistent implementation challenges (Chen Gang 2009).

Development and the environment – learning from China?

While *sustainability* is a widely accepted *leitmotif*, the practical reconciliation of environmental protection and conservation with economic and social development remains a challenge for developing and developed countries alike. It is an interesting – and extremely relevant – question whether environmental awareness and key concepts of sustainability can only thrive in more developed societies, i.e. in societies in which basic needs are being taken care of. The conflict points mentioned above seem to suggest that environmental thinking is not an issue for wealthy societies only. Environmental awareness might, however, be following a V-shaped curve in the development process.

Thus far, development is fundamentally understood as being about human control over the environment. The very concept of development is that humankind is shaping the environment, making people less subject to natural hazard. In this rationale, it is logical that in many societies, a 'natural state' is perceived as the situation to be overcome. While non-industrialised, agrarian societies base their livelihood on a life dependent on natural cycles and thus sensitive to environmental factors (which are sought to be somewhat managed, nevertheless), early industrialisation seems to come with a 'can do' attitude that rather sees environmental issues as yet another managerial challenge, thus posing *problems with policies and perceptions* (Hong Jiang 2010). This was the case in industrialising Europe in the late 19th century (Birnie et al. 2009: 589), and seems to be a pattern in today's emerging economies, too. In the post-industrial societies, environmental concerns are revived again and are linked to evolving value systems and matters of quality of life – and yet, these concerns in a post-industrial society are often concerned with a 'repair' of the already lost natural riches. We find a few indications for this interpretation of a V-shaped debate: The 're-naturalisation' of previously canalised water streams in an otherwise industrialised agricultural landscape might be an indication of these debates in Germany in the 1980s. Today's China is undergoing rapid industrialisation and should – according to the train of thought sketched above – be at the rising leg of the 'V-shaped' curve.

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Indeed, in today's China, environmental concerns are surfacing when pollution poses an immediate threat people's health or, as a consequence, negatively affects the return on their investment, as is the case with air pollution in Beijing or potentially hazardous industrial developments in Dalian, Xiamen, or elsewhere (Burgess 2012a; Li Wanxin *et al.* 2012). This individual reaction to environmental challenges 'at one's own doorsteps' is a global reaction, also to be found in the already mentioned example of the Niger Delta or, say, the civic resistance to deposits for radioactive waste in relatively thinly populated areas in Northern Germany. The environmental awareness in China is researched mostly amongst students, showing an increasing awareness – and the expectation of a rather worse immediate future (Wong 2003). More recent research in China's 'Green Schools' is less optimistic about the environmental awareness, stating that the perception of tensions between growth and environmental concerns amongst pupils was minimal and finding that economic development and welfare were clearly taking precedence over environmental concerns (Sternäng/Lundholm 2011).

We can expect the emphasis and political dimensions in the internal discussion on environmental effects in developing countries to be different from industrialised societies for various reasons. First, the sense of urgency in economic growth is much more pronounced, job and wealth creation are an immediate need for large parts of the population (as illustrated in the research by Sternäng/Lundholm 2011). Consequently, concerns of smaller and immediately affected groups – at least initially – might be regarded as less pressing and to be holding society as a whole rather hostage to 'backward thinking' and romanticism of a minority and expectations of scientific or technological progress to solve negative effects might be more prevalent. Secondly, the evocation of an environmental discussion by external actors (international NGOs or the like) are taken as interference in internal affairs – if not even as a full conspiracy against the rise of developing nations, with industrialised states using environmental

concerns as an excuse to keep unwanted competition small. Indeed, debates about the highway through the Tanzanian Serengeti are illustrative of these aspects, with supporters emphasising the potential developmental effects for the Mara district (“Councillors support Serengeti road”, *Tanzania Daily News*, 11 April 2012). A government spokesperson reportedly sighed: “you guys always talk about animals, but we need to think about people” (cited in Kipkore 2010). However, tourism managers in Kenya were equally concerned about the road plans; environmental protection and development clearly are producing tensions.

Looking into the so-called ‘China model’, decision-makers and commentators in Africa often practice cherry-picking, focussing on the economic growth rates and poverty reduction in China. Unsuspecting of environmental ignorance, Kenyan environmental activist and Nobel laureate, late Wangari Maathai, suggested that exchanges with China would be beneficial to Africans as it would help them understand “a fast-changing China” and the Chinese development experience that was significant to Africa (Zhu Zhiqun 2010: 46). Undoubtedly, there is a lot of scope for learning from China. Yet, the picture needs to be comprehensive, not selectively blind. Consequently, knowledge needs to be broadened, if lessons are to be learned from another society’s development trajectory. What can Africa learn from China – and what can China learn from Africa in terms of environmental protection? What should be included in the FOCAC debates, both with regard to process and to content?

