

## **OCCASIONAL PAPER**

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# **Education, Training and Capacity Building in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) 2021:**

Multilateral and Bilateral Ambitions  
Twenty Years On

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## **SUMMARY**

The latest Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) took place in Dakar, Senegal in November 2021. Among the huge range of pledges and agreements, one of the most extensive was capacity building through scholarships, targeted training and people-to-people exchanges. In this Strategic Update, Kenneth King analyses China's pledges not just in the sphere of formal education, but across the many different sectors of China's collaboration with Africa for the next three years. While the impact of COVID-19 can be seen in the reduction of some face-to-face opportunities in China, the extent of what is agreed to be implemented in Africa remains significant. Though these ambitious promises are agreed multilaterally with the whole of Africa, they are delivered bilaterally across the continent in more than fifty different country settings, reflecting how the Africa-China relationship remains strong after two decades of growing engagement.

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The eighth meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Dakar in November 2021 marked over 20 years since the Forum was launched in 2000. Much has changed since the early days of FOCAC, but the pattern of regular triennial conferences has become established. China still describes itself in the Action Plan (AP) as the 'largest developing country' (FOCAC, 2021: 1.4). 'Cooperation' remains one of the terms most frequently used in the text, and this is illustrated in the very frequent use of the term 'mutual' as in 'mutual learning', 'mutual benefit', and 'mutual trust', emphasising that China is not a traditional donor but is involved in South-South cooperation.

China's growing involvement in education cooperation and capacity building reflects the gradually evolving China-Africa relationship and China's overall emergence as a normative power. 'Education and Human Resources' remains a key section within 'Social Development Cooperation' in the 2021 AP, but it will be intriguing to see whether there have been changes in the approaches to human resource development (HRD) at a time when the pandemic has dramatically affected much face-to-face learning.

Furthermore, just before the FOCAC 8 meeting, China's State Council issued a White Paper: *China and Africa in the new era: A partnership of equals* (PRC, 2021). This proves to be a valuable complement to the FOCAC AP, adding detail in several places, and underlining the claim of equal relations between China and Africa despite the role of Chinese agency. In this analysis we shall start with the FOCAC support given explicitly to 'education and human resources'

and then review the wider positioning of capacity building for Africa by China, as well as the character of the sheer volume of pledges and agreements contained in the FOCAC AP. The conclusion reflects on the significance of educational cooperation for China's image and soft power in Africa.

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## **Overview: Education and Human Resources in the Africa-China Relationship**

While Africa-China relations are often framed as dominated by unsustainable financial ties or the omnipresent debt issue, the role of human resources development has often been overlooked. China's support for capacity building in Africa has remained a key pillar of its relationship with the continent and has been captured in the eight FOCAC Declarations and Action Plans, as well as in the series of White Papers since 2006. While these plans vary in content, no issue has been more of a red thread than scholarship and training support.

### **Bringing African Students to China**

FOCAC has been the central platform of China's educational outreach in Africa. One key aim has been to fund scholarship opportunities for African students in China. For instance, in the previous FOCAC AP of 2018, there were pledges by China of no less than 50,000 government scholarships and 50,000 training opportunities for shorter term workshops and seminars. Beyond this, there was an additional 'tailor-made programme to train 1000 high-calibre Africans' (FOCAC 2018: 4.3.3). What sets the 2021 AP apart from previous iterations is the lack of clear numbers for scholarship pledges, stating merely that '...China will continue to train professionals in relevant fields' (FOCAC 2021: 4.3.4).

### **Promoting Vocational Training**

Capacity building and vocational education represent another dimension of education and HRD under the auspices of FOCAC. The AP accordingly promises that China and Africa 'will deepen their cooperation in capacity building; promote technology transfer; enhance technical training for youth'

(FOCAC 2021: 4.3.1). Two aspects stand out in particular.

