

Tazara railway shows benefit of Chinese aid

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Illustration: Luo Xuan/GT

The 1,860.5 kilometer-long Tazara railway spanning from Tanzania's commercial center Dar es Salaam to Zambia's Central Province represents one of China's largest foreign aid projects. A tripartite agreement was signed in September 1967 to build the railroad and construction began in 1970. The railway opened in 1975 and in July 1976 was officially transferred to the governments of Tanzania and Zambia, with the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority undertaking operations. Over the past four decades, the railroad has helped boost agricultural production and urbanization along its route.

Despite sustained operational woes, the governments of China, Tanzania and Zambia actively strive to explore ways to revitalize the railroad and enable profitable operations, spotlighting the spirit embodied by the Tazara railway. This will take Sino-African cooperation in development to a new level as well as foster a shift in China's role as a force in advancing global governance from primarily promoting South-South Cooperation.

The decision to fund and build the railroad dispels accusations of China's neocolonialism. China faced natural disasters in the 1960s and the country's industrialization was still in its infancy at the start of the project. As such, the country had no need to exploit African resources or develop local markets. As Tanzania's and Zambia's efforts to seek help

from Western countries and the former Soviet Union were repeatedly rejected, Chinese leaders didn't take economic losses into account and resolutely decided to build the Tazara railway out of benevolence to help Africa's newly independent countries develop their economies and stand on their own feet. African leaders also put a premium on China's decision. Lending a helping hand to third world countries and promoting joint development was the fundamental starting point of Chinese aid in Africa, while the West's claims of neocolonialism by China is utterly groundless.

The recollection also highlights the international spirit of China's aid teams which sets an example for Chinese businesses operating in Africa. Along with growing economic and trade ties, China's economic activity in Africa has been seen to feature a mix of good and bad. Some Chinese enterprises came across as violating business ethics and treating local employees unlawfully, resulting in rebukes about a lack of corporate social responsible as well as subjecting Sino-African ties to latent political risks. A look back at the efforts of Chinese railway experts and workers in building the Tazara railway, however, reveals how China taught techniques to its African brothers and how countries along the rail route were impressed with Chinese staffers' devotion to duty. The intangible assets, as such, could be tapped as tutorials for Chinese enterprises with operations in Africa to regulate their business activity and benefit local society.

Furthermore, a comprehensive model in foreign aid is needed in guiding large infrastructure projects in Africa. While helping build the Tazara railway, the Chinese government paid special attention to fostering management talents in Tanzania and Zambia. China helped develop around 200 overseas students and a large number of mid-level technicians in both countries and established a school for studying railway technology in Zambia. As the project moved forward, the cooperation model among China, Tanzania and Zambia evolved, shifting from one where Chinese experts provided technical support and trained railway management talents to one with comprehensive participation from all sides in local railway management. Such a comprehensive model that combines project construction and technological cooperation is of profound guiding significance to Chinese aid projects of large cross-regional infrastructure and landmark buildings in Africa today.

Last, China needs to help solve the current predicament in the operation of the Tazara railway. Since the 1990s, an improved political environment in southern Africa has led to an increase in export channels for Zambia, which has caused a severe diversion of supplies. The joint management for the Tazara railway also resulted in insufficient management, in which both sides focused on running the railway but overlooked maintenance and relevant input. In addition, the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority adopted unrealistic welfare policies, which have pushed up operation costs. These factors have pushed the Tazara railway to the verge of bankruptcy. This also reflects some drawbacks on the Chinese side. Some African projects have proven to be unsustainable after China handed over the reins. For example, farms China helped build vanished within several years. In this respect, China should start from the

commercialization of the Tazara railway, and push forward comprehensive reforms in the railway, for instance, by applying for joint support from the governments and banks, and by adopting a franchise model to qualified enterprises in the running of the Tazara rail line.

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