



A New Politics of Development Cooperation? Chinese and Brazilian Engagements in African Agriculture

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Summary. — This paper introduces a Special Section on Chinese and Brazilian engagements in African agriculture. The paper asks if a new paradigm for development cooperation is emerging, and argues that we must move beyond the simplistic narratives of either “South–South” collaboration or “neo-imperial” expansion of “rising powers” to look at the dynamic and contested politics of engagement, as new forms of capital and technology enter African contexts. Historical experiences in Brazil and China, as well as domestic political and economic debates, affect how interventions are framed, and by whom, and so influence what technologies are chosen, which investments are funded, and who gets trained. There are both political and economic drivers at the heart of these choices, but these are not uniform or uncontested, either in Brazil and China or in Africa. The Special Section argues for a focus on the encounters on the ground, moving beyond the broader rhetoric and generic policy statements. A key feature of Brazilian and Chinese engagements in African agriculture is the role of state–business relations in shaping and steering development, suggesting new forms of developmentalism. The paper concludes that there is a growing opportunity for learning from the Brazilian and Chinese experience, as this will be a long-run feature of African agricultural development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the BRICS there has been much talk of a new paradigm for development. With new knowledge, expertise, and investment, countries such as China and Brazil could generate a new dynamic of development, particularly in Africa, it is argued (Gu & Carty, 2014; White, 2013). The rhetoric of “South–South cooperation” and “mutual learning” has flowed freely. Solidarities and connections based on shared geographies, histories, and links forged through struggles against colonialism and slavery have been added to the mix. Others, by contrast, have argued that these new configurations of power and capital are simply a new form of “neo-imperialism”, replicating past patterns of extraction and exploitation in new guises (Bond & Garcia, 2015; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011). Of course the reality is far more complex than these simplified characterizations (cf. Alden, 2007; Brautigam, 2009; Carmody, 2013; Power, Mohan, & Tan-Mullins, 2012; Taylor, Kopinski, & Polus, 2014; Taylor & Xiao, 2009). Getting behind the claims and digging into the details shows a more nuanced picture.

This Special Section therefore explores the emerging relationships between China and Brazil and Africa around a key productive sector, agriculture. Through detailed case studies and in-depth empirical investigations on the ground—in four countries in Africa, as well as China and Brazil—the papers together point to some important new features of development cooperation, associated with BRICS countries (cf. Mawdsley, 2012a; Mawdsley, Savage, & Kim, 2015; Li & Carey, 2014), including forms of “trilateral” cooperation (McEwan & Mawdsley, 2012). This includes the transfer of Brazil and China’s own experiences in agricultural development—and associated narratives, expertise, and technologies—to Africa

as part of development cooperation investments. The papers cover new forms of technology transfer, the growth of technical training efforts, the importance of state–business partnerships in investments, the role of small-scale investments by Chinese migrants to Africa in agricultural value chains, and the role of Brazilian and international civil society in mediating debate about the form and pattern of investment.

Together the papers show that there certainly are important changes afoot: recasting relationships, institutions, politics, and power in development engagements. Understanding the new roles of China and Brazil in the context of their own domestic political economies, and wider global trends in geopolitical restructuring and the shifting of the geographies of international capital, allows us to situate these developments in an historical perspective, and understand how China and Brazil are positioning themselves as key actors in African agriculture. Whether this adds up to a new paradigm is perhaps more questionable. Instead, despite important and significant shifts in styles of development cooperation, we also see many echoes of the past, set in a new geopolitical moment,

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with Chinese and Brazilian domestic experiences playing out in the African context.

This Special Section has seven papers. In the following sections we introduce some of the key themes highlighted by individual papers and across the set. The papers emerge from a project involving 25 researchers from China, Brazil, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and the UK.¹ The team represents a diverse array of disciplinary expertise, from agronomists to anthropologists to economists to international relations specialists to political scientists, all interested in different facets of development, bringing different literatures, academic cultures, and field experiences to the project. We have not tried to constrain this diversity. While all of us have offered insights and perspectives, with the aim of provoking exchange and conversation, we have not followed a singular approach, defined by a unified theoretical stance. Instead, we have encouraged deep empirical exploration of complex and fast-changing dynamics, with the aim of going behind the façade of standard approaches. The result is an eclectic mix of styles and approaches, but one we hope that adds up, as a rich tapestry, to a fuller understanding.