First, the AP identifies ‘Luban Workshops’ as key institutions to promote capacity building.<sup>1</sup> Luban Workshops were originally pledged in the 2018 AP and linked to the city of Tianjin which was responsible for the roll-out of Luban Workshops across Africa but the initiative has now been co-opted by the central government (FOCAC 2021: 4.3.2). These are already underway in Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Morocco, Egypt and Djibouti, to mention just a few of the 12 in Africa. As with the Confucius Institute (CI) project, which launched in 2004, the initiative is global in aspiration, and has already taken root in Southeast Asia, and even in the UK. The Luban Workshops focus on vocational education but with an emphasis on high-level technologies. While the CIs are located in host-country universities, Luban Workshops are located in host-country vocational institutions. One of the selling points for the CIs, particularly in Africa, was that they offered the chance to work in one of the many Chinese companies on the continent. Similarly, the Luban Workshops are linked to opportunities to gain expertise in Chinese technologies and work in Chinese firms. Hence it is mentioned in the FOCAC 2021 plan that, in connection with the Luban pledge, ‘China will encourage Chinese companies in Africa to offer at least 800,000 local jobs’ (FOCAC 2021: 4.3.2). Just as the CI project has been one of the largest language training initiatives,

so the Luban project has been identified as an ambitious global plan with a link to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Luban Workshops are likely part of a broader push to build capacity in the digital economy. The 2021 AP accordingly emphasises ‘ICT, fintech, digital economy, e-commerce, cloud computing, big data and cyber security in order to leverage relevant impact on the high growth potential of these sectors in Africa’ (FOCAC 2021: 4.3.1). Clearly, vocational training is high on the agenda of FOCAC as there is a pledge to put in place the ‘“Future of Africa” China-Africa Vocational Education Cooperation Plan’ (FOCAC 2021: 4.3.2). Africa has therefore taken pride of place in terms of the institutional development of Luban Workshops and vocational training cooperation.

### Teaching Mandarin Chinese

The traditional elements of the HRD FOCAC agenda such as CIs remain on the FOCAC AP. China and Africa continue to support both CIs and Confucius Classrooms (CCs); but they also welcome the way that Chinese has been accepted into national curricula in several African countries. It is worth noting that China does not want to be seen as only interested in the promotion of Chinese; rather, it also has plans to promote the teaching and training of African languages in China.

There is no mention of reworking the organisational structure in China for supporting the CIs and CCs in Africa

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1 Lu Ban who lived in China from the 6th century BC to 5th century BC is revered as the father of innovation in technology.

or world-wide (Li, 2021). This may well be because these changes were a response to specific, largely Western, and particularly US, criticism of the CIs. By contrast there has been little criticism of the CIs amongst the 62 institutes in Africa (King, 2017).

### **Providing Short-Term Training to African Professionals**

In the 2021 AP, China further supports the offer of 10,000 short-term training awards for African professionals to come to China. These cover one to three months of intensive exposure to some of the areas for which China claims expertise. They include a wide range of themes and are offered through some of the best-known universities, colleges and other institutes in China.

### **Capacity Building Beyond Education: Public Health, Science, Agriculture & Infrastructure**

While training and capacity building are red threads that run through the AP, they are by no means confined to the section concerned with formal education and training. While the term ‘capacity’ occurs no less than 53 times in the AP, ‘training’ 47 times, and ‘capacity building’ 27 times, ‘education’ only occurs 12 times, reflecting that the great majority of China’s support to HRD and capacity development in Africa cuts across almost all the different sectors—e.g. science and technology, health, poverty reduction, and people-to-people exchanges.

One of the most powerful illustrations of this relates to the section on medical care (Benabdallah, 2021). China will provide a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Africa— 600 million as aid and 400 million in joint production with Chinese companies (FOCAC 2021: 4.2.4). China has also supported the construction of the African Centre for Disease Control (FOCAC 2021: 4.2.6) and pledges to send 1500 medical personnel from China to Africa to help in the building up of ‘a training platform for China-Africa health cooperation’ (FOCAC 2021: 4.2.11). The specificity of the remaining nine items on the FOCAC 2021 medical package is remarkable in terms of capacity development, ranging from support to the African

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Medicines Agency to joint drug production and the active support of traditional medicine in medical treatment.

Another example of capacity development can be seen within the section on Science and Technology and Knowledge Sharing (FOCAC 2021: 4.5.1-11). This reaches from initiatives such as the BRI Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation action plan to a whole series of science & technology people-to-people exchanges. The latter includes international young scientist exchanges and innovative talent exchanges between China and Africa. Beyond this, there is a pledge to build a China-Africa joint research centre for cooperation in areas such as modern agriculture, biodiversity, eco-environmental protection, and public health. There is further planning in the space arena, including a white paper on China-Africa Space Cooperation. Finally, amongst much else, there is confirmation of support in the areas of nuclear and climate science for a range of activities (FOCAC 2021:4.5.11).

