

China's Economic and Environmental Footprint in Africa

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The advent of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an economic juggernaut is no secret in the twenty-first century. A large land possessing a massive labor force, China has maintained rapid economic growth for over a decade and surpassed the likes of England, France, and Italy in that span. As of 2006, the PRC trails behind only the United States, Japan, and Germany in total gross domestic product, according to the World Bank (1). This elevated status has pushed China into the political and economic limelight, causing its every move to be heavily scrutinized by the rest of the globe. Thus, it is not surprising that its increased involvement in Africa has recently raised warning flags in Western awareness with regards to the PRC's non-interference policies, human rights issues, and the environmental impacts of its actions in the region. Already

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reputed as environmentally careless at home, many fear that China's escalating extraction of oil and other resources within Africa as well as its involvement in various infrastructure projects leave foreboding consequences in store for African lands and in turn, the African people.

Although Chinese involvement in Africa has fluctuated since the 1950s, the PRC has recently refocused its attentions towards the developing continent. In the last ten years, the Asian powerhouse has strengthened its economic and diplomatic relationships with Africa, mostly under the radar of the rest of the world. China's aims in these associations are straightforward: to help satisfy its immense demand for natural resources; to expand Chinese manufactured goods into new markets; and to gain strategic political alliances (2). A so-called "soft target," Africa emerges as a prime candidate in pursuing these goals. The vast continent remains relatively unexploited in comparison to other developing regions due to the political, economic, and social instability that has reigned there for centuries (3). Its relative lack of suitors has provided China the opportunity to pursue African oil, timber, various mineral resources and other materials as well as its business and political good graces. Instability has also perpetuated the widespread corruption of African governments, and this corruption coupled with poor management of its governmental development, are flaws that China has been able to work to its advantage (2,3). In turn, China's non-interference terms and general disinterest in incorporating obligatory political strings in its dealings are attractive to its African partners, especially in comparison to Western proposals. Western agreements are often coupled with strict demands for Africa that are meant to help combat poverty and promote development within the region.

Due to a combination of skyrocketing demands for energy, lack of domestic resources, and a move away from their use of inefficient and polluting coal, China has turned to petroleum sources abroad. The nation is now the second largest importer of African oil after the United States, accounting for about a quarter of the oil the PRC imports. This amount increased more than 71% between 2003 and 2005, supplied by the Sudan, Angola, Nigeria, Chad, Libya, Algeria, and Gabon (2,4).

Africa's lax governance combined with China's lack of pressure on its firms to exercise good corporate policing and social responsibility has led to various corrupt and environmentally careless practices in the countries where China obtains oil. In Gabon, Chinese state-owned oil company Sinopec was discovered illegally prospecting for oil in Loango National Park in 2006. The park accounts for 11% of the country's territory and protects extensive coastal habitats and wildlife from all extractive and destructive industrial activities. The company had begun dynamiting and clearing forest without performing an official environmental impact study. It was only after the issue was brought to media attention by a conservation group from the United States that the Gabonese government ordered Sinopec to halt its activities (3,5).

Corrupt practices aside, further problems have arisen in the harvesting of African oil. In Nigeria, Chinese state-controlled firms have made considerable investments in recent years to procure petroleum from the region, spending billions on controlling stakes in oil fields and refineries (2,6). However, oil production in Nigeria is generally coupled with the flaring of associated gas found in its oil fields, since it is the easiest solution to isolating the lucrative petroleum product, but these flares can result in a wasted 2.2 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day. The consequences of flared gas include significant carbon dioxide emissions as well as the release of a harmful mixture of more than 250 toxins into the atmosphere, which is believed to contribute to acid rain production and the deterioration of crops, livestock, and general human health. Nigeria contributes 16% of the world's flared gas, more than any other country in the world, while Africa as a whole contributes 34%. While



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Chinese oil production in Nigeria is still exceeded by Western companies like Shell, ExxonMobil, and ChevronTexaco, its increasing presence there and throughout Africa has no doubt exacerbated this problem (7).

Aid has also been proven to play a significant role in the agreements between China and Africa. In 2006, China distributed \$5.75 billion throughout the continent in the form of loans, debt forgiveness, and other forms of financial investment. In addition, funding and support of infrastructure are other important offerings in China's arsenal to foster good relations and trade with Africa. These projects ranging from railway development to the construction of thermal power plants, oil facilities, and dams are meant to benefit the people and countries: however, they can cause more harm than good (8).

A prime example of a project gone awry is the Merowe Dam in Sudan, primarily funded by the Chinese. When initiated in 2003, surrounding communities were supportive of the venture because it would meet the great need for electricity in the region. However, with poor implementation and failure to meet both Chinese and Sudanese environmental standards, which in themselves are considered sub par, locals were forced to relocate to surrounding desert areas (8). There is a glaring lack of legitimate environmental assessments released concerning the construction of the dam, and the few that exist fail to address many important issues. One such matter is the possibility of sediment accumulation and its impact on downstream farming communities. These farms depend on the mineral nutrients provided by the river during the country's annual floods, raising the possibility of a potential decline in local agriculture with the dam's construction. In addition, lowered oxygen levels in the water are a similar worry for their possible effects on aquatic ecosystems (9).

As a result, issues that have arisen from such questionable projects have made many wary of similar undertakings in consideration elsewhere within Africa (10).

So what can be done? In wooing Africa with the promise of economic investment, China is often accused of practicing a brand of twenty-first century colonialism to pursue its own interests. Some believe this trend mirrors the West's own actions within Africa in the past and even the present. But there are important differences: the PRC lacks freedom of the press, and non-governmental watchdogs play an insignificant role in influencing the decisions and policies of the Chinese Administration (3). Hence, there is relatively little that Chinese citizens can do to influence a change in policy abroad in Africa.

However, China has slowly become more conscious of its global prominence and consequently, more sensitive to foreign criticism. This is evidenced in its very public campaign to reduce carbon emissions to an acceptable level prior to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. If pressured economically or politically, crucial changes in its conduct in Africa may be possible.

A key concern is the need for transparency in the transactions between the Chinese players and African governments. Encouragement to sign initiatives and make policies which mandate and enforce complete transparency with regards to its environmental practices is imperative. This would help prevent pollution and the overexploitation of the natural resources China seeks as well as ensure the quality execution of projects that are supposed to benefit the African peoples (5).

Even with transparency among some parties, however, the rampant corruption that persists within African governments combined with the debilitating lack of money and development may allow environmental conditions to continue declining. Furthermore, China's no-strings-attached policies in dealing with African nations will continue to entice, especially when considered against the onerous social obligations that are often included in Western-African agreements. Counter measures such as offers of heightened economic aid and investment by the United States and other nations, and increased global awareness of the African environmental situation may be the only options to help quell an intensifying environmental problem. Thus, unless a fundamental change is made in the PRC's policies, the African people could eventually be stranded with destroyed lands and a continued stagnancy in their poor quality of life.

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