

The Media and Chinese soft power in Uganda: The quest for investment and political influence

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ABSTRACT

The research study is part of the 'Voice of China in Africa' project that is examining the concept of 'soft power' in relation to China's engagement in Africa and how this is being covered by media in both Africa and China. This paper is based on the on-going research study that seeks to explore the impact of Chinese soft power, given China's increased investments, particularly in media and communication industries on the African continent using Uganda as a case study where China has had substantial investments. Recognizing that the economic interests cannot be dissociated from the political arena, the interest is to find out how the increased investments are being strategically used as a quest for political influence.

Premised within the globalization theories, the study assesses how the two predominant development paradigms – the Western imperialism paradigm and the participatory paradigm that is associated with the East, have been applied in Uganda's development approaches. China on the other hand, seems to be providing an alternative development model and the study examines the opportunities and challenges with this ideology, reflecting on its relevancy to Uganda's development and the African continent.

With Uganda as a case study, where extensive Key Informant interviews have been done as well as qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the media coverage of China, the paper in addition is enriched by similar research experiences shared at conferences studying China's soft power and the rising influence of China in Africa that have been held at Ch. Michelsen Institute Bergen

in Norway; Makerere University Kampala in Uganda; and IESE Maputo in Mozambique.

Given the importance of the media in influencing global power, the study examines China's engagement in communication and media industries, particularly the investments in digital television, mobile telephones and digital products in Uganda. Investments in other sectors are highlighted, amongst which are: oil, power, agriculture, road construction, health, and education. There is symbolic construction of government buildings, stadium, health centres, and donations meant to increase China's "soft power". Major Chinese finances for Karuma power dam estimated at US\$1.6 billion, and US\$350 million for Entebbe express high way have boosted Uganda government infrastructure projects.

Chinese investments have increased tremendously in Uganda over the past few years, peaking US\$683 million in 2013. Trade between China and Uganda has boomed reaching US\$359. The investments are projected to create 30000 jobs. However there are concerns over trade deficit of 1:10 between the two countries. Other concerns arise from extensive Chinese entry into retail business displacing the locals, poor language communication, labour relations, and Chinese getting most of the construction contracts.

Politically, state level relations are cordial, with high level delegations exchanged and China promising not to interfere with domestic affairs of Uganda. Nevertheless, critics have pointed out that the Chinese non-interference ideology is not promoting nurturing of democratic governance and also enhances corrupt practices. Another concern is that the Chinese engagement are very distant from the ordinary people so it is the government and the elite enjoying most of the benefits.

The extent to which the local and international media highlights these issues is the focus of this study.