

China and the global aid architecture: Understanding China's evolving development assistance

1. Excellence

China's development aid is expanding and there are many indications that some of its policies are changing. This is manifested structurally in new organization of aid at home as well as internationally in the relationship to the global aid architecture and established donors, in the rapid expansion in both the volume of aid and the geographical scope of recipients, and in the launch of new aid instruments. This project brings together scholars from Norway, China, Africa and the US and seeks to capture the nature and dynamics of this change through a multilevel analysis and an understanding of change informed by neo-institutional theory.

Through academic research and publications and targeted engagements with development aid stakeholders in China, recipient countries and among other donor countries and multilateral institutions, this project contributes to strengthened global partnerships as formulated in the Sustainable Development Goal 17.

1.1. State of the art, knowledge needs and project objectives

The overall objective of the project is to analyse the **implications of China's evolution as a major provider of development assistance in relation to the global aid architecture**. From the rich literature on China's own development path and integration into international institutions, we know that China is often seen as both an active learner, eager to experiment and reform, and a calculating strategist, actively promoting its interests and protecting its political traditions. When China incorporates international norms, it is typically explained as a function of these norms becoming strongly aligned with national interests. However, learning through socialization with international actors, sometimes combined with controversy and pressure, has played substantive roles in the evolution of many Chinese internationally oriented institutions (Kent 2007; Johnston 2008). Development aid presents an interesting window, empirically and theoretically, into China's evolving role as a global development actor. Firstly, China is expanding and changing its development assistance engagements. Secondly, China appears more eager to learn from, and engage with, international and multilateral cooperation actors (Zhang 2017). In this project we zoom in on these developments and study them within a new institutionalist framework (Mahoney and Thelen 2010), trying to disentangle when, and under which conditions, tradition, rationalized interests or learning offer better explanations for how and why China's aid policies and practices are evolving.

In China, we see an increasing attention to challenges and sustainability issues in connection with its development assistance, more attention to capacity building and the transfer of skills, and more interest in regional, international and multilateral cooperation and south-south and triangular north-south-south aid. The establishment (2018) of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) may be an indication of these changes. China's role as development actor is also highly controversial. In the West, a focus on the Chinese "threat" has been a recurrent theme for many political leaders, most recently illustrated by Washington's 2018 Africa Strategy. China's role as a development actor has also generated much scholarly debate and interest, perhaps especially in relation to its evolving new role in Africa (Bräutigam 2009, Taylor 2009). A dominant theme in this literature has been China's commercial expansion, its market-oriented domestic reforms and the Chinese state's efforts to support Chinese companies going global. We have also seen an expanding number of thematic and country case studies examining China's role and the implication for development in other countries (Alden & Large 2019).

China's expanding development assistance and position as an aid donor has also generated scholarly interest (Bräutigam 2011, Mawdsley 2013). Yet, most studies have not managed to adequately separate aid funding from the broader (and much bigger) Chinese commercial engagement and financial flows. Studies focusing on Chinese aid have often been confined to the forms dominant from the beginning of Chinese aid in the 1960s until the early 2000s, such as project aid in health, education and agriculture. Recent studies include attempts to assess the volume and direction of

Chinese aid using Chinese data (Kitano and Harada 2016), quantitative studies of the determinants behind aid flows (Dreher 2018) and case studies of Chinese aid projects within health, education and agriculture (e.g., Jing Gu 2016). Studies of the massive recent expansion of training and education opportunities in China for senior officials and students from developing countries have also emerged (King 2013).

There is currently no comprehensive analysis of Chinese aid in relation to China's political, and particularly foreign policy interests (economic, strategic/national security, norms/values), the adaptation to the realities on the ground or in relation to the global aid architecture, hitherto dominated by the West. China was a signatory to the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the OECD 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness which called for greater alignment with the needs and priorities of aid receiving countries and harmonization between donor countries. However, China has largely been absent in global efforts to implement these commitments. The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a further development and revision of the MDGs and the Paris Declaration through, for example, its recognition of new development actors and the ambition to improve global aid cooperation. This lack of current knowledge provides the justification for research on the role of Chinese development assistance.

