

China Enhancing Education Development in Africa: A Case Study of Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper analyzes China's new approaches of education aid to Africa through a case study of Cameroon. China's education aid includes higher education, vocational training, Chinese language instruction in developing countries, school construction, and collaboration with multilateral organizations. In recent years, China's university scholarships and vocational training programs have grown sharply, as has Chinese-language instruction. Cameroon has been one of the countries that have had a relatively extended cooperation with China. Four types of Chinese education aid to Africa are illustrated by this paper: (i) Confucius Institutes, which are providing language and culture-related training in host countries; (ii) longer term scholarships and short-term training for Africans in China; (iii) school construction; and (iv) stand-alone education projects. By analyzing how these three different types of aid are taking place in Cameroon, various and apparently contradictory strategies and discourses materialize.

Keywords: Africa, China, Cameroon, Capacity building, Education

I. Introduction

As in most countries worldwide, Sub-Saharan African countries are striving to build their human capital so they can compete for jobs and investments in an increasingly globalized world. China's aid and other engagements in Africa have been relatively on the rise and the Middle Kingdom has emphasized that it has a different ideology than most Western countries regarding its foreign policy. The official political discourse of the Chinese government is that it wishes to establish equal-to-equal relations with other countries and avoid any traits of 'imperialism' (i.e. foreign domination) towards another nation. China has therefore promoted the idea of a mutually beneficial partnership with Africa, in which both parties gain from the relationship. This "win-win" link between China and Africa - albeit being highly questioned by Western media, academia, and governments - does appeal to African leaders and to many Africans.

Besides the field of commercial activities per se, education has become a great component of the Sino-African framework. From a Chinese perspective, the "China-Africa Education Cooperation" is often divided into three phases. The initial phase was triggered with the first diplomatic relations that China started with Kenya, Egypt, Uganda and Cameroon in 1956. At the time, 24 exchange students traveled to the other side. The second phase consisted of a period of implementation: from the 1970's to the 1980's the number of exchange students increased and an official document of the Chinese government recorded that 4,570 Africans had studied in China by the end of 1996. Moreover, during this phase, China began to provide educational equipment and to build research laboratories all over the continent. Finally, by the turn of the Millennium, phase three started with the "Declaration of 2000": it was a program for China Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development which included human resources development and education. China then set up a list of measures regarding African personnel training, academic cooperation projects (such as joint laboratories and research institutes) and scholarship opportunities¹ (Kaiyu; 2012). "Beyond this, there was the continuation of the scholarship mechanism for longer-term training, mostly at the degree level, and there was also the sending of teachers to Africa to facilitate channels of communication between universities of both sides. Also at the time of this first FOCAC meeting in 2000, there was agreement that the two parties should work out 'country specific training plans' (King; 2006: 4)²

¹ See Kaiyu, S. 2012. Blackboard Cooperation: China's role in educating Africa, Consultancy Africa Intelligence.

² Quoted from King, K. 2006. The Beijing China-Africa summit of 2006: The New implementation implications of aid to education. Paper delivered to the Symposium of China-Africa Shared Development, 18-19 December 2006, Beijing

The consequence of this long-term partnership is the designing of a landscape of thousands of African students that can access fully-funded higher education degrees, hence, maximize their technical skills and career prospects – potentially beyond the social strata that usually studies abroad. Each year, hundreds of scholarships are given to African students to study in China in a bid to step up youth exchanges and to lay a foundation for future China-Africa ties. In order to ensure sustainable development to Africa, educational issues are to be given more intention under the FOCAC framework. The FOCAC educational agenda has developed from academic exchanges, government scholarships, higher education cooperation and research projects, dispatch of teachers, and human resources development to cover technical and vocational education and training, distance learning (remote learning), school construction, dispatch of volunteers, teaching Chinese as foreign language, and mutual recognition of academic qualification. In its aim to promote access and quality education, China is trying not to leave any African countries behind, the dragon economy takes the continent as a whole in terms of bolstering the continent educational system. For example, China intensification of relations with developing country like Cameroon has been attributed to the need to secure raw material (Ayittey, 2010; Davies et. al 2008), however, China has also been trying to promote Cameroon education development. Cameroon and China have signed several agreements in the domain of economic and technical cooperation.

Most of these accords define the modalities of Chinese concessional lending to Cameroon, but others are about cultural, technical and diplomatic affairs. Among these accords we have: Agreement for the reciprocal protection and promotion of investments signed in 1997, Agreement for Economic and Commercial Cooperation signed in 2002, and several Agreements on Economic and Technical Cooperation. China's educational assistance is precisely focused on primary school construction, language training, teachers and technicians training, and scholarships, which are recognized as a form capacity building and development. This paper intends to explore China-Africa education exchange and cooperation. The second part will be discussing educational cooperation in Sino-Africa relations; the third part will be present the impact of China development assistance in improving the education quality and access in Cameroon. The fourth part will be discussing policies and perception of Sino-Cameroonian Cooperation and the fifth part will conclude the paper.

