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Sustainable Business Relations between China and Africa

Report on the Dialogue in South Africa
25-27 August 2014

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between China and Africa**

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Globethics.net Focus

Series editor: Christoph Stückelberger. Founder and Executive Director of Globethics.net and Professor of Ethics, University of Basel

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INTRODUCTION

The *Ethics Institute of South Africa* (EthicsSA) in collaboration with the *Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humanity* initiated the *Leading Ethics in Africa Dialogues* (LEAD) with the aim of identifying ways to promote ethics and corporate responsibility across the African continent. The first dialogue took place in 2013 and it successfully initiated the kind of far-reaching, cross-sectorial conversations that Africans need to have in order to strengthen ethics and corporate responsibility. The theme of the 2014 Dialogue was ‘*Sustainable Business Relations between China and Africa*’. The theme was chosen as an outcome of the 2013 Dialogue where concern was raised about the responsibility of Chinese businesses in Africa. As a follow-up to this concern expressed at the 2013 Dialogue a survey was conducted by EthicsSA on ‘*Perceptions of Africans toward Chinese Business in Africa*’.

The *Dialogue on Sustainable Business Relations between China and Africa*, which took place outside Pretoria, South Africa from 25 – 27 August 2014, provided a platform for in-depth discussions between a Chinese and an African delegation. The main issues identified in the Dialogue that could impact on the sustainability of the Africa-China trade and investment relationship will be discussed in this report. Also the recommendations proposed at the dialogue for ensuring sustainable

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trade and investment relations between Africa and China will be outlined.

Background

In March 2013 EthicsSA convened a workshop on ‘*Strategies for promoting Ethics and Responsibility in the Private and Public Sectors in Africa*’ in Stellenbosch, South Africa. One of the main issues that participants from various African countries identified at this workshop was that Chinese companies are increasingly investing in Africa, but often neglect or do not take social and environmental responsibility, which is often to the detriment of Africans.

Following this workshop, EthicsSA conducted a survey in a number of African countries to gauge ‘Perceptions of Africans towards Chinese Business in Africa’, in order to have reliable data available for discussion. The findings of the survey were published in February 2014 and indicated that Africans generally had negative perceptions about the impact of Chinese business in their countries.¹

In order to address the perceptions that emerged from the survey, it was decided to organise a three day dialogue between a delegation from China and Africa respectively. The theme of the dialogue was ‘Sustainable business relations between China and Africa’.

The respective delegations from Africa and China were compiled based on the following guidelines:

- 50% of the delegates from both groups should be business leaders that also represent a network that has an interest in responsible business;
- At least one delegate of each group should be a policy maker;

¹ *African’s Perception of Chinese Business in Africa*, 2014. Download for free from www.globethics.net/publications

- At least one delegate of each group should be a government representative;
- At least one delegate of each group should represent civil society (also representing a civil society network with an interest in responsible business);
- At least one delegate of each group should be an academic specialised in ethics and/or the relationship between Africa and China.

The objectives of this Dialogue were as follows:

- To discuss the survey findings (particularly business responsibility issues) and propose actions to be taken to address the findings;
- To identify the roles and responsibilities of institutional players in the creation of sustainable business relations between China and Africa;
- To identify and/or create mechanisms for ongoing exchange between Africans and Chinese on matters of responsible business;
- To develop cultural understanding between Africans and Chinese.

The workshop was moderated by a neutral facilitator in the person of Prof Christoph Stückelberger, CEO of Globethics.net based in Geneva, Switzerland.

The 3 day programme addressed the following topics:

- African perceptions of Chinese business in Africa;
- Chinese perception of doing business in Africa;
- Identification of frustrations and opportunities for Africans (in terms of Chinese trade and investment);

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- Identification of frustrations and opportunities by Chinese (regarding Africa and Africans);
- African policy developments related to Chinese trade and investment;
- Chinese policy developments related to trade and investment in Africa;
- A better understanding and insights into Chinese culture;
- A better understanding and insights into African culture;
- Proposals for sustainable business relations between China and Africa

The programme also included a site visit to the assembly plant of the Chinese vehicle manufacturer FAW and a Chinese dinner sponsored by the South Africa China Economic and Trade Association (SACETA).

The dialogue was conducted according to the Chatham House Rule, which states: “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.” The outcomes reported below are also formulated in the spirit of the Chatham House Rule.

MAIN ISSUES IN CHINA-AFRICA TRADE AND INVESTMENT

The issues that were identified as having an important impact on sustainable Africa-China business relations were broken down into five categories: Products & Services; Social & Human factors; Economy, Finance & Politics; Values, Culture & Religion; and Environment.

