

[ OPINION ]

# Africa-China-Europe trilateral co-operation: Is Europe naïve?

by Sven Grimm

The European Commission is suggesting trilateral dialogue and co-operation among Africa, China and Europe. This sounds either bold or naïve. There is substance for – at times controversial – discussion among China, Africa and Europe, for sure. It would, indeed, be naïve to assume that trilateral discussion will easily result in finding a consensus. But not talking will not get us anywhere, either.

## Why should we care about Chinese engagement in Africa?

Beyond valid moral considerations ('care for thy neighbour'), there are also pertinent 'realist' reasons. Estimates of Chinese aid to Africa according to ODA definitions applied by the OECD are of 1.5 billion US\$ annually. Chinese development co-operation is thus disbursing a similar amount of money on development than Canada or Italy. Yet, the implications of China's global engagement are far larger. China is a global power – with considerable poverty amongst its own populations, but powerful nevertheless. It is likely to become the biggest world exporter and has accumulated substantial foreign exchange reserves; it furthermore has a veto right in the UN security council.

Motivations for trilateral dialogue and co-operation between China, Africa, and Europe might vary among the actors, but actors do not need identical reasons to co-operate – as long as each of them has resilient reasons. All three arguably do:

- For *China*, Africa is only a stepping stone in its 'going global' strategy, albeit an important one. Currently, China engages in Africa, as it is a relatively easy niche for it with not too much competition from the outside world. China's aim in its engagement includes to cushion its own 'peaceful rise' or rather 'harmonious devel-

opment'. China might gloss over power difference with African states in its South-South rhetoric. However, China faces increasing demands from Africa. Power comes with responsibilities.

- *Europe* has changed over the last decade. It is bigger and more ambitious in its global policy. It has thoroughly reformed its external relations – not least so its co-operation policy – over the last decade. But much still needs to be done to sort out the overly-complex European system. No longer being the only show in town in Africa keeps up the pressure on Europe – it will at least have to live up to its commitments. And discussing specific issues of mutual interest with China in Africa could actually be helpful for Europe: China is quick and efficient in its delivery, even though its turn-key approach to projects comes with costs.
- *Africa* could be tempted to play both actors against each other, following reflexes from the Cold War era. This backward-looking strategy, however, overestimates African stamina and its partners' patience. The Cold War is over – and Europe does not want it back. Africa cannot prevent bilateral contacts between Europe and China. In fact, Africa would be better off if it managed to keep both Europe and China oriented towards its own development framework, i.e. mostly so NEPAD policies and national priorities.

## Are the principles and themes for dialogue and co-operation set right?

The communication is careful to speak of dialogue and (possibly) co-operation. It is far from certain that the common ground is strong enough in all countries or on all issues to engage in trilateral co-operation. Europe should be careful not to compromise standards. The communica-

tion rightly refers to international commitments as basis for dialogue and co-operation, inter alia the Millennium Development Goals and the Paris Declaration.

Any discussion with China will have to involve African institutions – Europe cannot claim to speak for Africans, as Chinese and African officials are rightly pointing out. African initiatives will have to be promoted by Africans. Critical issues will not go away because of a positive spirit. Engagement in an environment with poor governance standards is a critical point and there are differing opinions on Zimbabwe or Sudan. But positive initiatives also exist – the extractive industry transparency issue (EITI) is partly an African agenda.

The Commission's communication suggests four possible areas for dialogue and co-operation: (i) peace and security, (ii) support for African infrastructure, (iii) sustainable management of the environment and natural resources, and (iv) agriculture and food security. The annexes to the communication list ongoing activities of all three sides in these areas. Activities do not in all cases work according to the same ideal. Yet, all sides have specific interests in each of them. Peace and security, for instance: Kidnapping of oil workers has negative implication for African development prospects. It negatively affects investment of external companies, be they European or Chinese.

It can be expected that Chinese interests in stable conditions increase with the level of funding and experiences of loss. Hence the interest in not allowing the North-South conflict in Sudan get out of control. Consequently, Chinese non-interference does not necessarily result in inaction. China actively participates in the UN and peace-keeping endeavours. UN activities and regional bodies' mandates will need to be coordinated or sequenced.

The crucial question for Europe is whether it emphasises the doubtlessly existing obstacles to co-operation or the equally present common ground. 'Effective multilateralism' – the EU's declared goal – will require some degree of flexibility. Trilateral dialogue is complicated by the fact that Europe and Africa are complex entities. This means that national governments in Europe and Africa will have to engage, too.

## Europe rightly searches for common ground with China and Africa

African countries need funding for development. Ideally, the Paris Declaration points out, national standards and systems of the partners are the reference point. The Accra Agenda for Action explicitly also calls on non-DAC donors to adhere to these principles. Some truths about Chinese international engagement in order to manage expectations:

- China is both a developing country *and* a donor. There is no either-or option between the two roles. A dialogue resulting in a blame-game is unproductive and there is no reason for complacency on any side. There is an important role for think tanks on all three sides in this debate, as the communication rightly points out.
- Chinese package deals are less transparent, but might be equally or more effective than EU co-operation. More transparency on Chinese policy towards Africa will need commonly agreed standards. OECD standards are one option, but rejected by China as 'Western'; others might have to be sought.
- China will not become a defender of African democracy anytime soon. But if non-interference is a serious principle, China will have to respect policies of regional bodies. Some provisions of the African Union go further than Chinese policies of non-interference. For instance, article 4h of the African Union's Charter provide for interventions by African states in an AU member country in defined cases. Basis for discussion should be African documents, including NEPAD's Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance.

The Commission initiative needs to be commended. It keeps internationally agreed commitments on the agenda and tries to enlarge their scope. Yet, the communication will have to be embraced by Chinese and African actors. Expecting quick wins from a dialogue would be naïve. But not trying to engage would be grossly negligent.