The project will include three interlinked work packages, with more specific objectives that will enable us to address the overall objective.

1.2. Novelty and ambition

Theoretically, we further the understanding on how and why both formal development assistance policies, and actual practices in recipient countries, are being shaped and evolve. The literature on Chinese aid is divided. Some scholars argue political and economic interests dominate most, if not all, Chinese aid, while others argue China also provides assistance to countries not representing or corresponding to any particular interests (Brautigam 2011). While this divide in motivational explanations underscores the need for further research, the current literature has very little to offer in terms of explaining why Chinese aid is not only expanding but seems to be changing in several respects. Is China learning from its own experiences, is it responding to recipient country praises or complaints, or are international and multilateral actors and their experiences now appearing more relevant than previously been perceived? This project moves to the centre of this empirical and theoretical puzzle.

While not ignoring tradition or overarching Chinese foreign policy- and aid principles, such as non-interference, state sovereignty and win-win, we pay special attention to interest calculation and processes involving learning, extending the empirical and theoretical understanding for how and why Chinese policies and practices, under varying circumstances change (or remain the same). Changes may be motivated by both interests and learning (Johnston 2008). Our ambition is to better explain what initiates change and expansion (of Chinese aid) and what steers their directions. Our multilevel approach, including strong components on general policy developments – in specific policy areas – as well as actual practices, studied through field work in three countries, will enable us to identify both key actors and key structural factors shaping institutional outcomes (aid policies and practices).

Within the framework of this project, the potential for developing new knowledge lies in mainly three areas. One is empirical knowledge about China as provider of development assistance. A second aim is to enhance our understanding of the determinants of Chinese aid, including the relations between aid and Chinese foreign policy objectives. The third area is China's role in relation to the evolving global aid architecture.

Methodologically, the project innovatively seeks to combine data collection at different levels: at the policy level in China, in China's engagement at the multilateral level and at the recipient country level. The multilevel approach will also enable us to follow the development of Chinese aid from its initial formulation in China (and its connections with Chinese economic and other foreign policy interests), and all the way down to the implementation phase – in order to ascertain how it is adapted to the realities on the ground as well as in relation to the global aid architecture.

In turn, this knowledge is intended to contribute to a better platform for engagement between traditional Western aid donors and new providers of development aid. This may help improve the potential for global cooperation to achieve the SDGs, specifically in relation to SDG 17 on global cooperation, and the sub-indicators on finance and capacity building.

1.3. Research questions and hypotheses, theoretical approach and methodology

Our objective is to explain expansion and evident changes that are occurring within Chinese aid policies and practices. Our primary research questions are: **What are the explanatory determinants of China's expanding development aid and how and why does policies and practices change? How does China interact with the Western-dominated global aid architecture?** This project seeks to capture the nature and dynamics of these changes through a multilevel analysis and a new institutionalist approach. Institutions are here understood as both formal policies as well as widely applied practices that may and may not be explicitly formalized. The combination of formal and informal is important, not least regarding the authoritarian Chinese setting, where actors are often expected to consider formal policy with some flexibility and room for interpretation (Tsai 2007; Gåsemyr 2015).

It is well established, also indicated officially by Chinese government statements, that international development aid is an integral part of Chinese diplomacy (Zhang 2017). We may thus assume that both elements of tradition and strategic considerations factor in when Chinese policy makers and aid practitioners plan and deliver aid. While not ignoring historical influences, such as traditional norms and overarching political principles, our main explanatory focus is on strategic interest calculation and learning, which need not to be mutually excluding. Triggers and drivers of change, moreover, may be both endogenous and exogenous in nature. Endogenous when provoked by Chinese aid-related actors and established institutions. Exogenous when inspired by actors and institutional norms that are not integral to already established Chinese aid institutions. To drive theorized explanations forward, we need to better understand under which circumstances interests and learning, as well as internal and external influences dominate or may be combined in creating new institutional outcomes (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). To make distinctions, we thus must see aid in relation to pronounced or perceived, identifiable interests, as well as specified changes in policies and practices. Most importantly, we need to identify the initiating and driving factors behind these changes to infer whether and what forms of learning may take place.

