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Social Welfare and Culture as the Corner Stone of Afro-Chinese Partnerships

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Abstract

As the historic Sixth Forum on China Africa Cooperation (6th FOCAC) draws nearer, South Africa takes center stage in hosting and contributing to this landmark Summit, held on African soil. Interested groups and concerned parties seek to grapple with key issues that revolve around altering material standards for billions of people, through interventions such as corporate financial transparency and accountability, industrialization, capacity building, health and medicine, peace and security, and good governance. However, what has been found to be often contentious and illusive in these Afro-Chinese narratives is the centrality of social welfare and culture, and the relevant policies which continuously re-emerge as a corner stone of Africa and China's development planning. The concern for most analyses has been about how Afro-Chinese partnerships are altering local and global economic, political conversations and decisions through financial interventions, micro and macro-economic prescriptions. However, the question remains; What will enable this 6th FOCAC to act as a catalysing platform for the implementation of action plans that address the growing divide in living conditions, popular opinion and perspective on where the interests of the two civilisational spaces lie socially,

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politically, and economically? The aim of this policy brief, a research initiative supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Institute of South Africa, is to indicate the value and importance in utilizing the notion of social welfare, and how it correlates the development of scientific, economic and political culture with an Africa-China development initiative. It ultimately recommends key points for strategic intervention, for the 6th FOCAC Summit.

Introduction

In contextualising the intellectual value and practical importance of an 'African Renaissance' (the revival and appraisal of African philosophies, cultures, scientific visions), and how it essentially contributes to the realisation of the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 action plans, Kwame Gyekye argues that

“the transitive or agentive character of the development process in respect of human society, make human beings... the agents of development. This suggests the strong conviction that in the development of a human society, appropriate regard must be paid to the characteristics, attitudes and habits, behaviour patterns, mental outlooks, values, institutions and social practices of the people: development in effect must have a basis in the *culture* of a people.”¹

Gyekye's analysis is poignant in the sense that it is within these 'contexts' (language, values, institutions and social practices etc.) that the bulk of recent policy analyses have either mistakenly, or purposefully ignored, superficially defined and applied the cultural dynamic of the socio-economic change in Afro-Chinese partnerships. This recurring problem, it has been argued, is mainly due to the notion that culture is a typically sensitive and subjective factor in development discourse, and has little value regarding established discourses on political economy. Thus the relevance of culture and its practical impact has often

been couched in and diluted by the rhetoric of populism, allowing the vogue of neo-liberalism, related peace and security measures, and good governance protocols to swallow and relegate important aspects of culture and related knowledge, economic production to the bottom of the development planning agenda.

The consequence of this is that although there are thousands of Africans who travel to China every year, their place as one of the 'foreigners' plying a trade or seeking knowledge is not as important and relevant as their European, American or Australasian counterparts, whose values, aesthetics, philosophies on politics and economics apparently supersede any African or Africanist perception or understanding of reality.² What starts out as a lack of understanding or ignorance manifests into covert or overt displays of racism in rural and urban settings, thus becoming re-institutionalised (in Chinese social spaces).

The question then is; what has been done, and can be done to address the devaluing of cultural spaces and lack of awareness / understanding regarding Afro-Chinese realities and partnerships?

A Crisis of Focus: The Consequence of Separating Culture from Development

Indeed, the 5th FOCAC that was held in July 2012, concluded with robust declarations on areas covering culture, education, press, publishing and Media, exchanges between Academia and Think Tanks, people-to-people, youth and women exchanges, and sports.³ Furthermore, efforts have since been made to implement some of these declarations; the China Africa Think Tank Forum held in South Africa September 2015, African Think Tank Delegation visit to China in July 2015, Second Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation held in Beijing in June 2014, China-Africa Cultural Cooperation Partnership Program inaugurated in June 2013, etc. However, these activities cannot operate in isolation (which are often bilateral in nature, thus negating wider African audiences),

and at times devoid of the AU's Pan-Africanist vision for African peoples' political or economic unity.