Products & Services

Generally most African countries are optimistic about the prospect that Chinese companies can make a positive contribution to their countries. This is due to the fact that China invests in the development of much needed infrastructure on the continent. However, there are sometimes issues with regards to the quality of the infrastructure projects as well as the maintenance thereof. Maintenance planning is often not included in project planning. As a result, the infrastructure often deteriorates soon after completion as there are no proper project or maintenance plans in place to ensure infrastructure sustainability.

When infrastructure development projects are undertaken in Africa, the workforce is seen to consist mainly of Chinese nationals. This does not bode well with the locals as there is little to no job creation which

can create a livelihood for Africans. There should ideally be a skills transfer programme whereby African labour would be integrated into the labour force that is involved in the construction of the infrastructure. This will ensure that skills and knowledge that will be required for the maintenance and sustainability of the infrastructure once the Chinese contractors have left are developed by Africans.

The high levels of corruption in African countries, including corrupt government officials, is also seen as very challenging by Chinese doing business in Africa, as they see it as an obstacle and a deterrent when trying to carry out their mandate. This is very frustrating for the Chinese, as they are often criticized for the occurrence of bribery, when all they are trying to do is to fulfil their contractual obligations and get the job done.

Social & Human Factors

There are concerns about the compliance of Chinese companies to the health and safety regulations of their host countries in Africa. Chinese also often seem to work throughout the week without taking the weekend into consideration or the day of the week on which most Africans practice their faith. These factors cause frustration and negative perceptions amongst African employees.

One of the major concerns of Chinese who reside in African countries is that of security, especially personal safety and the protection of their personal money and property. In terms of personal security, they are often negatively affected by the high crime rates and xenophobic tendencies in certain African countries. In addition, Chinese labourers often do not have bank accounts (thereby making them more vulnerable to being robbed), as they are trying to evade tax or even detention when they reside illegally in a country.

Chinese are often isolated from local communities as they find it difficult to interact with Africans mainly due to the cultural and language barriers (also known as the *Chinatown syndrome*). Consequently they are less likely to become fully integrated into African society.

Economy, Finance & Politics

The Chinese delegates felt that the opportunities of operating in Africa outweigh the challenges, as Africa is seen as an entrepreneur's heaven due to the wealth of business opportunities and well established financial infrastructure. Africa is seen as a land rich in resources, with a welcoming political environment, as well as a market for many of their goods and services. Chinese also feel they can easily relate to the issues surrounding poverty as they have experienced it themselves in their own country. The younger generation of Chinese are establishing their own civil society associations in Africa in a bid to improve the current perception that Africans have of China. Many Chinese traders are driven to succeed here in Africa in the hope of making their fortune and then later returning to their homeland.

Chinese goods are seen as good value for money by Africans and often facilitate African growth. Chinese are also seen to have very quick response times to market demand for goods and services, as they are not weighed down by government bureaucracy. The converse of this is that Chinese goods are often so cheaply priced that goods manufactured in Africa cannot compete, resulting in African companies going out of business.

The culture of engaging with civil society through NGOs is also new to the Chinese as their culture is generally to work through the government, resulting in them finding this relationship with NGOs very challenging to maintain. Chinese are often seen to be operating according to their 'own rules' in Africa without adhering to the local

policies and laws applicable to that specific country. This results in local societies having a poor perception of the Chinese and their business practices. This is often made worse by the fact that Chinese do not interact well with the media whenever they are asked to comment on contentious issues, mainly due the fact that they have little experience of dealing with a free media.

Values, Culture & Religion

It is evident that Chinese who live and own businesses in Africa are often misunderstood simply due to the fact that there are few mechanisms in place to ensure that Africans have a proper understanding of their Chinese counterparts and the reasons why they are in Africa in the first place. Many Chinese people who are employed in Africa are highly skilled and have academic degrees from institutions of higher learning and yet most are working in low skilled jobs or running their own businesses. In general, China has highly developed human capital yet they do not have the necessary know-how that would allow them to easily integrate into African society. Chinese thus have to work harder when they are in a foreign country in order to better understand their new surroundings. Chinese are often perceived as extremely hard working when in fact they are merely trying to get up to speed with the way of doing business in the country in which they are operating.

It is also challenging for the Chinese to employ local labour in African countries mainly due to the language barrier. The fact that the locals have families and religious practices, while the Chinese working in Africa do not have any religious obligations or often don't have family members with them, poses further challenges. These factors contribute to Chinese often being perceived as racist and prejudiced.

One of the ways in which the Chinese could be more easily integrated into African society would be if greater efforts were made by both Africans and Chinese to understand their cultural differences and to take these differences into consideration. This has been a major stumbling block thus far as there has not been a formal mechanism or platform under which this integration exercise can occur.

