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The African Cup of Nations 2012 – China's goals

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The kick-off at the African Cup of Nations in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea has been made. Both countries co-host the 28th African Cup of Nations (AFCON 2012) between 21 January and 12 February 2012. It is the first time for both countries to host a big international sports event – and the biggest soccer event on the continent will make Gabon and Equatorial-Guinea the centres of attention for a large part of the African population. Gabon's government made investments in the scope of €370 million, spent on equipment for the competition, inter alia for stadiums, hotels, and transport system. Moreover, the country has had the financial and technical support of, amongst others, China. Even if China cannot participate in the Cup itself, it is still scoring goals with the event.

China's showcase projects in Gabon

China has co-financed (i.e. provided a loan) and built (via the Shanghai Construction Group) a 40,000-seat stadium in the Gabonese capital, Libreville. The stadium, the biggest the country has ever had, hosts the matches of the group C (Gabon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Niger) and the Final on the 12 February 2012. The Chinese government, through its Vice Minister Fu Ziying, symbolically put down the foundation stone in April 2010. Henri Ohayon, General Director of the National Agency of Major Construction (ANGT), affirmed in the magazine *Jeune Afrique* that the stadium is considered as "a gift from the Chinese government to Gabon in the name of the friendship that ties the two countries". Commonly known as the Stade d'Angondjé, the new stadium is now officially referred to as the Stade de l'Amitié (Sino-Gabonaise).

Through the Stade de l'Amitié, Libreville is the city where the showcase projects of Chinese cooperation in Gabon are most obvious – but the stadium is not the only one. Other showcase projects in Libreville are the Chinese Hospital of Libreville, the National Assembly building, the Senate building, and the Maison George Rawiri which is the headquarter of the Gabonese national broadcaster, amongst others. In Franceville (in the south-east), the other Gabonese city which will host some matches, one can see the Hôpital Chinois de Franceville. Other projects such as primary schools, clinics, roads, or Chinese medical teams can be noticed throughout the country.

Beyond these showcase projects, China is playing an influential role in some important sectors in Gabon. Diplomatic relations between China and Gabon were established in 1974. However, it has been argued that the increase in China's involvement in Gabon, like with other African countries and especially in terms of commercial relations, started in the late 1990s. And not least so the visit to Gabon of President Hu Jintao in 2004 was considered as a sign of the increase of the ties between the two countries. Today, regarding the extent of China's involvement as an investor and trading partner especially in the mine sector, the country has been

considered as amongst Gabon's privileged and second largest customer behind the United States of America.

Small but interesting – Gabon's economy

Gabon - like its north-west neighbour Equatorial Guinea - is a country sitting on riches. Indeed, Gabon has large natural resources and is an important producer of oil and manganese. Gabon has also reserves of diamonds, niobium and phosphates, gold, lead/zinc, potassium salts and magnesium. Even if statistically having the second largest per capita income on the African continent (after – exactly: Equatorial Guinea),

Gabon is a tiny market; the country, being slightly bigger than the UK or Ecuador, is having a population of only 1.5 million. The market size is even smaller if one considers the substantial inequality in the country. Big rainforest are covering more than 85% of the country's land.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) indicates a 5.6% Real GDP growth in 2011 and predicts a 3.3% of Real GDP growth in 2012. Even if the country's significant performance since 2010 has resulted from the country's investments for the preparation of the AFCON2012, the fact remains that Gabon's main source of economic growth are the extraction and exportation of oil, manganese, and forestry.

China's goal in the AFCON 2012

In the light of Chinese interest across the African continent, it is not surprising to find China playing a major role in timber and mining as a major investor and trade partner. As Putzel et. al (2011) report, 70% of Africa's log exports to China are from the countries of the Congo Basin (including Equatorial Guinea) and in 2009

Gabon was China's fifth largest supplier of wood. In the mining sector, Chinese state-owned companies are involved in the extraction of Iron ore (with the Belinga iron project, Gabon's largest investment), and manganese (with the M'bembélé mine in the Moyen Ogooué area). China's economic interests in Gabon are thus predominantly in the (resource) trade links between the two countries. The construction of the stadium is largely of symbolic value. In terms of absolute value, a loan with either interest-free or prime rate to construct the Stade de l'Amitié in itself was not a large issue for the Chinese state (even if beneficial to the company that built it). The stadium, however, represents another goal that

China just scored in: the game of influence against Gabon's other major partners such as the United States and France.

On China's involvement in the Gabonese mining industry, see a CCS report of 2009, authored by Jansson, J., Burke, C, and W. Jiang: "Chinese Companies in the Extractive Industries of Gabon & the DRC: Perceptions of Transparency". Stellenbosch University: Centre for Chinese Studies. 