



The Emerging Powers

Commentary



THE FOCAC
SERIES: NO. 1

November 2015

Civil society perspectives on Africa-China engagements:

A view from Fahamu newsletters, 2010-2011

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The sixth Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) conclave, which doubles up as the second FOCAC heads of state and government summit will be held in a little under a month from now. The Wits China Africa Reporting Project was granted funds by Fahamu – Networks for Social Justice, to undertake a study aimed at providing information and knowledge to civil society organizations and journalists ahead of the FOCAC Six ministerial conference/second FOCAC heads of state summit.

In the next couple of posts, we shall publish articles from the study report. In this first installment, we offer an analysis of Fahamu's Emerging Powers own series of articles on Africa-China relations generally.

To undertake the study, we commenced with a review of Fahamu's Emerging Powers in Africa (hereafter EPA) online newsletter on the topic. This article synthesizes the online newsletter which commenced publication in September 2010 and ran to September 2011 and resumed in 2014 to present (see <http://www.fahamu.org/ep-articles?page=200>). In this article, I focus on a review of Fahamu's perspectives on Africa-China engagements between September 2010 and September 2011, rather than its recent iteration.

The series of articles was edited initially by Sanusha Naidu and eventually by Hayley Herman, both seasoned Africa-China hands.

The EPA publications were themselves an important contribution by a civil society organization using media and communication platforms to harness African agency in engagements with emerging powers and to contribute to an 'informed view on the topics associated with the emerging powers debates'. Synthesis of EPA's work indicates that efforts have been undertaken to expand the knowledge of African journalists with a view to enhancing their capacity to report on China.

EPA joined other organizations – state and non-state as well as Chinese and African¹ – that have organized learning and familiarization studies to China when it organized such a trip for four African journalists to China in April 2010. After the trip, participating journalists reported having gained knowledge and transformed worldviews away from western-centric approaches of perceiving China to African viewpoints (Naidu September 2010). The sponsored journalists also reported being mesmerized by China’s impressive development (skycrappers for instance); depth of culture along with instances of culture shock, all these ultimately lending lessons on various strands of what China means to Africa. An interesting take away is that China was seen more as a role model for Africa than a threat.

Even as civil society aspects of FOCAC increased after 2009 as seen in the activities of the Chinese NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) and Chinese-African People’s Friendship Association (CAPFA), communication and relations between civil society organizations in Africa and China remained weak (Herman October 2010, Xiao March 2011). These authors put the poor communication down to the fact that NGO exchanges were still new at the time (Herman October 2010, Xiao March 2011). The question is: have these Africa-China contacts strengthened fifteen years after the commencement of FOCAC?

It would appear that the initial Africa-China civil society contact after 2009 triggered debates as nongovernmental entities from either side broke the ice. The issues seemingly uppermost for civil society (ostensibly African rather than Chinese) at this formative stage included: rising social concerns resulting from increasing Sino-Africa engagements on issues such as sustainability and mutual beneficiation, a poor culture of Chinese corporate social responsibility and involvement of communities in projects, the form and nature that the nascent civil society interactions would take including an apparent fear that pro-government civil organizations would be favored over independent (Herman October 2010). Against the view that the Chinese concept of corporate social responsibility was narrowly defined to mean philanthropy, it was reported that Chinese State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) were keen to work with civil society organizations (here after CSOs) to correct misconceptions (Herman October 2010).

¹ See ‘Emerging trends and patterns in China African media dynamics: Discussion from an East

Citing Ravi Palat², a professor at Binghamton University, Naidu (March 2011) bolstered these concerns thus: ‘neither the Chinese corporations nor the Chinese government has done anything to benefit trade unions or social justice movements in Africa’.

The fear of exclusion of independent civil society in sectors where civil society could play a role, as pointed out by Herman above, found expression in a Konijn’s (April 2011) critique of the absence of civil society organization at a forum on health collaboration in Beijing in February 2011. Apart from the participation the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation and CNIE as the only civil society, the writer noted, there was no African civil society attendance and found this troubling because African civil society and faith-based organizations contribute hugely to health provision in Africa.

Writing on Nigeria-China engagements Charles-Iyoha (September 2011) enumerated a number of problem areas ‘that civil society and other development stakeholders were not querying’. Pointing out that projects cost Nigeria money in loans, she intimated that projects³ contracted to Chinese companies were: half completed, abandoned, or delivered below standard in addition to casualization of staff. Her lobbying for civil society intervention on these issues was based on a conclusion that ‘China’s non-interventionist political approach appeal(ed) not only to the Nigerian polity but the general African polity’.