2. Education Cooperation in the New Century

There China-African educational ties are by no means a new phenomenon. Educational exchanges have been initiated by China shortly after the end of the colonial era in the 1960s Programs initially focused on student exchanges¹ and teacher visits but the Cultural Revolution which took root in 1965 eventually brought these early attempts to an end (Nordtveit 2009). Ties were again resumed in the 1980s and an increasing number of African students came to China in order to pursue their studies. It is especially during the last decade that educational cooperation has increased more rapidly following China's increased economic engagement with Africa countries. At the political level, the first Sino-African Education minister's meetings took place in Beijing in 2005 which resulted in the "Beijing Declaration" signed by 17 African countries (Sinograduate 2012). The declaration contained a common commitment towards educational development and laid a special focus on primary education, vocational and technical education (Nordtveit 2009). Furthermore, the declaration recognized that "the relevance of education to economic development is more significant in the process of pursuing economic development and eliminating poverty" and mutual benefit, and the intention to pursue multilateral consultations around common issues (FOCAC 2005).

During the third Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2006, four main areas of involvement have been announced by the Chinese government: (i) setting up rural schools in Africa, (ii) increasing the number of Chinese Government Scholarships, (iii) providing professionals and educationalists of various institutions in Africa, and (iv) the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CI) for Chinese language teaching and the encouragement of teaching African languages in Chinese universities (FOCAC, 2006). Along these lines, the Chinese government announced its commitment to increase training for African specialists and heads of leading educational institutions, to assist African countries to build 100 schools and to increase the number of scholarships (Nordtveit 2006:46).

More recently, the UNESCO-China-Africa University Leaders meeting was held in Paris in 2011 and brought 44 presidents from Chinese and African universities together to discuss how to advance university cooperation between these two regions. During the latest FOCAC meeting in 2012, China announced its three years "African Talents Plan" which sets the 30,000 Africans, to award 18, 000 government scholarships (Sinograduate 2012) and to build cultural and vocational training facilities by 2015. This is a great increase compared to the 2009 FOCAC meeting which foresaw 5, 500 government scholarship and promised to train

¹ Some of the earliest accounts on this matter includes John Hevi's autobiographical book 'An African student in China, in which Hevi provides a detailed and unfavorable account of his and some fellow students experiences in China such as the exposure to political control and racial discrimination.

20,000 Africans (Hanauer, Morris 2014: 77).

In order to develop a better understanding of China's major education programs in Africa, the remaining part of this section sets to give a greater account of the four main pillars of China's educational cooperation. This is by no means a comprehensive list but it provides an overview of the main features and modalities of China's educational cooperation:

Vocational and Human Resources Training

The third and fourth FOCAC meetings foresaw a massive investment in professional training. The third FOCAC meeting 2006 promised to train 15,000 African professionals within their respective countries as well as in China (long-term and short-term courses) including teachers of all levels of education and four education research centers were set up in China to providing training to Africa's formal education system. The 2009 FOCAC meeting again foresaw an increase in human resources development, especially through the support of aiming to reach up to 30,000 African professionals from various sectors in 2015 (FOCAC 2006, 2009, King 2007b).

One example is the training sessions of the International Poverty Reduction Center in China (IPRCC – founded by the government in cooperation with UNDP) which focus on China's poverty reduction experiences for civil servants of developing countries. A report on a 2006 workshop on Poverty, Policy, and Practice for African countries details the following outcomes: "The participants were given detailed information on Chinese economic and social development as well as compulsory education in rural China. Second, the field trip was a chance for the participants to witness and to learn from Chinese experiences and policies. Third, friendship was growing" (cited from Nordtveit 2009:162). Amongst participants, there is a keen interest in China's development experience as reflected in the following reaction of a Ghanaian participant who was "astonished" by Guangxi's village-based development model and stated that she would "coordinate the Ghanaian government agencies into the study of the experience and hard work of the Chinese people" (Nordtveit 2009:162).

Giving an account of a training for African diplomats in China, French (2005) reports how China's political stance in the United Nation Security Council towards the United States intervention in Iran was repeated several times during the training, concluding that "while the aid seems aimed at winning African hearts, the classes in diplomacy, constantly refined over the past decade, seem aimed more at swaying African minds. In addition, to impart a sympathetic view of China, they put forth a distinctly Chinese view of the world on questions about everything from economic development and history to democracy" (French: 2005).

Scholarship for African Students in China

Representing the earliest form of China-Africa educational cooperation, scholarships are on the FOCAC-Agenda since its initiation in 2000 and over the last decade, there has been a significant increase from 2000 African scholarship recipients in 2003 and 6000 in 2012 (Obamba 2013:7). The fourth FOCAC meeting also foresaw the provision of 200 scholarship for a Master in Public Administration in China for 200 middle to high-level professionals (King 2014:4).