Learning may occur in both domestic, bilateral and international settings. Chinese, as well as recipient country actors, may promote novel practices that are inspired by national, and not necessarily internationally established, experiences and norms. Chinese may learn from their own successes and failures. Studies on Chinese peace and security engagements in Africa, for instance, have found that China is there actively experimenting with new foreign policies. China is thus not only reacting to established norms but is actively making them (Alden and Large 2015). In the regional and international arenas, moreover, learning through socialization has too often been simplified as a one-directional process, failing to acknowledge that international socialization is at least a two-way process (Pu 2012).

We know from theory, both generally (Cortell and Davis 2000) and specifically in relation to China (Kent 2007), that international norms are more likely to transform into domestic practices if they come to be seen as well-aligned with domestic interests. However, we also know that both domestic experiences and socialization around international norms has led to substantive changes in China's internationally oriented institutions: Johnston (2008) has documented this in relation to Chinese disarmament and nuclear test policies; Kent (2007) in relation to international security and monetary governance; and Gåsemyr (2015) in relation health and disease prevention governance. One tricky challenge in identifying and explaining learning through socialization, however, is to separate strategic adaption from more genuine forms of learning (Johnston 2008). In our study, strategic adaption, for instance, may occur if aid expands or practices change to achieve some expected gains. Typical gains may be to facilitate other political and economic objectives, to mute recipient country complaints, or deflect international controversy. Genuine learning, on the other hand, would occur if expansion or changes could be attributed to other factors than merely self-serving interests. This could mean, for instance, Chinese aid policies changing to improve conditions for certain recipient groups who do not represent any particularly interests.

With our research design and methodology, we are well positioned to study national policy level changes as well as country-level changes regarding relevant aid practices. Most importantly, we can identify key actors, and the structural constraints that surround them, and study them in relation to both interests and socialization and learning. This will enable us to further specify which factors

seem more and less present in relation to different types of institutional outcomes – changing and unchanging aid policies and practices.

We have designed three work packages (WP) and corresponding hypothesis.

WP1: To what extent and why is Chinese aid changing from previous patterns?

This package will *first* map the evolution of Chinese aid and provide an overview of volume of aid provided, the channels being used for delivery, the types of aid interventions supported, and the geographical directions. Chinese aid has a history dating back to the 1960s. It has mainly been provided as bilateral project aid using Chinese personnel in small service delivery projects within agriculture and health coupled with scholarships for education and training in China. Additionally, there were a few infrastructure projects typically funded through grants or interest-free loans.

Although the volume of Western aid was much bigger, there were many parallels between Chinese project aid and Western bilateral project aid as provided from the 1950s through to the 1970s (Hyden & Mukandala 1999, Bräutigam 1998, Morgan & Yu Zheng 2019). But from the early 1980s, the Western (or OECD-DAC) donors moved in a different direction with increased emphasis on bigger programme aid, expanding donor coordination, application of economic and political conditionalities and on improving government institutional capacities. The 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness was a culmination of this trend. Chinese aid also began to change, primarily after 2000 and the establishment of the Forum for China Africa Cooperation. Both the volume of Chinese aid and the number of developing countries benefiting from the aid increased. The emphasis on bilateral project aid continued but a new and major component was added: subsidies on loans from the two Chinese policy banks EXIM Bank and the Development Bank (Tjønneland 2013).