Patronizing approaches and attitudes should be avoided on both sides. The Chinese - African relationship should instead be based on reciprocity in order for it to be sustainable and mutually beneficial.

Environment

Chinese are starting to implement pollution controlling practices and are increasingly promoting the use of clean energy and environmentally friendly practices. There is also a very strong drive toward the establishment of standards and reporting on Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs).

However despite recent advances, the neglect of adherence to environmental standards is still seen as prevalent in Chinese business practices. Minimal adherence to local environmental standards by Chinese companies, rather than adherence to best environmental management practice, is also a concern.

PROPOSALS FOR SUSTAINED AFRICA – CHINA TRADE AND INVESTMENT RELATIONS

Proposals for future interactions, with the aim of strengthening relations between Africa and China, include suggestions relevant to the following sectors: Private Sector; Government; Academic Sector; Civil Society; and Cross-sectorial Initiatives.

Private Sector

China should start branding and marketing itself more proactively as China is involved in many good initiatives in Africa, which very few people are aware of. Africa-China business associations, hosted jointly by African and Chinese Chambers of Commerce, should be established as a platform for the sharing of ideas and networking between Chinese and Africans both in Africa and in China. This initiative will promote joint venture partnerships and allow for benchmarking of business performance.

Chinese companies must develop, brand, and market quality Chinese products which will enhance their reputation in Africa and cultivate a culture of good practice and pride amongst Chinese businesses. This can be aided by awarding business accolades to Chinese companies for

integrity and good practices when operating in African countries and making Chinese businesses realise that it is in their own interest to comply with local business practices and standards.

Chinese companies who operate in Africa should also work closely with the local media to communicate openly and honestly with their host communities on the actions that they are undertaking. Chinese companies who operate in Africa should look at practical ways to implement their government mandate and agenda, ensure optimal stakeholder engagement, and strive towards a beneficial outcome for all their stakeholders.

Government

Governments in Africa need to work more closely with Chinese businesses which operate in Africa, in order to understand their needs and assist them in performing business with more ease. This will also be an opportunity for Chinese to become more involved with society as they will have more of an awareness of the labour practices and socio-economic conditions under which most Africans reside. This can also lead to a better understanding of expectations from both parties, removing fears and uncertainties on both sides.

African governments should also have clear policies and standards in place that set out the terms of engagements for Chinese companies that wish to trade and invest in Africa. Furthermore, they should ensure that they are branding and marketing themselves sufficiently in China itself.

The Chinese government should be more involved with the informal business sector in Africa as Chinese immigrants account for a substantial percentage of the informal sector in Africa. This can be done by establishing certain monitoring bodies and NGOs to assist in overseeing what activities Chinese informal traders are involved in. These initiatives will prepare Chinese traders and businesses on how to engage with Africans and how to do business with them in a manner that

does not cause alienation and misunderstanding. This can be done through training and awareness campaigns and will ensure that African communities are more welcoming of Chinese trade and investment.

The Chinese government should also recognise their responsibility for the Chinese informal sector that operates in Africa as the government is the only stakeholder that is powerful enough to control their activities. There should also be guidelines for benchmarking the activities of Chinese who operate in Africa in order to ensure that their presence on the continent is indeed benefiting the local African civil society.

The Chinese government should develop a credit and quality rating system for Chinese companies who operate in Africa. Such a system would assist Africans in knowing what type of Chinese companies they are doing business with or investing in.

Academic Sector

African and Chinese academic institutions should partner with each other and assist with the dissemination of information on China-Africa trade and investment. They should jointly and severally conduct research that will assist in educating both Africans and Chinese about the business cultures of their respective trade partners. They should also prepare case studies or guidelines of good business practices so that both parties have context and background information before they engage in business activities with each other.

Workshops and forums should take place where Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and business ethics concerns can be raised without the fear of repercussions.

Civil Society

Role-players in civil society should act as change agents by raising awareness of the various issues and concerns related to the presence of

Chinese businesses in Africa. They can also act as bridging agents between the Chinese informal sector and the African communities in which they operate.

Both African and Chinese civil society organisations should play an advocating role in the way in which Chinese funding and aid is channelled to Africa, and ensure that there are relevant accountability mechanisms in place.

The African media can also be used as a channel for disseminating information in order to make Africans more aware of Chinese culture as well as highlighting the impact (both good and adverse) of the Chinese business presence in Africa.

Chinese NGOs and business associations should interact with their African counterparts to gain more insight into what the situation is like in Africa at grass root level.