The Government Scholarship program is amongst the most straightforward in indicating an overall objective which is "to strengthen mutual understanding and friendship between China and other countries" (Changsha 2014). But Ding and Chapman also spell out that the scholarship program provides mechanisms for training future leaders from other countries who might assume a powerful position in their respective countries. This would have a great influence on the future relationship between China and its beneficiaries (Dong, Chapman 2008:162). What still remains unclear, is how scholarship and training opportunities are distributed across different countries (Obamba 2013:7).

Confucius Institutes and Chinese Language Learning: Following the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Kenya in 2005, there has been a precipitous spread towards other countries on the continent. Nine years later, 37 Institutes in 27 African countries have been established. Although this number only represents a small proportion of the world's 300 Confucius Institutes, they significantly outweigh institutes of cultural representation of other countries such as Alliance Francaise (which is represented in 16 African countries) and the German Goethe Institute (which is present in 17 countries) Scarlett 2010:3; Confucius Institute 2013).

Confucius Institutes are generally demand-driven partnerships between a Chinese and a host country university. Their main function is the promotion of Mandarin and Chinese culture and to work towards a better image of China to the outside world. The Confucius Institutes offer short and long-term programs in Chinese, international Chinese language examinations, and Chinese culture courses and they also offer a lot of extracurricular activities such as film screenings, art exhibitions or sports and they occasionally consult firms and individuals interested in China. All this is supposed to make Chinese a global language and to encourage trade and investment between the Chinese and the host economy (Kragelund 2014). Finally, there are also many scholarship opportunities for the participant in language training within China (for example, the Confucius Institute of the University of Nairobi alone issued 40 scholarships in 2009/2010 (King 2010a: 81-82).

School Construction

Lastly, the FOCAC Action Plan 2005 also foresaw that construction of hundred schools in rural areas, while the following 2009 FOCAC meeting provided for the construction of an extra 50 China-Africa friendship schools. However, an academic assessment of this endeavor is entirely absent and little can be said about the effects and perceptions of this program. The reason for this lack of interest might be the fact that this is a rather small number – coming to about 26 schools per year in the time period of 2007-2012. For example, this can hardly be compared with the 2600 primary and secondary schools Japan constructed in 22 countries between 1985 and 2008 (King 2013:30). The different engagement of the two donors might be due to the fact that Japan, as well as other Western donors, are heavily engaged in supporting basic and secondary education especially under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the ‘Education for All’ Goals while China has largely remained absent from this discourse (King 2014:8).

3. Cameroon’s Educational Cooperation with China

There are seven countries in which 40 percent or more of children do not meet a minimum standard of learning by grades 4 or 5. In countries such as Zambia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and others, above half of in-school students have not learned basic skills when they complete primary school. Under the current model, half of sub-Saharan Africa’s total primary school population – 61 million children – will reach adolescence without the basic skills needed to lead successful and productive lives (Africa Learning Barometer; 2012). In Cameroon, the population living below the poverty line in 2000 was estimated at 48 percent (CIA, 2014) and 39.9 percent in 2007 (World Bank, 2014), and, therefore, the lack of some form of support to students from poor and marginalized backgrounds could put an end to their educational career or reduce the quality of their learning, especially if they are not able to meet the demands and cost associated with learning (Ngwana, 2003; UNESCO, 2003; Magdalin, 2015)

Cameroon had a period of economic success during the period prior to 1986, with an economic boom that could yield foreign exchange revenue from petroleum and cocoa (Afrodad, 2011). The change in Cameroon’s GDP as of 1987 – 1993 was negative (-2.8 percent) according to the UK Economist Intelligence Unit country profile report (2007). However, Cameroon’s economic growth picked up again in 1994, after the profound economic crisis. Growth rate averaged was estimated at 3.8 percent in 2006 (IMF, 2007a). This economic leap was far enough to reduce poverty in Cameroon with an actual population of 24 451 850. Persistent poverty, increase income inequality and slow job growth, are critical constraints on the socio-economic development in Cameroon. Therefore, Contemporary Cameroon development strategy is deep-seated in the country’s National Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (GESP) with a reference framework for government action over the period 2010 - 2020. It replaced the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) instituted in 2008 following its non-satisfactory outcomes. The PRSP was simply a tool to help guide the attainment of the MDGs goals.

New development strategy seeks to make Cameroon a middle-income country, a newly industrialized country, consolidate democracy in the next three decades as well as eradicating poverty in Cameroon. In order to attain these objectives, the country has increased its investments and at the same time has also improved its international cooperation to attract and accommodate foreign funding which will eventually lead to the changes in the country. Since it became a unified country in 1961, Cameroon has received significant amounts of foreign aid, most of it coming from France, the Europe Economic Community and several multilateral agencies (Mbaku, 1994). However, in the last two decades, China has been one of the most important donors since it has increased its foreign development assistance to developing countries including Cameroon. The motive for such aid ranges from different developmental, economic, commercial and political perspectives, which seeks for mutual benefit for both China and Cameroon.