Secondly, the hypotheses below will be used to analyse the determinants of Chinese aid.

- (1) China's aid is mainly determined by Chinese economic interests;
- (2) Chinese aid is responding to lessons from its implementation and embarks upon new aid interventions to address development and sustainability challenges; and
- (3) Weak coherence in Chinese aid remains amidst institutional restructuring and reflects a fragmented domestic institutional framework for delivering aid.

Dreher (2018) analysed financial flows from China to developing countries and found that ordinary loans are more commercial than “aid-like” loans and grants which are more driven by other foreign policy objectives.¹ A number of case studies have examined the economic interests behind the Chinese engagement and have linked this to both economic needs – derived from needs for access to oil and other raw materials; excess capacity in the Chinese construction sector; and/or state incentives encouraging Chinese companies to “go global”. Other foreign policy objectives – related to South-South cooperation and “Third World” solidarity also plays a role. Furthermore, our hypotheses are derived from the expanding studies of China's role as development actor in individual countries which portray China's pragmatic approach and an ability to adapt to local conditions (e.g. Bräutigam 2009). Another important feature is weak coherence in Chinese aid interventions (e.g., Jing Gu 2016).

We will collect data through mapping and analysis of the key Chinese policy documents on aid. This include the white papers on aid (2011, 2014 and (expected) 2019), the administrative regulations and other documents from the new (2018) China International Development Cooperation Agency, and policy documents from related institutions, including, among others, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Secretariat for the Forum for China Africa Cooperation, and the Belt and Road Initiative that links China with the rest of the World through a massive infrastructure and investment programme. This mapping will also include assessing available data on disbursements from the aid budget. The aim is to collect data on which loans and credits are subsidized from the aid budget, and why they were selected for such grants.

We will also conduct semi-structured interviews with officials and in the new Aid directorate, relevant Beijing-based government departments and agencies involved in policy development and

¹ The study relies on the database from AidData, the best available for these types of quantitative studies, but the dataset is incomplete and suffers i. a. from a failure to identify the loans from the EXIM Bank/Development Bank that have been subsidized by allocations from the aid budget (and which accounts for over half of the aid disbursements according to the two most recent – from 2011 and 2014 - Chinese White Papers on aid).

implementation, including the policy banks. Furthermore, we will interview relevant foreign donor agencies and institutions based in Beijing focusing on China's role as development actor. In addition, we will interview academics, observers and other stakeholders in Beijing and Shanghai who are engaged in China's role as development actor in other developing countries.

At the end of the second year, the project will also hold a workshop in Beijing to discuss preliminary findings with stakeholders. Officials interviewed, and other stakeholders from China, African missions and donor agencies present in Beijing will be invited to this event and the aim is to get feedback on our mapping and interpretation.

WP2: How does Chinese development aid relate to the global aid architecture and is this changing?

This work package will map China's position in relation to the global aid architecture. Historically, Chinese aid has been largely bilateral, and this is a trend that continues. China's contributions to multilateral institutions (development banks and UN agencies) have varied between USD 0.2 and 0.7 billion for the past ten years – about 10% of bilateral aid (Kitano 2017). However, China increasingly emphasizes the importance of participating in such fora (Cf. also Gåsemyr 2018). A noticeable trend in recent years is also China's participation in trilateral cooperation with Western bilateral donor agencies and/or UN agencies. This typically involves joint projects between China and the Western/UN agencies – most often with Western funding – in a developing country (Tjønneland 2019).

These changes reflect both China's foreign policy priorities of advancing a multipolar world and South-South cooperation, but increasing emphasis is also being placed on its growing great power identity. Furthermore, and perhaps specifically related to the trilateral projects, China's long experiences of delivering and expanding its aid has also led to a perceived need to assess lessons from other and "traditional" aid agencies with a view to identify implications for its own aid management performance (Zhang 2017). Our hypotheses are

- (1) China is putting increasing emphasis on its foreign policy objectives as a development actor and works to influence multilateral institutions with its own perspectives; and
- (2) China is eager to learn from other donor and development finance agencies with a view to improve its own aid performance.

