

China should give more ‘soft’ aid to Africa

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Illustration: Luo Xuan/GT

China's aid to Africa has long focused on engineering construction projects. Over the past six decades, China had funded and built many big infrastructure projects in the continent, some of which have become local landmarks like the African Union Conference Center and Office Complex in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and the Tazara Railway linking Tanzania and Zambia. Along with China's growing strength, the country's foreign policy has gradually shifted from being benefits and ascendancy oriented to being based on benefits and value. Against this backdrop, Sino-African cooperation has also gradually transitioned toward global governance from South-South cooperation.

As such, China should continue to cooperate with African countries on infrastructure projects, but should move beyond that to imparting China's experience and translating its confidence in its development path, theory and system into an intangible force that is internationally recognized.

Nevertheless, the current cooperation framework focused on hardware infrastructure doesn't cater to new situations. First, the framework doesn't help with precise poverty alleviation in African countries, as insufficient importance attached to "soft" environment planning makes it hard for China to accurately fit into development plans proposed by its African partners. Second, it's unfavorable for the dissemination of China's governance experience, considering that the completion of infrastructure projects discontinues China's sharing its values and ideas in the continent. Third, it's detrimental to the improvement of China's national image in Africa, as most of the infrastructure projects have remained closed and have triggered skepticism among local people. In light of these shortcomings, China should intensify its efforts to provide "soft" aid to Africa to enable the popularization of Chinese values in the continent.

First, China should differentiate its aid projects to suit specific African countries in order to channel resources to key projects. Currently, China's foreign aid still follows the pattern of "sprinkling pepper," with each recipient country being given a similar package which integrates goods and materials, and comes with equipment and technical cooperation. The excessive inclusiveness of these projects fails to generate a focus and doesn't allow China to develop a differentiated aid policy which addresses the weakest development link in a specific African country. China should make a greater effort to extend soft aid to Africa, such as planning and consulting services and should also understand the real needs of recipient countries. A short term aid plan could be laid out to specifically cater to the need of a specific country and address the toughest problems in certain areas. After clarifying the focus and direction of the aid projects, China could then consider including construction projects, technical cooperation programs and dispatching experts. In some East African countries, such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, which enjoy political stability and sound economic development, China could focus on promoting connectivity and help train professionals specializing in operations and maintenance and launch commercial operations separate from large infrastructure projects.

Second, China should focus on developing overseas human resources. Foreign media tend to dramatize China's financial aid to African countries. Although some of these reports are groundless, China's foreign aid is not flawless. Foreign aid which focuses on hardware facilities can be easily labeled as pure "money relations." Western developed countries have been sending volunteers to recipient countries since the 1960s and US Peace Corps volunteers can now be found in almost any poor African village, which to a large extent helps mend the US' image. Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers and senior volunteers also add credit to Japan's overseas engagements. China should send more volunteers to African countries in the future and extend their duration of stay. While

focusing on promoting cultural exchanges and human communications to elevate China's soft power, China should make more efforts to improve the system of selecting and training volunteers and develop the incentive mechanism which links their performance in Africa with employment after returning to China. Meanwhile, China should launch overseas training programs and send experts for grassroots training in fields such as education, science and technology, culture, healthcare, agriculture, mining industry and economic technology to effectively convey China's development concept to local African people.

Furthermore, China should maintain good communications with local non-government organizations. Corruption is widespread in some countries' governments due in part to flawed democratic systems. In addition, China's aid model - which only aims to extend aid to the current administration of its recipient countries - inevitably invites skepticism. With inadequate publicity, some locals even believe that Chinese construction teams seek to steal their jobs. China should not overlook the role of local non-government organizations because in some African countries with relatively weak governments social organizations play a key role in balancing power. In some African countries which are undergoing transitions, social organizations actively push forward co-governance between the government and the people. In order to expand the influence of its soft power, China should consider including some influential non-government organizations in the network of its soft aid recipients. By drawing experience from the UNDP's Global Environment Facility, China could also set up a specialized fund to finance joint research and technical sharing projects for poverty alleviation with various local non-government organizations.

The author is an associate researcher with the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation. bizopinion@globaltimes.com.cn

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