Sino – Cameroonian relationship has been characterized by amicable economic and social cooperation which can be considered as China’s general approach with other African countries. China affianced its African counterparts, including Cameroon, to serve the mutual interest and mutual benefits. As affirmed by the former Chinese President, Hu Jintao during an official visit to Cameroon in January 2007, that China’s relation with Cameroon is sincere, based upon equality, reciprocal benefits and win – win cooperation. Bilateral cooperation between China and Cameroon covers an array of areas which includes trade, infrastructures, construction as well as investments in energy and exploitation of natural resources; additionally, China has also extended its aid towards health, cultural and tourism, and above all the educational sectors which is our main purpose in this paper.

Four kinds of projects are categorizing Sino-Cameroonian educational cooperation: Chinese language training, school constructions, Higher education research cooperation, and human resource and capacity building. This part seeks to analyze every category as well as its impact on Cameroon economic growth and social development.

Language training

According to the journal *Business in Cameroon February 2016* edition, Chinese training centers in Cameroon

are supervising approximately 10,000 persons by 2016. The rush to learn the Chinese language, according to the management of these learning centers, is explained by the availability of opportunities in terms of employability in the country. Indeed, following the launch of infrastructure projects in Cameroon, mostly undertaken by Chinese companies, several companies have established themselves in Cameroon and Chinese language knowledge is, therefore, an additional advantage to be recruited by these companies. Moreover, many local economic operators see the Chinese language as an opportunity to strengthen their business relations with their Chinese partners. For traders who import goods from China, mastering the Chinese language generally, enables them to successfully conduct business once in China.

The Chinese Language Teaching Centre was established in Yaoundé in 1997, under the auspices of the International Relation Institute of Cameroon at the University of Yaoundé II and the Zhejiang Normal University in China; it was upgraded into the Confucius Institute in 2007. In the implementation's agreement, both Cameroon and China side support Chinese studies in Cameroon, they jointly work on the establishment, development, planning, advertisement and promotion of Confucius Institute at the University Yaoundé II, and friendly cooperation with the Office of Chinese Language International Council (Hanban) for its evaluation. Also, according to this agreement, the Confucius Institute of the University of Yaounde II develops the educational exchange programs, such as mutual recognition of credits and bridging curriculum with the Chinese institutions of higher learning that meet the conditions. Students spend the first and second year at the Confucius Center and further their third and fourth-year study at the Chinese institutions of higher learning where the degree will be awarded to the eligible students, to promote the Sino-Cameroon educational cooperation. In terms of Organization and management of the new Confucius Centre, the representative from the University of Yaoundé II hosts the post of chairperson and the representative from Zhejiang Normal University hosts the post of vice-chairperson. However, Both parties will be responsible for the funding. Hanban and Zhejiang Normal University invest a certain amount of funds at the setting-up period; the University of Yaoundé II invests in the form of classrooms, offices, equipment, etc. and strives for the funding support from the government of Cameroon.

Since its establishment, the Confucius Institute at the University of Yaounde II set up fifteen language teaching centers in Yaoundé, Douala, and Maroua, in universities, primary and secondary schools, ministries, organizations, and enterprises. By November 2013, total Chinese learners enroll in different centers almost reach 6,500. "The Confucius Center in Cameroon offers language courses like Chinese major undergraduate course, Chinese as an optional course for the university, secondary, and primary students, Chinese course for government officials, and Chinese training program for managers". The training program includes Chinese cultural training courses, and cultural activities such as Taijiquan (martial art), calligraphy, paper-cutting, Chinese painting, traditional Chinese opera and skills of traditional Chinese massaging.

The number of enrollment has increased considerably compared to the beginning, more than 50 students per year enrolled in different centers, according to an interview with a Chinese teacher currently in service at the Confucius Institute at the University of Yaounde II. This growing registration may be related to the bad situation of employability in Cameroon. As more and more Chinese enterprises are investing in the Country, many students believe that learning the Chinese language will give them employment opportunities. Indeed nowadays, there are a lot of Chinese learners working with Chinese companies in Cameroon as a translator, we also have students who have developed their own business with Chinese because of the advantage of mastering the Chinese language. However, two important questions remain to be asked: is Chinese enterprises based in Cameroon are satisfied with the productivity of these Chinese learners? Do they have necessary skills to collaborate with Chinese companies? If not, what is the role of Sino-Cameroon educational cooperation to fill this gap? These interrogations lead us to the scholarships provided by Chinese Government to Cameroonians which may ameliorate the quality of training to enable Cameroonian Chinese language learners to master necessary skill for the job market.