This work package will study China in aid-and development related international institutions and its relations to other donor agencies in three ways. *First*, China's overall involvement in key global and regional aid institutions will be mapped and examined. *Secondly*, we will collect data on Chinese participation in trilateral development projects with bilateral Western donor agencies and/or UN agencies and the multilateral development banks. Data will be assembled from projects documents and assessments of individual projects, interviews with participating Chinese institutions in Beijing and interviews with Chinese participants and Chinese embassy officials and aid managers from other donor agencies in the countries part of WP3.

Thirdly, we will do a case study of China's evolving aid relations with the African Union (AU). This will enable us to assess the aid dimension in a South-South relation at the same as the AU is a major case of Western donor support to the same institution. Until recently China's relation with the AU was little more than the sum of engagement with individual African countries. This is now changing and China's relations with the AU is becoming more direct with the AU's 2063 Agenda and China's Belt and Road Initiative now providing the overarching framework for Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The AU also provides a framework for donors seeking to harmonise and align their support. How does China's engagement respond to these initiatives? And how does China respond to AU-priorities which goes beyond the Chinese approaches? Data will be conducted through literature surveys and interviews with officials at the AU in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa and in the AU mission in Beijing, Chinese AU/aid officials at the Chinese Mission in Addis Ababa and in Beijing (MFA, FOCAC Secretariat, CIDCA and others) as well as Western donors to the AU. Emerging findings will be discussed at a workshop in Addis Ababa with participation from invited officials, aid managers and stakeholders.

WP3: How is bilateral Chinese development support implemented on the ground and are practices changing?

The final work package addresses implementation of Chinese aid on the ground in individual countries. How are aid projects organized and implemented? How do Chinese actors cooperate with governments in partner countries? How are policies adapted to local conditions, and to other donor countries? How do Chinese aid authorities monitor and assess results of aid provided? Available studies indicate that Chinese officials dealing with aid-related measures are realizing challenges, are keen to learn how to improve delivery of aid and are seeking to adapt interventions to local contexts (Zhang 2017). This is perhaps best illustrated with the increasing emphasis on capacity development and sustainability in the delivery of Chinese aid. Furthermore, the literature also points to a picture of aid interventions that reflect a multitude of Chinese implementing agencies (Jing Gu 2016). In recipient countries it is also often difficult to distinguish between activity is funded by Chinese aid and what is funded by others. We have formulated two hypotheses guiding our research:

- (1) Chinese aid is adapting to local contexts and putting increasing emphasis on new types and forms of aid interventions to address capacity building and sustainability; and
- (2) Implementation of Chinese aid reflects divergent priorities between different implementing institutions and between different Chinese foreign policy objectives.

We have selected three African countries from Norway's list of 16 partner countries – Ethiopia, Tanzania and Mozambique. They were selected from the smaller group of low-income countries (nominally prioritised in Chinese aid) and we have excluded those in severe conflicts (South Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan). The three case countries have been selected because they have a shared history of Chinese engagement and are in the same geographic region. They have all seen extensive Chinese commercial engagement over the past decade and there is a significant aid dimension in the Chinese presence. There is also a substantial body of literature on China's role as development actor in all three countries (on Mozambique see Alden & Chichawa 2014; on Ethiopia, Ch. 9 in Yanzhuo Xu (2018); and on Tanzania: Cabestan & Chaponnière (2016)).

In the three case countries we will *first* map the volume, scope and direction of Chinese development aid. This will be based on data from China, from sources in the case country and from the scholarly and policy literature. We will also interview officials from the Chinese, African and Western donor side in the country. This includes relations with OECD DAC donors, donor coordination mechanisms and any joint funding between China and other agencies (including trilateral projects between UN agencies and/or bilateral donor agencies and China).