Nationalist Africa (excluding the Diaspora, which is highly contentious), divided into 54 states each in constant struggle to attain diplomatic and economic supremacy of some kind, exists in a global geo-political and economic arena that takes advantage of its relative isolation from the financial centers of Capitalism. For example, the debate on whether to 'invest' in more value-adding industries as opposed to relying on extractive-based industries is essentially a non-starter if these 54 states all choose to maintain their neo-colonial economic structures, under pressure from current Euro-American trade agreements and financial institutions.⁴ Continued reliance on the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are worrying reminders of this unequal relationship. Whether the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Brazil / Russia / India / China / South Africa (BRICS) Development Bank (NDB), or the African Development Bank will be able to constructively operate independently within International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations is to be seen.

This ofcourse all ties in with how each of the 54 states value their environment, because currencies are constantly devalued and rarely positively re-valued in Africa, deepening financial dependencies, encouraging political / social instabilities which are dealt with only if capital flows to the centers of the West, and East, are interrupted. Hence at the Fifth Forum on China Africa Cooperation (5th FOCAC), South African President Jacob Zuma poignantly observed that recent political and economic partnerships between African and Chinese counterparts were becoming 'unsustainable', with reference to the historical record with other international economic partners.⁵

It is in this regard that the 6th FOCAC Summit must acknowledge the principle importance of human migration, not as a consequence of displacement, but as a necessity for the fluidity of culture, political affiliation and organization, and sustainability of African economies. Migration must then be explained as a core, enabling factor when defining social welfare in both African and Chinese contexts.⁶ Thus if China engages on multi-lateral platforms such as the United Nations (UN), the Group of 77 (G77), the AU, or FOCAC, it has to take into account that the *supra-cultural* and *national* mandate (which involves ethics, ideology, science, politics, environment, and economy) of African peoples worldwide is unity. Thus culture cannot be separated from the processes of development.

Interpreting Social Welfare and Culture as Key Economic Drivers

Although the AU grapples with the internal politics of regional or continental unity, and employing top-down / bottom-up approaches to achieving its developmental agendas (2063 in this instance), the key factors that facilitate the processes and progress of these unities hinge upon broad social welfare policies and practices that enable the strengths and benefits of indigenous knowledge systems to facilitate development. In this regard, Yash Tandon provides an interesting critique and point of intervention regarding social welfare as a key developmental driver. He argues that historically, socio-economic change articulated itself most vividly through revolutionary struggles for greater human freedoms and equality in African and Chinese spaces.⁷ The distribution of Land, use of the sea and air, language and related knowledge production, reviewing and altering systems of exchange, and the pursuit for sustainable political organization all represent critical spheres of interaction that are constantly contested, specifically in African spaces. It is within these spheres, and interacting in these spaces, that social welfare becomes

the measuring tool for a common social, political and economic project.

Offering a roadmap for implementation, former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, articulated how to express a Pan-African Operational Objective, which he broke down into six parts;

1. Strengthen the regional political and economic processes led by our Regional Economic communities;
2. Ensure that all our states implement the continental policies agreed through the OAU and the AU, including those articulated in New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the APRM, the African Peer Review Mechanism;
3. Enhance the possibility for the AU to intervene throughout Africa to achieve the objective of peace, security and stability;
4. Capacitate the Pan-African parliament to enable our continent's elected representatives, acting together, to participate in the implementation of the Pan-Africanist project, as well as provide effective oversight in this regard;
5. Take all action to ensure the engagement of the African Diaspora with the Pan-Africanist project, working to guarantee that it also addresses the challenges facing this Diaspora;
6. Most importantly, ensure that the broad African masses take *ownership* of the Pan-Africanist project in all the elements we have mentioned, and therefore that the necessary steps are taken at least to keep the organized formations of these masses properly informed and engaged in all actions focused on the pursuit of this Pan-Africanist project, including through the AU ECOSOCC, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council. ⁸

This operational framework, in relation to Chinese domestic and foreign policy interests, is complimentary, and must be emphasized at the 6th FOAC. ⁹