Scholarship

Africa has long been reliant on overseas assistance, which somehow has often failed to resolve many indigenous issues. In order to promote Africa's independent educational development by strengthening its capacity to create its own cultural and human resources, China is offering scholarships to Africa in many areas: sciences, engineering or technology fields, reflecting the demands from the African countries to build up necessary skills. In addition, other scholarships continue to be in humanities, social studies and Chinese language. Since 2006, the number of scholarships for Africa including Cameroon has grown rapidly. The annual increase in scholarships has averaged 835 and in 2011, a total of 6316 scholarships were given to students from African countries (Sajitha 2015). Particularly for the case of Cameroon, the scholarship cooperation with China took off in 1995, before that, Cameroon rarely received scholarships from China. However, since this new decade, and more precisely by the year 2009, the offer increased considerably, placing China as the first scholarship donor, followed by Morocco and Algeria (Björn,2011).

There are different types of scholarships offer to Cameroonians. Firstly, we have the bilateral scholarship

through the management of the Ministry of higher education and the Embassy of China; each year, the Cameroonian government receive from China 34 scholarships in diverse domains, both in the first cycle university studies, as well as in Master and Doctorate. These scholarships cover areas such as Mining, Industrial Fishery, Medicine, Accountancy, Commerce and Distribution, Renewable Energy, Environmental Sciences, Network and Telecommunications, Management of Agricultural Co-operatives, Computer Science, Communication and Information, Electricity, International Relations, International Business Law, and Chinese Language.

Secondly, we have the Confucius Institute scholarship, offering especially Chinese language training scholarships. This one aims to help learners acquire a deep understanding of China and the Chinese culture. It provides one month, six months and one-year language training for students who are holders of the HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) level 1, 2 and 3; and scholarship for bachelor's and Master's degree in teaching Chinese as a Second language for holders of the HSK level 4 and 5 successively.

In recent years, the priority of Confucius Institute scholarship mostly goes towards higher teachers' training college (ENS) students in Maroua majoring in the Chinese language, who after graduation at ENS are greatly encouraged by the Confucius to continue the Master program in China through the scholarship. From the opening of the Chinese major at the University of Maroua in 2008 to today, at least 4 or 5 students from the ENS are winners of the Confucius Institute scholarship each year.

In addition to the above scholarships, the Chinese government also provides short-term training to Cameroon and finance between 100 and 110 study tours in China for technicians and civil servants every year. Chinese authorities offer two types of training including technician training which is longer and last between 6 months and a year, and training for civil servants, which usually lasts about 2–3 weeks. In 2008, approximately 60 Cameroonian civil servants and 30 technicians were trained (Bjørn, 2011). These increased numbers of scholarships not only help China facilitate Chinese cultural transmission in Cameroon but also cultivate learners' skills which will enable broaden their horizon and prepare them to face the challenge towards development.

Primary school constructions

One of the China development assistance to Cameroon is the rural primary school constructions. Under the FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) framework of the year 2006, China promised to build 150 primary rural schools in Africa between 2006 and 2012. In addition, the Chinese Premier WenJiaobao announced in 2010 the construction of 200 elementary schools in developing countries by the Chinese government from 2010 to 2015. MOFCOM's website (2014a) also mentioned the building of 34 primary schools between 2009 and 2011. However, China Cameroon cooperation in basic school's construction seems to be organized by events and set up within the Cameroon Ministry of basic education. Indeed, after the visit of the President of Cameroon in China in 2006, China has launched the project of a primary school building, and in 2007 the Chinese President visited Cameroon and announced the construction of two elementary schools. In 2009, the Chinese government completed the construction of three primary schools. Contrary to the Japan, the largest bilateral donor in primary school construction in Cameroon who generally makes use of a local subcontractor doing construction, the Chinese is using technicians from China; materials are brought from China or purchased in Cameroon. However, due to the complexity of the Cameroon education system, these constructions are controlled by Cameroonian experts so that the Chinese engineers can follow the norms adapted to the reality of the country.

China has been doing many efforts to help Cameroonian improve access to education by offering free schools building, it has been trying to help Cameroon build up its human resource capacity by offering scholarships, teaching infrastructures (e.g Microbiology Lab in the University of Yaoundé I) and offering training for government officials, administrators, teachers, business man and so on. These are considered to be the positive and beneficial role of China's aid towards the education improvement and even more, the economic development in Cameroon portrayed in some recent researches. In addition, apart from the education sector, China's has also realized a lot of projects in health, culture, information and communication technology and etc. (see table below).

Table 1: Distribution of funds invested by China in projects of various fields in Cameroon (In US Dollar).