Secondly, we will examine two thematic areas of Chinese aid intervention. *One* is job creation and skills development. This has been chosen because it covers two thematic priorities in the Norglobal call (business development/job creation and education) and because they are critical elements in development and central in the SDGs, especially target 8 on employment and growth (and sub-indicators 8.2, 8.3 and – on gender – 8.5) but also several sub-goals under SDG 9 on infrastructure, industrialization and sustainability. China is a major provider of finance for business development in all three countries with job creation and skills development becoming major issues (see e.g., Xiaoyang 2019 for case study of Chinese manufacturing in Ethiopia). Chinese aid is providing significant funding for education and training, including also specialised training centres in Africa, but very little is known about how and to what extent Chinese aid addresses issues of job creation and skills development. How is this dealt with in individual countries? How do Chinese aid authorities assess country and sector demands and needs? How does Chinese aid interventions align with priorities of the government in the recipient countries? Are any lessons and experiences from Western donor support to job creation and skills development assessed?

The *second* is debt sustainability. This has been selected because it is increasingly emerging as a critical issue both for China and Western donors and lenders. Debt management is central to SDG 17 and indicator 17.4.² Debt management is an important issue in all three countries, but it is of major concern in Mozambique. Mozambique is a country in debt distress and a country where China is major creditor. Some of the loans are also provided by Chinese aid. How does Chinese aid authorities assess

² This sub-indicator specifies the need to “assist developing countries in attaining long-term debt sustainability through coordinated policies aimed at fostering debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate, and address the external debt of highly indebted poor countries to reduce debt distress”

its role as creditor in Mozambique? How and to what extent does China engage with other lenders and donors to address unsustainable debt in that country?

The use of relevant stakeholder/user knowledge

Stakeholder and user knowledge will be an important part in the implementation. They are crucial for data collection (both in relation to Chinese, African and Western officials dealing with aid issues). Three workshops in Beijing, Addis Ababa and Oslo will be organised during the project period to discuss emerging and preliminary findings with officials and aid managers.

2. Impact

2.1. Potential impact of the proposed research

The ability to produce impactful research primarily depends on the quality of the academic outputs. We plan a minimum of eight journal articles and one edited book with contributions from the project participants. Three of the articles will be based on the African country cases (WP 3), one on China's aid relations with the AU (WP 2) and one on Chinese aid policy and management (WP1). Additionally, the Ph.D. student – writing an article-based dissertation – will contribute a minimum of three articles to the project.

The project's more direct ability to contribute to addressing societal challenges hinges on its ability to contribute to better informed analysis and findings on China's role as provider of development assistance. Throughout the project period, there will be systematic engagement with aid officials both in China and in Western donor agencies, as well as with African officials and other stakeholders, as they are an important data source. Furthermore, the project will organise a minimum of two workshops with officials in China and Ethiopia. This is also intended to ensure improved relevance of the research. A final workshop will also be held in Oslo in the third year to present and discuss findings with aid officials and other stakeholders in Norway.

The project outputs will directly address several of the indicators under SDG 17, which seeks to strengthen global partnerships to support and achieve the targets of the 2030 Agenda. However, the project will also be relevant to several other SDGs, especially SDG 8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all).

3. Implementation

The project will be based at the Chr. Michelsen Institute and carried out in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University (Shanghai), the Research Centre on the UN and International Organisations, School of International Relations and Diplomacy at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, and the Forum for Social Studies in Addis Ababa. The project will be managed by **Elling Tjønneland**, senior researcher at CMI. He has more than 30 years' experience in researching development aid issues and the global aid architecture.

The team is interdisciplinary, but with a strong core in political science with additional competence in political economy, development and Chinese studies. The members of the team bring a complementarity of skills and knowledge to the project. This includes Chinese politics and institutions, Western aid and the global aid architecture, development studies and deep country knowledge of the three country cases.

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