Recommendations

With social welfare understood as the key driver for development, the following recommendations are thus tabled:

Economy

Re-constituting capital value in African local economies, through policy interventions that tackle;

- The promotion of public policy centered at developing social welfare, and the legal and economic support for indigenous knowledge systems
- Steering macro-economic policies toward articulating exchange systems that encourage restorative based-creativity and production
- Re-configuring the underwriting mandate of the new development banks to create better, indigenous insurance capacities and currencies
- Strong focus on building regional transportation corridors, as well as strategic development of energy sources to support regional supply chains
- Transitional health care and food distribution networks for displaced communities and persons, as they are re-integrated into regional-wide, trading system

Culture

Find commonalities and shared interests in the aesthetics and cultural philosophies of the African world with Asian counterparts, through;

- Responsible journalism
- More focus and collaboration on other media platforms, regarding mutually-beneficial Afro-Chinese representations (Arts – Film, Music, literature)
- African-Language Learning Centers setup across the Asian continent
- Strong focus on re-vitalising African studies in the Humanities, as well as long-term exchanges and capacity building regarding high technology and related knowledge production

Endnotes

1. Gyekye, K. (2013). *Philosophy, Culture and Vision – African Perspectives*. Sub-Saharan Publishers, Accra, P.44: Also see Institute of China Studies, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (ed)(translated by Pan Zhongming & Ego) (2013) *China's Road and Prospect*; Record of the 5th World Forum on China Studies, China Intercontinental Press, Beijing, Pp.134-135. WU Xiaogang interrogates the matter further when he argues that “we should try to explain how personal characteristics and local social and economic developments, especially economic elements, influence subjective-well being.” This, he argued, was important because “there is a correlation between well-being, income and inequality in income that makes people feel relative deprivation.”
2. Vines, S. (01 November 2009). China black pop idol exposes her nation's racism; See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/01/lo-u-jing-chinese-talent-show> (site last accessed on; 24 November 2015): Also see Bodomo, A. (2012). *Africans in China; A Socio-Cultural Study and its Implications for Africa-China Relations*. Cambria Press, Amherst, New York, Pp.112-121
3. 'The Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan'; See <http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t954620.htm> (site last accessed on: 24 November 2015)
4. Tandon, Y. (2015). *Trade is War: The West's War Against the World*. OR Books, New York, Pp.53-87
5. Louw-Vaudran, L. (27 July, 2012). Africa Buys into China's generosity. Mail and Guardian online; See <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-07-27-africa-buys-into-chinas-generosity> (site last accessed on: 24 November 2015): Also see Umejei, E. (10 April, 2015). China-Africa Relations: horses and riders? Mail and Guardian online; See <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-04-10-00-china-africa-relations> (site last accessed on: 24 November 2015)
6. Li Peilin, Chen Guangjin, Zhang Yi, Li Wei, Xu Xinxin (eds.)(2012). *Chinese Research Perspectives on Society-Volume 2*. BRILL Publishers, Lieden, Pp.95-116
7. Tandon, Y. (2015). Op. Cit., Pp.12-14; Ogunsanwo, A. (1974) *China's Policy in Africa 1958-1971*, Cambridge University Press, London, Pp.56-60
8. Ngcaweni, B. (ed.)(2013). *The Future We Chose: Emerging Perspectives on the Centenary of the ANC*. Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria, Pp.219-220
9. See the chapter titled “The Guiding Theories of the Communist Party of China”, in; Yang Fengcheng, Su Haizhou, Geng Huamin, Yan Maoxu, Zhao Shumei, Wu Wen Long, Zhang Siyang (eds) (2012) *The Success of the Communist Party of China*, China Remin University Press, Beijing, Pp.128-152

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Louw-Vaudran, L. (27 July, 2012). *Africa Buys into China's generosity*. Mail and Guardian online; See <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-07-27-africa-buys-into-chinas-generosity> (site last accessed on: 24 November 2015)

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