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‘Greening’ Sino-African cooperation – FOCAC and its commitments

Environmental issues are also increasing in relevance in China’s international relations, not least in its stance on climate change (see, for instance, Wei Liang 2010), but also in debates about standards applied in cooperation. Already in 2000, during the first FOCAC meeting in Beijing, environmental cooperation featured in the agreed action plan. Environmental cooperation between China and Africa’s states was agreed upon in areas including pollution control, biodiversity conservation, protection of forests, fisheries and wildlife management. This general statement of intent, however, was not ‘operationalised’ and not linked to specific targets. In all of these cooperation areas, problems have surfaced, be it in pollution control in the mining industry, the poaching of abalone and illegal fishing operations off the African coast, debates on rhino poaching and the role of Chinese criminal groups in it, or the accusation of illegal logging in African rainforests (cf. The CCS Weekly Briefing, various issues, also: Burgess 2011). Illegal activities by individuals do not devalue the overall partnership; doing so would mean to measure with different standards, as we do see weapon sales or oil exploitation or non-sustainable fishing by Europeans or North Americans. The value of a relationship, however, is in the ways of handling those activities that are not covered by it. Nationally and internationally accepted standards need to be effectively policed and implemented. Specific actions and targets help in formulating and focussing policies, not unlike the idea behind the Millennium Development Goals.

With the fourth FOCAC meeting in Sharm el-Shaik in 2009, we saw some specific goals in the 'greening' of China-Africa relations emerge, specifically in the area related to climate change. In Sharm el-Sheik, China has committed, *inter alia*,

"to assist African countries with 100 small-sized well digging projects for water supply and clean energy projects of biogas, solar energy and small hydro-power plants in the next three years [...as well as to...] help African countries better protect the ecosystem and biodiversity". (FOCAC 2009)

While making the commitments more tangible – and thus subject to better monitoring – the commitments on biodiversity remain vague. The specificity in targets came into play mostly with FOCAC III, held in 2006. It is certainly no coincidence that the Chinese commitment of 'doubling aid' came a year after the G8 Gleneagles Summit, where Western countries pledged exactly this: the doubling of their aid. At the next occasion, in Sharm el-Shaik in 2009, however, the choice was rather to replace the 'old' eight commitments with eight 'new' commitments. It is understandable that China's government does not want to repeat the policies of Western countries to outdo successive numerous financial and political commitments. Western countries are struggling to fulfil their commitments (as also analysed by the OECD itself), finding themselves accused of 'creative book-keeping' or entangled in a blame-game with some foreign governments of why some commitments have not been met. It is more sensible to manage expectations and stick to commitments that are manageable. Yet, in environmental matters, it is not a question of the steepest commitments or the best sounding promises. Agreement on not necessarily just more, but on *more specific* targets in the area of environmental cooperation would make FOCAC more 'operational' in this policy area.



Positive developments have taken place with regard to environmental concerns in the relationship China-Africa.



Positive developments have taken place with regard to environmental concerns in the relationship China-Africa. China EXIM Bank, for instance, has introduced environmental standards in its lending practice. The environmental policy of EXIM Bank was established in 2004 already and it is publically available; it can thus be used as a tool in advocacy by NGOs, too. Since 2007, environmental impact assessments are necessary also for lending for Chinese infrastructure projects. Additionally, corporate social responsibility gets increasing attention by larger Chinese companies (Bosshard 2008:6). The key challenge is thus not the lack of policy, but a lack of implementation or differences in interpretation of what constitutes a harmful behaviour and what does not. The onus in the environmental discussion is clearly predominantly on the African side; China has responsibilities, though, as the more powerful element in the discussion, as argued elsewhere (Grimm 2011).

Conclusions – Not more, but more effective cooperation in environmental matters

The necessary assessment of moves towards more environmental issues benefits from being contextualised in the environmental policies and their implementation in China herself. Learning, however, is not a one-way street. Africa can indeed learn from China, including in the environmental realm and how to reform institutions with a view to make them more effective. Yet, learning could also take the other way, with Chinese decision-makers looking into good practice in African states and thereby learning from African examples. The regulation of national parks, for instance, is one such issue where African regulations look back on a longer history and are more advanced than Chinese policies (cf. Burgess 2012b).

What policy makers can learn from the Chinese development example includes that it is politically contagious to ignore environmental concerns (see Eastern Europe and emerging Chinese protests) – and it is economically costly. These costs might not be immediate, but to simply postpone facing the bill comes with additional costs. A philosophy of ‘develop first, repair the damage later’ is not sustainable for any state, not least as the loss in biodiversity cannot be undone. This is not an abstract debate that has not touched Africa. To the contrary: many issues arise in Africa, e.g. when hard infrastructure is cutting through national parks (e.g. Serengeti) or where resource exploitation leaves destruction behind (e.g. Niger delta). The above mentioned examples are the concern of African policy-makers in the first place. Yet, environmental protection is also an immediate topic for China-Africa relations, as many Chinese business activities are active across the continent in mining and logging. These are environmentally sensitive economic sectors and China is thus well-advised to proactively address issues with a high potential for negative headlines – both in Africa and globally.

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It is therefore in the interest of the Chinese government to explore sustainability as an issue in China-Africa relations, very much beyond the ‘moral’ argument. This is not just a matter of a blame-game. The lifestyles in the USA and in Europe (as well as in other developed countries) are not sustainable in themselves. The West’s historic development combined with the catching-up of a handful of emerging economies of the size of China and India is beyond the means of this planet – and already does negatively affect the entire global population, including those parts, like most of Africa, who have not caused climate change. Locally tangible effects – including in China – illustrate that it makes immediate political and economic sense to address environmental challenges. 2012 marks the 20th anniversary of the Rio Conference on Sustainability, the 10th anniversary of the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development. Rio+20 and the 5th FOCAC meeting in 2012 should be a time to assess China’s role in Africa on this matter.

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