Projects	Different sectors	Value (million US\$)
Renovation and Extension of the Buea Hospital.	Health	5.20
Renovation of the Yaounde Conference Centre	Culture	4.00
Construction of the Yaounde Sports Palace	Culture (Sports)	30.00
Construction of houses for personnel of the Gynaecological-Obstetrical and Paediatric hospital	Health	3.00
Construction of a Primary School in Mvoméka	Education	
Modernisation of telecom network between CAMTEL and HUAWEI	Telecom	45.20

Nonetheless, the above mention scope and nature of China's aid to Cameroon has been considered by some pundits such as Davies et. al (2008), as attributes by China to cost its African counterparts so as to attain their aggressive economic offensive need for the search of raw materials to feed the demands of the Chinese industries as well as markets for their products. George Ayittey (The Economist debate on Africa, 2010) still thinks that, despite the policy based upon equality, reciprocal benefits and win – win cooperation reaffirmed by the Chinese president Hu Jintao during an official visit to Cameroon in January 2007, the relation is guided by China's interest rather than the need of the recipient, highlighted by utilization of Chinese labor and input in every project they carry out in the recipient countries at the time we talk of technology transfer. To this effect, how is China's assistance enhancing the self-reliance capability of Cameroon and of African countries in general? Don't we often say in China'' you would better teach someone how to fish than give him fish?''

4. Policies and Perception of Sino-Cameroonian Cooperation

In looking at the various approaches and types of cooperation, a pattern emerges: first – the Chinese aid to Cameroon is visibly on the rise. Second, the cooperation is still in a beginning phase and is still being organized to a large extent by the involvement of the Chinese Embassy, not by professional development and aid workers. Third, the cooperation is trying to provide demand-driven, practical, useful aid to Cameroon – which can be of mutual-benefit for the two countries; hence the emphasis on “win-win.” Finally, the cooperation is largely based on programmatic events, such as the FOCAC. In this section outline the policies of Chinese involvement in Cameroon – and then the perception of the cooperation and aid.

4.1. Chinese aid and cooperation policies

As noted above, the aid and cooperation policies and strategies are largely based on the FOCAC process. Therefore, it can be said that the Sino-African aid and cooperation strategy is based on 3-year programs. Most of the aid and cooperation projects are decided as an exchange between two countries during FOCAC or during some other high-level meeting. As noted by the Chinese Embassy in Yaounde':

We are trying to make a strategic plan, a long-term plan. Every third year, the inter-ministerial forum [FOCAC] evaluates the actions and makes plans for new actions. For example, we decided to construct schools. In the years to come, we will evaluate whether we should continue to give support in the same sector. These decisions are taken during the meetings of the forum.

The principles of the cooperation are said to be related to African needs, and secondly, to help in domains that the Chinese are capable of help them in; hence the focus on practical aid projects, rather than the use of conditionalities and a meta narrative on, for example, structural adjustment or economic policies, human rights, the environment,¹ or other themes that are often being promoted by the Western donors. This type of aid is characterized by the limited possibilities of the Embassy to follow-up on the aid and cooperation. As noted in the introduction, China distinguishes itself in not having a central institution coordinating aid, nor professional aid workers that are in charge of the follow-up of the cooperation projects. It follows that China generally doesn't fund any regional projects, only particular projects in each country. It is interesting to note that the Chinese Embassy in Cameroon has been participating in meetings with the other donors at the World Bank to discuss the economic situation for aid and cooperation. Also, Chinese Embassy representatives participated in an Education For All sector meeting at UNESCO-Yaounde'. Also, the Embassy expressed a wish to streamline Chinese aid with other donors' aid, and to co-implement projects with UN agencies:

The China–Africa aid politics are a bit special. We do not have joint projects within international agencies, but only bilateral arrangements. In the future, we hope to make joint programs and projects with the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO. For the moment, our only cooperation with these agencies is at the level of

¹ Although it should be noted that the recent FOCAC (2009b, p. 3) “underline[s] in particular African countries' urgent need for stronger capacity to adapt to climate change and support their legitimate right in combating climate change.” It also discusses the effect of the worldwide economic slowdown that started in the fall of 2008, and supports African efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

exchange of information.

The Embassy in Yaounde' has only two key staff members following up with the aid and cooperation projects (in education and other domains), and who are also performing regular consular functions. Such low number of staff limits the capacity of the Embassy to conduct a realistic monitoring of the aid program and of implementing a structured and coherent aid policy. The lack of human resources for follow-up also has its repercussions in terms of project documentation. Often, China has been criticized by the West about its limited transparency and of lack of documentation regarding the aid and cooperation projects. However, it should be emphasized that China has only recently emerged as a donor, and the Chinese institutions have not yet had time to adjust to the dramatic increase in aid and cooperation that took place after the first (2000) FOCAC:

Our statistic services are not very good, and we have yet not established a very good data system. ... Chinese aid and cooperation with Africa have been hindered by a lack of transparency, and a lot of the documentation on prior projects has been lost. The new strategy of aid to foreign countries is important for us, and we are currently reviewing old projects and practices, to learn for the future (Embassy Personnel, Yaounde').