Since 2011 detailed field investigations of 16 cases of Chinese and Brazilian engagements have been carried out, involving extended fieldwork. Over 20 Working Papers and other articles have been published to date, and the papers in this issue draw from these, offering a more synthetic view of emergent patterns and trends. The African cases were chosen from a country-level mapping of what was happening where, based on secondary data, triangulated with interviews from officials. The cases were chosen to represent a range of styles of engagement—including conventional “aid” projects (mostly around technology transfer), private (or more often state–business hybrid) investments, training and capacity building efforts, investments in agri-food systems by migrants and civil society engagements protesting about investments and aid projects. Each case, while not representative in any statistical sense, as all were very different, offered a different angle on understanding the dynamics of engagement in agriculture by Brazil and China.

2. CONTEXTS FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IN AFRICA

“South–South cooperation”, and the extension of Chinese and Brazilian engagements in African agriculture, therefore emerges from a particular set of contexts. This includes the growth of new hubs of capital in China and Brazil, supported by global finance, that are entering a globalized competitive world; a recent, although now declining, commodities boom and massive growth in demand for resources; a huge growth in capital goods exports to Africa, especially from China; shifts in political contexts in China and Brazil seeing new foci on business and development and new emphases in international positioning; an extended period of neoliberal economic restructuring in Africa that provides space for private (or state–business) investment; African government and donor policies that offer support and subsidy for the extension of capital, and an elite, sometimes corrupt, politics in Africa that may see new investment as a route to shore up existing commercial and political interests. As [Amanor and Chichava \(2016\)](#) explain, all these factors play into the dynamics of development cooperation in Africa.

This reconfiguration is often read as a period “beyond aid”, where development occurs through private investment, with less of a role for conventional aid agencies. Today private cap-

ital and global finance, from multiple sources, are driving forces in a globalized, financialized, liberalized world. In different ways, Brazil’s and China’s “development cooperation” efforts, just as those of the US or European countries, must be seen in this light; as an extension of capital and markets, now with new roles for the state, as part of state-directed “developmentalism” ([Lee, 2014](#)), and in relation to new patterns of accumulation by capital in new sites across the world ([Moyo, Yeros, & Jha, 2012](#)). As [Gu et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Xiuli et al. \(2016\)](#) highlight, the new, hybrid relationships between states and businesses, where state funding supports and guides and businesses implement, are of particular interest, as they reveal the emerging ways that expertise, technology, and finance are deployed in agricultural development through “development cooperation”.

There is therefore important change, but also continuity. We are seeing new relationships being forged that are opening up possibilities for negotiation in African contexts, as new “donors”, “investors”, and hybrids between the two, arrive. This offers greater “agency” for African governments ([Brown, 2012](#); [Mohan & Lampert, 2013](#); [Mohan & Power, 2008](#); [Tan-Mullins, Mohan, & Power, 2010](#)), and a new room for manoeuvre ([Kragelund, 2008](#)), that was not possible in previous decades, when the singular strictures of the International Finance Institutions, and the aid conditionalities of other Western donors, meant that only one option was on the menu. Today there is greater diversity and choice, and so negotiation is the order of the day. This presents a new landscape for development cooperation, defined to encompass more than just conventional aid transfers and involving an array of state-supported business relationships and investments. While China and Brazil remain small players relative to others, they are gaining influence, and certainly in the case of China, the scope and amount of both development assistance and wider investment is growing significantly. This includes a focus on agriculture ([Buckley, 2013](#)), a sector that is especially important for Brazil ([Cabral, Shankland, Favareto, & Costa Vaz, 2013](#)).

Agriculture has been identified by both China and Brazil as a strategic focus for engagement with Africa ([Cheru & Modi, 2013](#)). This derives from different motivations and incentives. Agriculture is seen as an area where both countries have comparative advantage. Both can point to agricultural “success stories” in recent decades. Both have experience in tropical and sub-tropical agriculture, involving similar crops to those found in Africa, and so can offer technical expertise and technologies. Agriculture has a different strategic value in the political economy of China and Brazil, with China increasingly relying on food and feed imports to satisfy growing demand, while Brazil’s economy is heavily dependent on a strong agribusiness sector, reliant on export commodity sales ([Mueller & Mueller, 2014](#)). While expansion into Africa is very unlikely to feed China ([Brautigam, 2015](#)), there is interest in contract farming arrangements for key crops (including cotton and tobacco), and possibilities of investment along agricultural value chains, including for processing, machinery, and input supply, in forms that may favor poorer producers and business enterprises, as the technologies are sometimes more appropriate and the market standards less restrictive than investments from the West ([Kaplinsky, 2013](#)).

For Africa, with its significant rural population, large land areas and challenges of food security, agriculture remains a top priority, as affirmed in frequent statements from the African Union, presidents, and officials from across the continent. As a core productive sector, largely ignored by Western donors for decades, it is an area where external intervention

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