The Emerging Education Sector in China’s Aid Policy to Africa

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Education has been an important part in Sino-African cooperation since China first established diplomatic relations with Egypt 50 years ago. Main modalities of earlier Sino-African educational cooperation include exchange visits, student and staff exchange, government scholarships, dispatch of teachers, joint academic and research projects, supply of educational equipment and facility, etc. Such initiatives and endeavors vary with the changes of the international geo-political landscape and the development of Sino-African relations. Education did not become a priority until very recently, when educational establishments, human resources development and cooperation in HE and TVET were put high on the FOCAC agenda. Such cooperation will not only provide a channel for African counterparts to know more about China’s developmental model but will also contribute to the revitalization of African countries through direct involvement. For China, interaction with African countries in education provides a new means of capacity building. For both sides, educational cooperation is the key to the sustainable development of Sino-African political and economic cooperation. In this sense, the rising status of education sector in the overall package is both practical and strategic. The changing status is accompanied by changes in rationale, approach, scale, level, fields, actors, etc of the sector.

China is itself an assistance recipient country. In providing assistance to Africa, China has been very prudent in its discourse and practice. It prefers “educational cooperation/exchanges” to “educational assistance/aid”, taking educational aid as part of educational cooperation. Even “development assistance”, MDGs and poverty reduction were very unusual terms in the relative documents. This does not mean a deliberate deviation from the UN MDGs. The pledge to establish 100 rural schools in the next three years can be understood to be closely associated with the MDG of universal primary education. China differs from other donors in that it sticks to bilateralism and has its own priorities in higher education and TVET, fields that are perceived to be high priorities by African governments themselves. Mutuality, integrity and continuity also contribute to the shaping of China’s educational aid to Africa. Education is just part of the whole package. Not only do various educational initiatives need to be integrated, but education, as a fundamental sector, needs to be integrated with other sectors. New initiatives and endeavors need to be coherent and consistent with what has already been done. However, it is mutuality that accounts for the emerging model of “aid through cooperation, cooperation for mutual development” in the education sector. Such mutuality is determined by the duality of

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China both as a donor and as an assistance recipient country and by China and Africa’s eagerness for mutual development as the largest developing country on the one part and the continent with the biggest number of developing countries on the other. This also explains why China prefers “educational cooperation/exchanges”.

In response to the emerging role of the education sector in China’s aid policy and to the emerging pattern of China’s educational aid, we find a new pattern of institutional practice. Such is an integrated approach to supporting capacity building of a higher education institution in the respective field and of China in Africa. Educational aid or cooperation is no longer simply taken as a political mission assigned or sponsored by government. Rationales are becoming more diversified and such endeavors are internalized or institutionalized, making them part of the institutional strategy to gain expertise and comparative advantages. Beyond the active participation in educational aid to and cooperation with Africa, higher education institutions are developing academic, research and consultancy capacity to meet both institutional and national development goals in the field.