CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONS:
THE RELEVANCE OF STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT OF AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS WITH CHINA

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Abstract

This chapter aims to analyse the implications of the absence of African civil society engagement in China-Africa relations and dialogue processes. The main argument is that this absence will lead to a missed opportunity for strategic engagement which could open avenues for a better understanding of the Chinese approach to Africa. Secondly, it is argued that China differs from Western governments in its approach to civil society groups, and therefore it requires alternative approaches and strategies by African civil society groups to strategically engage with China outside the state-state relations’ framework. Thirdly, such an approach is likely to open up the space for constructive dialogue with China, in which African civil society groups are able to effectively channel their concerns to the Chinese government and engage with their Chinese counterparts on cross-cutting issues entailed in China-Africa relations.

Introduction

The presence of China in Africa has received much attention in recent years, as shown by the diversity of opinions and perceptions (Sautman & Hairong 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Taylor 2006; Chidaushe 2007; Melber 2007; Brautigam 2008, 2010a; de Oliveira et al. 2008; Guerrero & Manji 2008). From within Africa, views largely express some sense of appreciation but also fears and caution with regards to the implications of the role of China in the continent. To many Africans, China’s recent intensification of relations with Africa pre-
sents new opportunities for generous and unconditional lending, faster infrastructural development (Centre for Chinese Studies 2006; Bosshard 2007; Foster et al. 2009), and increased opportunities for trade and foreign direct investment (Marafa 2009; van Dijk 2009). This has been described in the principles of China’s African policy (Yu 1988; Anshan 2005, 2006) as ‘mutual benefit’ or ‘win-win’ situations (Marafa 2009). Some recent debates have also entailed comparative analyses of China’s role in Africa with those of European powers and the United States (Tjønneland et al. 2006; Bates et al. 2007; Brautigam 2010b).

Reactions have emerged from both state and non-state actors alike. Civil society organisations (CSOs), as part of the latter category, are beginning to be vocal at the national level in most African countries, even though to a lesser degree at the Pan-African level. However, despite these noises, African CSOs have yet to come up with strategies for effective engagement with their own governments on China-Africa relations (Ong’ayo 2010). Moreover, African CSOs have not paid attention to the necessity of engaging with the Chinese government and CSOs in China, despite the magnitude of inroads China has made into many parts of Africa and the ramifications of its engagement with different governments in the continent. A related concern is the absence of Africa’s own perspectives in the China-Africa discourse. While the debate is gaining momentum at local and global levels, the voices of Africans – especially their CSOs – still echo those of their Western donors.

Current changing global power relations between Western and emerging global powers such as Brazil, China and India (Broadman 2007) are likely to have an immense impact on Africa. These developments and what they mean for Africa (Goldstein et al. 2006; van Dijk 2009) have, however, not received much attention in terms of case studies that could reveal the actual impact in specific country contexts and on government policy initiatives in response to the broader framework of China’s involvement in Africa. However, since 2006, the China-Africa debate has intensified and elicited interest both in the West and in Africa, with various institutions, academics and CSOs beginning to take keen interest in the subject in an attempt to unravel the factors behind this phenomenon and the paradigm shift in Africa’s receptiveness and embracement of China. Earlier examples of such initiatives within the African context include the work undertaken at Stellenbosch University, which has provided a platform