African civil society should hold African governments accountable for the way in which they deal with Chinese trade and investment. Furthermore they should promote strong civil society institutions to hold both African and the Chinese government accountable.

Cross-Sectorial Initiatives

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) should act as a catalyst to facilitate more interactions and conversations around Africa-China trade and investment relations as FOCAC have the resources and networks to address the issues and disseminate information. The broadening of networks and the encouragement of cooperation between government and business will also assist in bridging gaps in current policies and frameworks.

An Africa-China initiative to develop a Code of Ethics for sustainable Africa-China relations needs to be established that can become a central reference point for Africa-China trade and investment relations. This initiative should consist of both Chinese and African

members who will exchange information and continuously educate each other while creating a culture of accountability. This will enhance the building of partnerships and make it easier for businesses to benchmark their performance.

Way Ahead

It was agreed that a follow-up Dialogue would be important in order to ensure that this initiative and the proposal flowing from this Dialogue do not lose impetus. This would involve participation and inputs from persons from a spectrum of sectors e.g. business, civil society and government. The Center for International Business Ethics (CIBE) has offered to host the next Dialogue in China in 2015 with assistance from EthicsSA and Globethics.net.

It was also recommended that a follow-up survey on ‘How do Chinese businesses who operate in Africa perceive Africans?’ be conducted, which should include a wide range of stakeholders. A database of cases of responsible performance by Chinese companies in Africa can also be developed that can serve as a benchmark for other Chinese companies in Africa. The findings of both these initiatives can be presented at the 2015 Dialogue.

It was also suggested that a follow-up survey on ‘Africans’ perceptions of Chinese Business in Africa’ be conducted in the six African countries that participated in the 2014 Dialogue. The findings of this survey can also be presented at the 2015 Dialogue in China.

List of participants

African Delegation	Chinese Delegation
Prof Deon Rossouw (EthicsSA, South Africa)	Prof Liu Baocheng (Center for International Business Ethics)
Ms Montle Phuthego (EconoMarkets, Botswana)	Mr Liu Debing (China General Consulting & Investment)
Mr Luis Magaco (Moza Banco, Mozambique)	Dr Guo Peiyuan (SynTao)
Mr Said Kambi (Institute of Directors, Tanzania)	Ms Liu Haifang (Peking University)
Mr Job Ogonda (UNDP Africa Bureau, Kenya)	Mr Liu Guijin (Former Ambassador to South Africa and Zimbabwe)
Dr Minka Woermann (University of Stellenbosch, South Africa)	Mr Kleinjan du Toit (ASA Metals (Pty) Ltd, based in South Africa)
Mr Victor Banjo (Institute of Directors, Nigeria)	Ms Christina Naidoo (Huawei, based in South Africa)
Neutral moderator: Prof Christoph Stückelberger (Globethics.net, Switzerland)	



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About EthicsSA

The Ethics Institute of South Africa (EthicsSA) is a non-profit, public-benefit organisation that commenced operations in August 2000. It is governed by a board of directors consisting of prominent persons committed to promoting ethical responsibility.

EthicsSA's vision is: "*Building an ethically responsible society*".

We pursue our vision through thought leadership, training and ethics advisory services. We work with the public and private sectors, with professional bodies, and in partnership with organisations that share our values.

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EthicsSA is committed to stimulate and advance awareness of ethics in South Africa and in other countries on the African continent where we are active. We participate regularly in public debates in the media and contribute to policy formulation in respect of business ethics, corruption prevention and professional ethics.

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- Advisory services: Consulting to public-sector and private-sector organisations and professional associations on matters related to the management of ethics;
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- Membership services: Offering subscription membership to individuals and organisations, with a variety of membership benefits.
- More information on EthicsSA can be found at www.ethicssa.org



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Sustainable Business Relations between China and Africa

Report on the Dialogue in South Africa 25-27 August 2014

The Ethics Institute of South Africa (EthicsSA) conducted a survey in a number of African countries to gauge local perceptions towards Chinese Business in Africa, in order to have reliable data available for discussion. The findings of the survey were published in February 2014 and indicated that many Africans had negative perceptions about the impact of Chinese business in their countries.

In order to address the perceptions that emerged from the survey, it was decided to organise a three day dialogue between a delegation from China and Africa respectively. The theme of the dialogue was Sustainable business relations between China and Africa. The dialogue took place outside Pretoria, South Africa in August 2014, and was moderated by a neutral facilitator in the person of Prof. Christoph Stückelberger, Executive Director of Globethics.net based in Geneva, Switzerland. It provided a platform for in-depth discussions between a Chinese and an African delegation; this report includes many proposals how to improve business relations between China and Africa.