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POLICY BRIEF

CHINESE TRAINING COURSES FOR AFRICAN OFFICIALS: A “WIN-WIN” ENGAGEMENT?

BY HENRY TUGENDHAT

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As part of its growing engagement in Africa, China has become one of the world’s largest providers of short-term agricultural training courses. China’s training course model differs from most other traditional donors in that it almost exclusively targets government officials. These courses aim to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and technology, increase trade opportunities, foster stronger political and economic relationships, and present a positive image of China. The courses appear to be achieving these goals, with different benefits for both sides.

Training courses for African officials have become one of China’s most successful public diplomacy efforts. Every year the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) facilitates training courses for thousands of civil servants in developing countries to learn different aspects of China’s development experience. While these courses are organized for Global South countries all over the world, the vast majority are aimed at African policy-makers and government employees.

In 2013, **China offered 539 training courses** to government officials from developing countries:

- 430 courses involved African officials
- 139 courses were aimed *exclusively* at African officials
- 73 of the courses for African officials were specifically for French African officials
- 78 of the total 539 courses—or about 15 percent—were related to agriculture, fisheries, animal husbandry, or “green growth” subjects

The 539 courses China hosted in 2013 had, on average, 20 to 30 participants per class. It is expected that from 2000 to 2015, about 86,000 African officials will attend a Chinese training course, in addition to the tens of thousands of officials from other countries. By comparison, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) plans to offer roughly 400 courses in 2014 with between 5 and 20 participants per class.¹ This then raises the question, **why is China investing so much into its training courses?**

Like most Chinese development cooperation, the training courses are framed as “win-win” engagements, and bring together a mixture of aid, trade, and diplomacy. These courses give African officials an opportunity to learn from China’s development experience, to buy Chinese agricultural technology, and to form a closer business relationship with the Chinese state. For China and its institutions, these courses offer the prospect of shaping perceptions and agendas at the highest levels of foreign governments, as well as an opportunity to expand trade with developing countries.

CHINA’S TRAINING COURSES

What are training courses?

The short-term training course program began in its current form in 1998, and took off in earnest after the first meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. Since then the program has grown enormously at every triennial meeting. China is now the largest provider of training courses, and about 15 percent of its courses focus on agriculture.

Training courses are either implemented by MOFCOM’s internal Academy for International Business Officials, or funding is given to other approved training centers. These may be other government institutions, universities, research institutes, or private companies. Flights, accommodation, and lodging are all paid for by MOFCOM; the only costs borne by the participants or their ministries are the visa fees, sometimes a stipend, and any insurance policies they decide to take out.

- **The number of courses and participant places available differ from country to country.** Once courses are approved, lists are sent out to the Commercial Counselors’ Offices (CCOs) attached to Chinese embassies around the world stating the training courses available that year, and the number of places allocated to that country for each course.
- **Each course generally accommodates between 20 and 30 participants and the courses usually last from one week to three months.**
- **Courses are offered in English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, and Portuguese.** The original delivery is almost always in Chinese, and interpreters are hired for each of the respective languages.
- **Of the agricultural training courses offered thus far, about half have focused on technological methods, and the other half have covered a mixture of policy and management methods.**

RESEARCH METHODS

The Academy for International Business Officials (AIBO), part of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, has posted all training courses since 2012 on its website. Assuming that all registered courses are accounted for, 2013 is thus the first complete year that has detailed information for every course. The researcher began by downloading the information for all courses posted on the AIBO website and then used this data to analyze the different themes and modalities within the courses.

Following analysis of the training course data, the author conducted participant observations at two training courses in China in the summer of 2013. He also interviewed 32 civil servants in Ghana and Zimbabwe, 29 of whom had been on training courses.

- **The courses cover a wide range of topics, including healthcare, education, and agriculture.** Most courses focus on teaching China's own development experience as an example that other countries can learn from. Although courses are predominantly aimed at foreign governments' civil servants, there is also a small number of courses aimed at particular professions, such as doctors or school headmasters.

Course Aims and Objectives

According to documents agreed to by both the Chinese and African sides in the first FOCAC meeting, training courses aim to: *"...vigorously promote further China-Africa cooperation in...human resources development...so as to promote the common development of China and Africa."* Later FOCAC documents single out agriculture as a particularly important element of human resources training and capacity-building.

A MOFCOM handbook for Chinese institutions that offer training courses builds on these objectives, stating that the aim of carrying out these training courses is to *"complement China's comprehensive foreign policy needs, help train the human capital of developing countries, and drive forward friendly relations and trade cooperation with developing countries."*²

In many African countries, both the media and the general population hold broadly negative perceptions of China. Thus, training courses that expose African government officials to Chinese culture, modernization, and ideas are an important opportunity for the Chinese state to present a positive image of itself to partner governments across the continent.

On the African side, their sole responsibility is to appoint the appropriate civil servant to the appropriate course. So far, there is no evidence that Ghanaian or Zimbabwean officials have a strategy regarding what they want from the courses, nor have they made any concerted requests for courses more suited to their needs.

TRAINING COURSE RESULTS

Public Diplomacy

The training courses have all met the aims of promoting Chinese culture, modernization, and a positive image of the country abroad. Of the 29 African interviewees who attended training courses, all held very positive views of China. Those who had attended training courses spoke highly of Chinese hospitality, food, and culture, and some said the course changed their prior negative perceptions of Chinese technology. Furthermore, three interviewees who had not attended training courses nonetheless gained positive impressions of the country and its development experiences through discussions with colleagues who had participated in the courses.

