

Crafting a unique partnership with Africa

The future of India-Africa cooperation is agriculture, even as the China factor looms large



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“A historical solidarity is today a modern partnership,” tweeted External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar during his recent trip to Kenya. Critical to its foreign policy matrix, New Delhi’s engagement with the African continent has been multifaceted, with projects implemented under Indian lines of credit, capacity-building initiatives, and cooperation in a range of sectors. As an importer of fruits, nuts, grains and pulses from the continent, Indian congruence with African countries in the agriculture sector is expanding. **With 65% of the world’s uncultivated arable land, employing over 60% of the workforce, and accounting for almost 20% of Sub-Saharan Africa’s GDP, agriculture is critical to Africa’s economy. The African Continental Free Trade Area agreement is expected to improve cost competitiveness by removing tariffs.** As this relationship enters the post-pandemic world, it is vital to prioritise and channel resources into augmenting partnership in agriculture. **This is crucial given its unexplored potential, centrality to global food security, business prospects and to provide credible alternatives to the increasing involvement of Chinese stakeholders in the sector.**

Analysing Chinese engagement

Over the past few years, I have led and worked with different teams of experts from various African countries, conducting evidence-based studies at the grassroots level to demystify Chinese engagement in the region. Evaluating the approaches that Chinese corporations, small and medium-sized enterprises and entrepreneurs adopt has provided a layered perspective of the sociopolitical, economic and environmental impact of Chinese engagement.

Today, **China is among Africa’s largest trading partners. It is also Africa’s single biggest creditor. Its corporations dominate the region’s infrastructure market and are now entering the agri-infra sector.** Increasingly critical to China’s global aspirations, its engagement in African agriculture is taking on a strateg-



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ic quality. Therefore, dismissing Beijing’s engagement in African agriculture as inconsequential for New Delhi would be unwise.

While access to Africa’s natural resources, its untapped markets and support for ‘One China Policy’ are primary drivers of Chinese engagement with the region, there are other factors at play. **Chinese-built industrial parks and economic zones in Africa are attracting low-cost, labour-intensive manufacturing units that are relocating from China.** Chinese engineers interviewed spoke of how their operations in Africa are important to accumulate global experience in management, risk and capital investments. Not only are they willing to overlook short-term profits in order to build ‘brand China’, but they want to dominate the market in the long term, which includes pushing Chinese standards in host countries. Chinese tech companies are laying critical telecommunications infrastructure, venture capital funds are investing in African fintech firms, while other smaller enterprises are expanding across the region.

While many Chinese entities have been active in Africa’s agricultural landscape for decades now, the nature, form and actors involved have undergone substantial change. In Zambia, Chinese firms are introducing agri-tech to combat traditional challenges, such as using drone technology to control the fall armyworm infestation. They have set up over 20 Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers (ATDCs) in the continent where Chinese agronomists work on developing new crop varieties and increasing crop yields. These ATDCs partner with local universities, conduct workshops and classes for officials and provide training and lease equipment to small holder farmers. Chinese companies with no prior experience in agriculture are setting out to build futuristic

ecological parks while others are purchasing large-scale commercial farms. Furthermore, African agriculture experts, officials and farmers are provided opportunities to augment skills and be trained in China.

The exponential growth in the China-Africa economic ties and the emergence of Beijing as an alternate to traditional western powers has motivated change in perceptions across groups. Governments and heads of state are recalibrating approaches, media houses are investing more resources for on-the-ground-reporting and artists like Michael Soi in Kenya are using satirical paintings to start a dialogue. Simultaneously, Africa-China relations are becoming complex with a growing, insular diaspora, lopsided trade, looming debt, competition with local businesses and a negative perception accompanied by greater political and socioeconomic interlinkages.

Examining Chinese interactions also provides cues on what not to do. The Chinese and African experts working in ATDCs seemingly operate in silos. On occasion, there seems to be a gap between skills transferred in China and the ground realities in Africa. In some cases, the technology taught in China is not available locally and in others, there is inability to implement lessons learnt due to the absence of supporting resources. Larger commercial farms run by Mandarin-speaking managers and the presence of small-scale Chinese farmers in local markets aggravates socio-cultural stresses.

Takeaways for India

India-Africa agricultural cooperation currently includes institutional and individual capacity-building initiatives such as the India-Africa Institute of Agriculture and Rural development in Malawi, extension of soft loans, supply of machinery, acquisition of farmlands and the presence

of Indian entrepreneurs in the African agricultural ecosystem. Indian farmers have purchased over 6,00,000 hectares of land for commercial farming in Africa. Sub-national actors are providing another model of cooperation in agriculture. Consider the case of the Kerala government trying to meet its steep requirement for raw cashew nuts amounting to 8 lakh tonnes a year with imports from countries in Africa to complement its production capacity currently limited to 0.83 lakh tonnes. **There are also proposals to create a jointly-owned brand of Africa-Kollam cashews. Similar ideas could encourage State governments and civil society organisations to identify opportunities and invest directly.**

There is also promise in incentivising Indian industries to tap into African agri-business value chains and connecting Indian technology firms and startups with partners in Africa. The transformative power of innovative and disruptive technology has been evident in the African agri-tech sector as the startup ecosystem in the continent enjoyed a 110% growth between 2016 and 2018. In the past year, despite the pandemic, the sector witnessed a record increase in investments.

A thorough impact assessment needs to be conducted of the existing capacity-building initiatives in agriculture for India to stand in good stead. This could include detailed surveys of participants who have returned to their home countries. Country-specific and localised curriculum can be drawn up, making skill development demand-led.

While India’s Africa strategy exists independently, it is important to be cognisant of China’s increasing footprint in the region. Beijing’s model, if successful here, could be heralded as a replica for the larger global south.

It is important to note, however, that prominent African voices have emphasised that their own agency is often overlooked in global discourse on the subject. In that sense India has consistently chosen well to underline the development partnership to be in line with African priorities. It is pertinent, therefore, that we collectively craft a unique modern partnership with Africa.

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