The personnel in the Embassies mostly follow-up on an aid and cooperation agenda that is already set at a high political level. For example, they will every year receive a list of training seminars from the Chinese Ministry of Higher Education, which they pass on to the Ministry of Higher Education in Cameroon. Then they will follow-up on the selection and process the names and visa applications for the chosen participants. Some of this training, especially short-term training, clearly has a diplomatic goal rather than providing capacity building. A Chinese official criticized the selection of short-term trainees as biased and said that...the Ministry send their family and friends to the training. Teachers and real people don't go; only administrators. It's really desperate, they go away and come back without [having learned] anything ... and they just have some pictures and souvenirs that they have bought.

However, it should be underlined that this is not a situation that is specific to the Chinese aid and cooperation. It is a Cameroonian problem, linked to the lack of transparency in the administration of scholarships. As noted by an Embassy interviewer, "I have talked to the US Embassy about this problem, and the US Embassy has exactly the same stories and the same problem." Nevertheless, the Chinese aid and cooperation administration in its lack of resources, and in its principles of non-conditionality, may have even less control than other donors over the Cameroonians' use of funding and the selection of personnel to be trained. Added to this comes a Chinese cultural near-aversion to request accountability for the aid offered. For example, the Embassy is donating US\$10,000 worth of IT equipment to the Ministry of Secondary Education every year. The equipment is intended to be distributed to schools, but there is no control that this distribution is effectively taking place. As noted by a Chinese official,

... this is not a good way of operating. We have no control over how they use the equipment. If we offer it directly to the schools, the Ministry would be offended. We feel it is not polite to control the use of the equipment. But we fear that the equipment will not serve its intention. In addition to the cooperation between governments, a number of cooperation projects are set up between private institutions.

Up to the 1990s, the government financed all the Chinese international projects, but around 1995, some private companies started to implement projects. Since in China many companies operate under the umbrella of a university, it can be difficult for the recipient country to determine whether the aid and cooperation are part of an official agreement, or if it is an institutional deal sought by a private partner. The Chinese Embassy in Yaounde' explained that "there is even a possibility that mixed or private companies are operating under the same name as the university. These companies can offer cooperation projects to foreign countries." The Embassy does not necessarily know which companies are doing what in Cameroon, but in many cases, they are asked to help in the negotiation between the company and the country's host institution. Hence, there could in some cases be confusion between the public and private of China's development aid. The aforementioned microbiology project is a good example; it started out as an institutional cooperation project between two universities, which was facilitated by the Chinese Embassy (which was involved in the negotiations between the institutions). The extension phase (which is currently stalled) would bring in a private Chinese company for the installation of a production facility to transform medical plants into medicine. The Cameroonians said they were unsure of the expertise provided by the Chinese (i.e., whether the Chinese would dispatch professors or factory specialists to help the implementation of the project), and how the modalities of the cooperation would be carried out, e.g., who would own any patents that may come out of the research. Again, this situation takes us back to the novelty of the strong Chinese involvement in Africa, and the rapid expansion of the Sino-African aid and cooperation, which maybe has precluded a more organized and systematic approach.

4.2. *Cameroonian perception of Chinese Assistance*

A number of different attitudes and reactions can be distinguished among the Cameroonian aid recipients. First, a limited number of Cameroonians found the aid to be exploitative and aligned to other donors' excessive approaches. Often, these officials point to negotiating techniques employed by the Chinese that they find "unfair," and complain about the Embassy's involvement in institution-to-institution negotiations. Also, interviewees at the Prime Minister's office pointed out that the Chinese look for raw materials and that the aid is tied to economic conditionalities: "the Chinese are very shrewd and come with things that we like. They give us a stadium; we give them an oil well."¹ Conversely, other politicians pointed out that when the traditional donors started to ask for transparency in the cooperation, as well as "democracy and other conditionalities," China was preferred as donor, because of its lack of involvement in the recipient country's internal affairs: "So, at the time of structural adjustments, we prefer dealing with the Chinese because they do not ask for transparency or that we respect ethnic minorities in our country." Other interviewees (also politicians, education managers) pointed out that the conditionalities imposed by Western donors did not have any impact, and that the interchange with the Chinese therefore represented a "true dialogue:"

The politicians prefer the Chinese discourse because they [the Chinese] do not begin the dialogue with the discussion of conditionalities. Conditionalities are not a cure for everything. After 1990, human rights and democracy became conditionalities for aid. Therefore, new laws declared the principles of human rights and democracy, but nobody applied these laws.

A number of Cameroonian politicians and administrators find the aid and cooperation from China "better" than the aid from traditional donors because a colonial past does not hamper it. Also, China's own development is seen as a model for development.² In comparing the differences between three types of bilateral aid (from China, France, and Norway), a senior advisor to the Prime Minister explained:

Norway let us steer towards the areas of intervention that we felt were appropriate and needed in Cameroon. France would never have let us steer the process ... China, on the other hand, is more calculating. China would like to give you something, but they would like something in return. The Norwegian cooperation is generous. Psychologically, the difference between the two styles is very important. China has good intentions but wants something in return. France would like to be generous, but there is a background of a debt to pay, of a re-compensation for something. The relation is like an adult towards a child.