Furthermore, an area of intensive collaboration and capacity building is agriculture, food safety and food security. This includes support for the long-established agricultural demonstration centres in Africa and China's pledge to '... send 500 agricultural experts to African countries to carry out plan making, policy consultation, technical demonstration, on-site teaching and capacity training' (FOCAC 2021: 3.1.8).

Lastly, China's long-standing support for African infrastructure development also has a capacity building dimension. All areas of infrastructure—roads, rail, ports, aviation and information technology—are tied to training as '[b]oth sides will deepen their commitment to increase the training of African professionals—including women—in all the domains that fall under infrastructure connectivity initiative in Africa' (FOCAC 2021: 3.2.7). This pledge includes the specific commitment to capacity development by the building of an Africa-China civil aviation academy in Africa.

## **Implementation: A One-Way Street?**

### **Multilateral Pledges and Bilateral Implementation**

While the AP is certainly ambitious in what it pledges, it is less certain how this complex programme will be implemented. There are many pledges of very specific initiatives such as 10 schools, 10 infrastructure projects, 10 connectivity assistance projects, 10 industrialisation and employment assistance projects, 10 digital economy assistance projects, 10 medical and health assistance projects, 10 poverty reduction and agricultural assistance projects, 10 peace and security projects, and 10 green development projects. Despite this level of detail, the AP remains silent as to where in Africa these may be allocated. This is likely because, traditionally, China has determined the

allocation of its pledges bilaterally rather than leaving it to the African Union or its regional economic agencies to make these decisions.

This bilateral allocation process can take place when a Chinese minister is visiting an African country, reflecting how FOCAC pledges have to be implemented in particular countries while the agreement is with Africa as a whole. Thus, when China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, visited Kenya in January 2022, he confirmed six bilateral agreements, including the allocation of 10 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine (Anadolu Agency, 2022).

China's aid agency, China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), plays a key role in the bilateral process and maintains close links with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce. The latter continues to have an institutionally distinct presence in many African countries such as South Africa and Kenya and is responsible for many aspects of China's 'aid'.

Last, even though the scale of the action plans is ambitious, there continue to be items that are agreed on bilaterally that do not feature in FOCAC action plans in cases where country-level needs must be addressed before the next FOCAC.

### **What is Pledged and What is Implemented**

When there is such a variety of China-Africa agreements and pledges covering all the different sections and sub-sections of development cooperation, it is understandable that there is a required

follow-up committee. This is composed of no less than 36 heads of relevant departments of the Chinese government as well as envoys from each of the 54 African countries with embassies in Beijing. Thus far, there have been fifteen of what are called Senior Officials Meetings (SOMs) for FOCAC follow-up, and the last line of the 2021 FOCAC AP confirms that the next two SOMs will take place in 2023 and 2024.

SOM reports likely communicate the feedback from the 54 envoys on what elements of the complex AP have been bilaterally agreed with their national government and ministries, as in the above example of the vaccines promised to Kenya. Understandably, the individual African ambassadors in Beijing cannot comment on what has happened to the one billion doses allocated to Africa as a whole, but only on their own bilateral component. The same will be true of the hundreds of other components pledged in the AP.

If, for example, we return to the theme of Education and Human Resources discussed at the outset of this paper and examine the range of what is actually pledged in the nine components of this section of the AP, it becomes evident that they differ a great deal from each other in terms of quantity and general targets. This may challenge follow-up procedures and assessments of adequate implementation.

The first item is general in nature and has no numerical targets but just an aspiration that China and Africa will deepen their cooperation in capacity building, technology transfer and technical training.

The second item is very different. Following African appreciation of the Luban vocational training opportunities provided by China, both sides agree to expand vocational training and employment, and implement a series of schemes, but with no quantitative dimensions. The same is true of the pledge to set up more Luban Workshops. The encouragement for Chinese firms in Africa to provide vocational training also has no targets. The only numerical element in this second component is massive but hard to monitor—the encouragement of Chinese companies in Africa to offer at least 800,000 local jobs.

The third commitment includes two very specific promises: the offer of building or upgrading ten schools; and providing 10,000 places in seminars and workshops for African high-level professionals. Clearly, these two elements can be reviewed over the triennium. However, for the fourth element—the offer of scholarships—there are again no target numbers. By contrast, the hope that both sides will explore setting up a joint R&D centre for road engineering can obviously be traced.

