

Book Review

Beyond Official Development Assistance: Chinese Development Cooperation and African Agriculture. By Lu Jiang. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2020, 273 pp.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has proactively engaged in international development cooperation (IDC) with Africa since the new government was established in 1949, especially in terms of agro-development cooperation. Today, China, as the world's second largest economy, increasingly plays a key role in the international arena. With the increasing expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, agro-development cooperation has embarked on a new trajectory which is significantly distinct from the traditional one in terms of motivations, priorities, actors and modalities (p.1). The author, therefore, investigates the historical changes, innovative characteristics and modes based on in-depth case studies, as well as the implications for the global IDC community.

IDC is at a turning point: in addition to the long dominant North, growing Southern actors show their strength in development cooperation, with multi-polarisation as a result. Moreover, private sector actors, typically the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) modality, are constantly incorporated into IDC, generating pluralistic forms of cooperation. In this transitioning landscape, Chapter 1 profiles IDC's evolution route and contemporary challenges, the panorama of Chinese development cooperation with Africa, ultimately ending with research concerns, the methodology and the outline for the book. Initially, it depicts a growing North-South divide with regard to geographical distribution (close proximity to the South), targeted sectors (economic sectors versus social sectors), financial methods (grants versus loans) and the distinct forms of cooperation (project aid versus programme aid), by introducing the history of IDC. Due to the different development pathways, the author also clarifies discord in PPP modality between the North and China; namely, recipient-oriented pattern featuring certain additions versus mutual development respectively. Notwithstanding the differences, the author highlights that more openness and mutual understanding between the North and South is required, which means that emerging Southern actors should "not be judged by what they are, but rather,

what they are not” (p.13). Indeed, the stereotypical mindset originated from the North needs new norms and pattern to position a proper interaction with the South. Just as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the current director-general of the World Trade Organization (WTO), points out, Africa can create miracles for its own sake by endeavoring towards proactive participation and discourse. In this vein, the author briefly clarifies the reasons why agro-development cooperation between China and Africa merits special attention, including the vital role of agriculture in Africa’s economic growth, and the trial-and-error landscape of China’s development packages. This is done by elaborating the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework.

Chapter 2 provides a historical perspective which reviews how contemporary agro-development cooperation between China and Africa is formulated, particularly foreign aid reforms starting from the 1980s and corresponding change-provoking events during this process. The author categorizes agro-development cooperation into three stages, i.e., the earlier or “pure aid” stage from the 1960s to 1970s; the transition stage from the 1980s to 1990s; and the current stage from the 2000s to the present (p.35). At the “pure aid” stage, China unfolded its agro-development cooperation with Africa for the sake of the new regime’s survival and international recognition, hence, agro-aid modality was dominated by the central government, with grants or interest-free loans provided and little economic concern. Unfortunately, official agencies and staffs lacked incentives because of the strict top-down command chain and tight budget, resulting in passivity and low efficiency, as well as short-term sustainability predicaments. The Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978 created the momentum for China’s foreign aid reform, such as repositioning the scale and performance of aid, reciprocal interrelationships, which tackled the previous lack of motivation to a large degree, and simultaneously, predicted the coming of the transition stage. In the context, the author investigates the consolidation and gradual transformation of reforms. Interestingly, although new approaches were introduced to the agro-aid modality, for instance, managerial cooperation and agro-business oriented projects, the thorny sustainability issues remained. Therefore, breaking the short-term predicament seems a challenge for either the South or the North. In tandem with the “Going Out” strategy after its accession to the WTO, China’s foreign aid adopted a mutual development mentality, bringing it into the current stage. The author carefully explores notable development packages, namely the traditional agricultural aid

model based on technology, the innovative agricultural aid model and the agribusiness model, concluding with more diversified outcomes in the aspects of management, operational mechanism and public and private actors respectively.

Based on numbers of case studies, the author elaborates the innovative agro-aid and agribusiness models in Chapters 3 and 4, comparing the distinctiveness of these two key models with respect to their objectives, cooperation patterns and participants. Taking China's flagship Agriculture Technology Demonstration Centre (ATDC) as an example, the author deeply digs into the innovative agro-aid model from three dimensions: technical transfer, business introduction and project sustainability. Almost all ATDC projects primarily concentrate on sophisticated technology or simple processing and food security, and focus on, for instance, grains (rice, maize), vegetables, livestock, and aquaculture. Hence, the author maintains that the ATDC projects gain multi-functionality, which serve mutual development benefits as business-introduction platforms, and more importantly, shoulder a public-interest function aiming to strengthen food security. No doubt that to recognize the actual situation and top priorities, ATDC is a vital precondition for ensuring the sustainability of China's agro-development cooperation with Africa in the long run. In this vein, the author shows the distinguished outcomes of ATDC in Mozambique and South Africa. In terms of technology transfer, Mozambique's case showed less progress than South Africa's, due to little follow-up and feedback, poor communication, and less engagement; in addition, language barriers further eliminate mutual trust between the two sides, and more seriously, it ignored different farming cultures, technological adaptations and dealt with backward infrastructure, significantly affecting ATDC's development in Mozambique. In terms of business introductions, the market-oriented approach does pave the way for project sustainability in both Mozambique and South Africa. Similarly, in Chapter 4, the author finds that the agrobusiness model progressed a lot in realizing the goals of agro-development cooperation, either through agricultural economic growth or public-interest improvement, through flexible cooperation forms and pragmatic motivations, as well as tremendous capital investment. However, such Chinese overseas agricultural foreign direct investment presents a stable increasing proportion of cash crops and core nodes in the agricultural value chain, which is notably distinct from previous stages. Again, the author finds that knowing little about local communities, market, and