Also, he noted that behind its apparent generosity, France has an agenda for the French culture and the Francophonie. In analyzing policies of human resource building, it was noted that France does not give scholarships to any initial education at bachelor level, but only to post-graduate and research purposes. Other Western countries are following the same pattern, and rather give scholarships to postgraduate students. This makes it possible for the donor country to consider the mature students; if they are very good, they can be kept in the host country. If they are arriving at the donor country when they are too young, they do not want to go back to Cameroon, whereas older people with a family are willing to go back. In this way, the West gets "the better of two worlds: it keeps the best, and returns the rest." China, on the other hand, has a policy of opening-up towards other countries and therefore gives scholarships at bachelor level.

Some Cameroonian officials were frustrated by the lack of responsiveness from the Chinese Embassy. Since China does not have an organized aid structure or any specific person in charge of aid at the Embassy, a number of requests from specific ministries apparently remain unanswered. At the Ministry of Basic Education, officials said that they had requested school construction and training, but had so far only received 10 refrigerators and 20 TV sets:

There is no plan or sign of cooperation; so, we are following up on political events, which are usually accompanied by aid. The Chinese are approaching us to offer projects, but they do not take into account our requests. For example, we have no reply to a request made in 2005–2006 for the construction of primary schools and kindergartens. The embassy has been very helpful and given us 10 refrigerators and 20 TV sets. However, we feel that China does not have any institution that follows up on aid. Even our plans for training in China have not materialized. We have asked for training for teachers at preschool level but we have not received any reply.

UNESCO representatives in Cameroon noted that China is providing aid to the education sector through their engagements in school construction, and that the Embassy of China was for the first-time present in a technical and financial meeting between UNESCO, financial partners, and the Ministry of Education in January 2009. UNESCO thinks that China will increase its aid to Cameroon ["la Chine devrait arriver"] because of having announced its intentions to augment its aid to the sector. However, it was also noted that little was known about Chinese cooperation in education. Other donors and organizations shared this view.

¹ This was meant figuratively. As far as we could figure out, the Chinese had not been given an oil well in Cameroon

² See the analysis of China as a model along the lines of a "Beijing Consensus" in Nordtveit (2009).

For example, a representative from the NGO Network for EFA said that “Chinese construction of schools is not well known by civil society.

... China’s engagement with Cameroon should be public knowledge.” In particular, it was emphasized that, in view of the severe problem of corruption in Cameroon, it is very important that China is transparent with the money it is giving in aid:

Our role as civil society is to have a look at how the money is used. ... Cameroon is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. For example, we can plan to construct a school somewhere, and then some politician will “take” the school and build it somewhere else [most often, in the home town or election base of the politician].

This had apparently happened with the Chinese school construction projects in many African countries (including Cameroon), since an interviewee in Beijing complained that the school construction project in Africa was at risk, because of high officials’ “hijacking” of the schools. Civil society representatives in Cameroon further emphasized that “if China is only dealing with the Cameroonian government bilaterally, it will increase the problems of corruption that we face in the country.”

5. Conclusion

The Sino-Cameroonian educational cooperation illustrates facets of China’s development engagement with Africa. First, one notes a clear transition from a political engagement phase to a more economic driven phase that can be dated to the period of opening-up policies preceding the first FOCAC (in 2000). The transition is visible both from the Cameroonian and the Chinese side: increasingly Cameroonians are interested in China because of the economic development of the country. Conversely, China is interested in a “mutually beneficial” economic cooperation in Africa. Second, the support has recently changed pace – and China is therefore increasingly visible among the donors to education in Cameroon. Third, China is interested in enhanced cooperation with other education donors and aid agencies in Cameroon.

The analysis of various Chinese education projects in Cameroon demonstrates that China is a new donor – with particular problems and weaknesses related to its quick expansion of the aid and development sector: absence of a professional aid and coordination structure, ad-hoc replies to demands, unstructured aid that does not always correspond to the needs of the recipient.¹ Kenneth King, in a recent study of China’s educational aid to Kenya (2010), also found similar characteristics of Chinese aid, which is said to be “on a learning curve.”

The educational cooperation between China and Africa has brought technological impact to Africa; it improved the economic capacity of African countries and effectively helped the local people to get a job. It is clear that in recent years, the development of Cameroon has benefited from various forms of cooperation between China and Cameroon, which include in education. Nowadays, China has brought great opportunities for Africa. The cooperation with African countries is no longer a simple economic cooperation, which is a mutual reference. With the initiative of one belt one road, this becomes the great opportunities for the African continent, there will be more and more education cooperation between China and Africa. Believing that the emerging continent will inherit the Chinese experience to prosperity.

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¹ For example, a somewhat puzzled professor at the University of Yaounde’ I told me that his department had received a shipment of umbrellas from the Chinese.

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