Both the fifth and sixth components contain completely general promises about capacity building that both sides will seek to implement. Clearly these can be evaluated only at a very different level compared to numerical targets. The seventh element offers continued support to CIs and CCs, but historically there has been no target number associated with these as they are meant to be demand-driven from the interest of universities and schools in Africa. The eighth part considers extending the UNESCO-China Funds-in-Trust, which has already had three phases, for a further four years.

Lastly, there is a wide-ranging item covering the launch of an experts' exchange programme as well as joint research projects across a wide spectrum from software development to policy planning, monitoring and evaluation. Both sides will also develop new models of training in particular African countries.

These nine items are one example of the varied character of what has actually been agreed on in the many different

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sections of the FOCAC 2021 AP. But they illustrate the complexity of the follow-up procedure. There are another set of goals which are also quite specific but where there is no numerical timeline; these include implementing the China-Africa Vocational Education Cooperation Plan, the holding of a China-Africa Education Ministers' Forum, and the setting up of a Road Engineering Centre. This high priority for technical and vocational training may be one reason why at the beginning of the section on Education and Human Resources there is an emphasis on the promotion of technology transfer and enhanced technical training. This technology focus is also evident in the plan to explore the setting up of a laboratory or centre for road engineering. This in turn connects neatly with the desire to connect most of the FOCAC agreements to the on-going BRI.

However, even without specific targets or numbers for pledges such as government scholarships, Confucius Institutes, Luban Workshops, exchanges of experts, or new projects in any one of the areas mentioned, the fact that they feature in the FOCAC AP could be a green light for an African ministry to apply to the Chinese embassy or the local office of the Ministry of Commerce in pursuit of any of these opportunities.

## Locating African Agency

One persistent question of Africa-China relations is that of agency; in this context, the ability of African countries to shape the FOCAC agenda according to their

respective national preferences. The above underlines the fact that the China-Africa cooperation process may appear to be a one-way system, with China providing the support to Africa. The AP is structured in a way that 'the two sides' is mentioned throughout the document (175 times) while 'the African side' is only mentioned 19 times. There are, however, many occasions where the document affirms China's agency ('China will', 103 times). Even when it comes to supporting African languages, it is China that will 'provide the teaching and training of African languages in China' (FOCAC 2021: 4.3.7). One of the few areas where Africa is engaged in parallel training is where it is agreed that 'both sides will continue to open more culture centres in China and Africa' (FOCAC 2021: 5.2.6).

In addition to this power asymmetry, the COVID-19 pandemic may have made it harder to create a level playing field in education and training cooperation and thereby hampered Africa's opportunity to capitalise on FOCAC. For instance, in the previous 2018 FOCAC AP, the number of professional training awards was no less than 50,000. It is entirely possible that given the continuing challenges and uncertainties of COVID, and China's zero-COVID strategy, Beijing has decided that it will not be feasible to maintain the 15,000+ annually associated with the previous FOCAC. COVID may also be the reason that for the first time there were no numbers attached to the offer of scholarships. China's offer of these scholarships and training awards has particularly been

justified on the assumption about the impact on scholars and trainees of actually being in China. While studying online has proved possible with the long-term scholarships during the pandemic, the actual exposure to Chinese practices in some 300 different areas of expertise in the short-term training awards has not been possible; hence the dramatically lower numbers offered by FOCAC 2021 for training awards. Perhaps the thinking is that by the third year of the current triennium, the possibility of in-person training will have returned.

COVID may therefore account for the absence of any numerical pledge for scholarships and the reduced training awards rather than any Chinese 'retrenchment from Africa' (Sun, 2021). The reality is that African student numbers in China have been going up substantially, and by 2018 had reached over 80,000, including both scholarship and fee-paying students (Wu, 2021: 31).

## **Conclusion: South-South Cooperation in Action**

It has been acknowledged earlier in this paper that the COVID-19 pandemic has doubtlessly affected the character of the FOCAC 2021 AP. Nonetheless, the 2021 AP is a good example of South-South cooperation in action. Even though in the 35+ pages there are many actions which are solely the responsibility of Beijing—'China will...'—the overall impression from the AP is that its 175 uses of the term, 'the two sides...' and the 116 examples of the term 'China-Africa' do confirm that it is not just read as a one-sided 'aid' document, but rather a complex and hugely ambitious set of targets, goals and mutual understandings between two long-standing partners. ■

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**Cover image:** Detail from a photo of the opening ceremony of the FOCAC Summit Beijing, 3 September 2018. by Paul Kagame via Creative Commons



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