government or ignoring social foundations, has more serious impacts on the agrobusiness model. For example, the unique land tenure system governed by local traditional leaders or tribal chiefs leads intractable disputes in land contracts authorized by the recipient government. In addition, the enormous initial investment in infrastructure, including levelling lands or developing irrigation and roads, affects the sustained outcomes to a large extent, and therefore, in the view of the author, more endeavours are needed for deeper mutual understanding.

In Chapter 5, the author adopts the public policy implementation (PPI) approach to evaluate the outcomes of Chinese agro-development cooperation from the perspectives of policy, implementation, and the environment. The development cooperation policy naturally incorporates mutual development, therefore bringing about challenges in policy design and control. First, the multi-objective design cannot be realized simultaneously; secondly, it reduces local actors' involvement in cooperation, where projects are dominated by the Chinese management with their different procedures and phrases, contributing to mistrust and rupture in relationships between the two sides; and thirdly, policy design lacks concrete action plans, comprehensive official or non-official documents and strong state support systems. In turn, all the weaknesses indicate room for improvement in China's agro-development cooperation with Africa. The author, once again, highlights that more attention should be paid to the local environment, or localization. Better embedding a donor into recipient countries' social networks and having one's legitimacy acknowledged, is a key concern for the North and the South in IDC. As for the implementers, the author discusses two examples, i.e., Chinese corporate actors from various sectors, ownerships and official levels; and Chinese governmental actors, primarily from commercial or agricultural systems and the central-provincial level. The diverse implementers build complicated implementation structures, thus resulting in a negative influence on capabilities, motivations, discretion, and multi-organizational cooperation. In this vein, they are a double-edged sword, implying that efforts are required to mitigate conflicts and synergize collaboration among different actors in China's agro-development cooperation modality. The author also discusses environmental matters, explaining current constraints. Indeed, the biggest obstacle lies in actions and interactions among different actors that are pertinent to creating a dynamic environment, rather than a static environment. Hence, the author points out

that a comprehensive framework consisting of policies, implementers and environments may forge synergetic effects to ease these problems over time.

Reflections and implications are presented in Chapter 6. The author initially reflects on the historical origins and perception changes of China's agro-development cooperation, one that is substantially rooted in the logic of mutual development. It is noteworthy (according to the author's analysis) that this cornerstone springs from similar historical experiences in terms of colonialism, war and tremendous pressures on food security and poverty alleviation, rather than so-called "Chinese characteristics". On this basis, the "Development Packages" in Chinese agro-aid modalities employ diversification in technology and economic cooperation, and it emphasizes pragmatism. For instance, the traditional agro-aid model gives increasing weight to agro-technology, while the innovative model absorbs different corporate actors and commercial operations. But the agribusiness model goes beyond economic concerns with its broad development-oriented efforts, all of which extend and deepen mutual development to various degrees. The author treats the mutual-development mentality of China and its development package modality as two vital novel elements in IDC, which requires an acknowledgment of the distinct norms and yardsticks which differ between the South and the North. There are no irreconcilable contradictions between the development-oriented and profit-seeking models, rather, they are two sides of the same coin, and hence, it substantially depends on properly comprehension to be operationalized. Returning to the transitioning IDC landscape, the author believes that there is a big gap between the South and the North, one which requires shifting to innovative IDC thinking, financing methods and forms of cooperation (but with the mutual development mentality). Finally, the author heavily underlines the fact that IDC providers should offer more respects and institute equality with respect to the recipients who are struggling for their own miracles, by positioning these in the discourse of power and core role in IDC.

In a nutshell, this book is a must-read for those who are curious about China's agro-development cooperation with Africa, particularly about the heated debate on the Belt and Road Initiative. This book clarifies misunderstandings in terms of China's supposed behaviours, logic, and their historical roots. More importantly, as the author repeatedly mentions, environmental factors, especially local environments (including culture, traditions, custom and unique histories), are significant. Therefore, an

interdisciplinary approach is needed in future research, for instance in areas such as socialized networks, social capital and induced institutional changes. In addition, localization matters in IDC: we should consider the main concerns at different stages of agricultural development in recipient countries, such as food security in the traditional stage; income improvement in the modern stage; and growing sustainable priorities nowadays – and thus formulate corresponding agro-development cooperation frameworks and concrete policy systems.

Du Shigui

Faculty of Business & Economics

University of Malaya

Lembah Pantai

50603 Kuala Lumpur.

Email: 17220335@siswa.um.edu.my