Yongjun (February 2011) proposed Africa-China collaboration in the land sector. Starting from the view that lack of empirical data on Africa-China relations was impeding an informed understanding on the policy and institutional processes of Chinese ventures in Africa Yongjun (2011) proceeds to argue that such an informed understanding would benefit both parties’ developmental interests. Yongjun offers the approach of focusing on one development sector – the land sector – from various and multidisciplinary angles as a means of gaining informed understanding and consequently offering solutions to challenges. The article enumerates land tenure challenges arising from land reforms in China from the collective land system of the planned economy era, to the current ‘individual household land use rights under village collective landownership. These challenges include: poor governance leading to conflicts; ‘unprecedented land grabs’; natural resource degradation and depletion and issues around adequate compensation, resettlement, and access.

² From his book: Rise of the Global South and the Emerging Contours of New World Order

³ Citing: The rehabilitation of Nigeria railways, the NigcomSat1 and ZTE’s handset factory, etc

The article finds a nexus between China's land reform difficulties and those on the African end, albeit with the African difficulties emanating from land reforms aimed at legalizing landownership and rights through title deeds and registration of individual, group, communal and customary land. A proposal is thus made for the establishment of Africa-China comparative research group on land and development (ACRELAD) whose key goal would be provide 'sustainable strategies ... to facilitate models of social and political change in Africa' by leveraging experiences from China. It would be interesting to know if this proposal took off or was stillborn.

Somewhat related to Africa-China land perspectives is Bosshard's (July 2011) analysis of the potential environmental risks using the case of the world's biggest hydropower project, the massive Three Gorges Dam. Bosshard's article found little to celebrate about the project but instead saw a litany of social, environmental and geological problems. After enumerating problems ranging from failure for the Three Gorges Dam to live to expectation as a source of electric energy to the negative ecological impact of the project among others, Bosshard (July 2011) warned that these deleterious effects could be exported to Africa as Chinese hydropower contractors, some of which were involved in the Three Gorges Dam, seek projects in Africa. Finding that some of the challenges with the Three Gorges Dam were about resettlement of displaced people, Bosshard (July 2011) drew parallels with similar challenges in the case of the hydropower projects of Kariba (Zambia), Aswan (Egypt), and Merowe (Sudan) dams and suggested these could recur. However, Bosshard (July 2011) threw in an optimistic line in that the Chinese government was now requiring its outbound companies to 'pay more attention to the interests of local communities, workers and the environment'.

As is with Western perspectives on Africa-China media engagements, Western civil society organizations also make it into the Africa-China civil society debate arena. A particularly dramatic instance is where Brautigam (January 2011) rebutting suppositions that the Chinese government was intent on changing world media after its own model. The suppositions had initially been made by Farah and Mosher (2010) writing for the American CSO, National Endowment for Democracy. Brautigam was of the view that the authors had misread China's media-based public diplomacy – which she considered unproblematic – for an ideological agenda.

In making a connection between civil society and media, Xiao (March 2011) finds a gap between media's focus 'on diplomatic and large-scale economic and trade relations' and their 'ignoring of the relevance and importance of civil society actors'. On the basis of this lacuna and citing the case of Zambia, Xiao (March 2011) concludes that poor reporting on civil society would engender 'cultural misunderstandings, information disparities and conflicting interests' leading to 'disputes, accusations, scandals sometimes rumors'. Bosshard (July 2011) advised the media and civil society to hold Chinese companies involved in hydropower projects in Africa, 'to account for their compliance with international environmental, social and human rights standards'.

The foregoing confirms Fahamu's EPA program as a pioneer in structuring platforms on which vibrant debates on the implications of new global powers on Africa are discussed. While noting that Fahamu commenced publication of its online newsletter recently, this paper is a continuation of the effort at providing spaces for civil society through information and communication avenues.

In the next article, we shall consider conceptual and definitive issues of FOCAC. We shall seek to answer the question: What is FOCAC?

Special Report Acknowledgements

The principal investigator of this research report is Bob Wekesa*, a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of Journalism (Wits Journalism), University of the Witwatersrand. The report received overall leadership from Professor Anton Harber, head of Wits Journalism. Brigitte Read, former coordinator at Wits China Africa Reporting Project managed the initial phases of the study, a role that was taken over by Barry van Wyk, the current Project coordinator. The report benefitted from research assistance by Raymond Mpubani and Emeka Umejei, master's and doctoral students respectively at Wits Journalism. The entire Wits Journalism Department and Wits University at large contributed to the successful completion of this report. Specifically, Pierre and Linda, administrative officers at Wits Journalism were instrumental in the production of this report.

Wits China Africa Reporting Project would like to thank Fahamu for the grant that made this work possible. We would like to particularly thank Sanusha Naidu and Edwin Rwiggi, colleagues from Fahamu's Emerging Powers in Africa for continuous engagement throughout the research and report writing phases of the study.

We would also like to thank Eric Orlander of the China Africa Project podcast for reviewing and offering candid and helpful comments that served to improve the study.

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