Furthering Economic Cooperation

Training courses have fulfilled MOFCOM's aim of driving forward trade cooperation with developing countries through three main channels:

(1) Marketing agricultural technology within the course itself

Some training courses offer to sell participants agricultural technology on site. Although participants rarely have the mandate to make purchases during the training courses without first consulting their ministries, the interaction serves to lay the foundation for future business opportunities. Often the intention is simply to make participants aware of Chinese agricultural technology so that they spread this knowledge when they return home. For example, during one such course

for French African officials in 2013, participants were taught about the various machines the Chinese use for different harvesting procedures. Model numbers, some technical details, and demonstration videos were all covered and the participants were invited to ask questions about transferability to their own agricultural contexts.

(2) Promoting the institution's consultancy services

Training courses are also used to promote Chinese officials' technical expertise in agriculture as a form of consultancy that can be hired at a later date. One participant who had attended a course on environmentally friendly forms of fertilizer production at Southern China Agricultural College explained:

"It's a very complex technology so the professor who was in charge said that he wouldn't teach us the technology, but did it in the lab and brought it to us as a sample. Then when we are interested, we inform our government, then they will do it in whichever country you want...as a consultant."

(3) Seeking the help of participants for market research in their home countries

Some Chinese companies use training courses as a venue to explore whether markets might exist for them to invest in at a later time. Four of the interviewees had attended training courses by institutions that gave them seeds to take back to test in their home countries. Participants were then encouraged to send information back to the training institution when the plants had matured, so that they could see how their seeds fared.

However, commercial opportunities are not the core focus of training courses. In total, only 9 of the 29 interviewees that attended training courses were exposed to one or more of these commercial engagements. Although all of the courses included factory and field visits, they did not always entail a commercial incentive. Furthermore, some of the agricultural training courses focused on imparting policy lessons in which there was no real scope for driving trade cooperation, such as the "Seminar on Rural Development and Poverty Reduction for Developing Countries."

Transferability of Courses

Of the 29 interviewees that attended these agricultural training courses:

- 9 gave examples of how they were able to directly apply the knowledge they learned within their work
- 2 are still testing lessons in small plots before passing it on
- 18 were not able to apply the knowledge directly, but 5 of them said they informally passed on what they learned to colleagues who might be able to make more use of the information

The most significant success found among the African officials interviewed involved a Roots and Tubers Specialist who attended a course on sugarcane and cassava processing in 2008. The two-month course covered different varieties of cassava, and different forms of processing cassava. This inspired her to try to introduce and foster greater diversity in Zimbabwe's cassava production. She put together a proposal with her senior colleagues and successfully applied for a grant from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to run a pilot project on cassava production and processing between 2009 and 2011. The pilot was a success and the Zimbabwean Ministry of Agriculture has since taken over the funding of this project. It includes training for farmers, and cassava is now recognized as one of Zimbabwe's key crops.

Many were not able to transfer the lessons learned because of a lack of funding and resources at home. Others could not transfer the lessons they learned from the courses because they were simply not relevant for them in the first place. For instance, one interviewee attended a course on tea cultivation, but it is impossible to grow tea in the region in which he works in Ghana.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

China's training courses have great potential to *foster stronger relationships* and *increased understanding* between China and African governments by allowing African civil servants and their ministries to learn from the Chinese development experience. They also present an example of *cooperation* from which traditional donors can learn.

In particular, a number of lessons can be drawn from the current research on China's training courses:

(1) Agricultural training courses have exhibited elements of a “win-win” arrangement for both China and participating African governments. Those who have gained most from these training courses so far are *the Chinese state institutions* keen to promote a positive image of China and build strong relations with African governments; to a lesser extent, those *Chinese institutions* using these courses as a platform for market research and advertising technological goods; and at the individual level, *the African officials* who are able to build networks at these conferences and gain first-hand understanding of one of their most important foreign partners.

The media and general population in many African countries still hold negative or suspicious views of China, yet the training courses are allowing China to forge stronger relationships with African governments and officials. Courses have reached across government ministries in each country, involving a range of officials from junior analysts to top ministers. Although China manages these encounters, the knowledge transfer and networking opportunities they provide still benefit African officials who are interested in working with China more closely.

(2) More broadly, the benefits on the African side do not presently appear to extend far beyond the individual officials who attend the courses. Despite knowledge and technology transfer ostensibly being the main focus of these courses, it actually appears to be the weakest area of success among the courses' stated aims due to financial and administrative constraints. At the same time, it can be questioned how Chinese institutions would determine success or failure of knowledge transfer; this is undoubtedly an area for further and continued research. Ultimately, even though there seems to have been little transferability thus far, there have still been some notable successes, and African countries are still eager to participate in the programs.

(3) Finally, China's training course model differs from most traditional donors in that it almost exclusively targets government officials. Further research might examine how this affects the outcomes of China's training programs: Do African officials' positive perceptions of China trickle down to the rest of the population? And how do Chinese training courses targeting civil servants and officials compare to the courses offered by other countries, such as Germany or Japan?

1. Japan International Cooperation Agency. 2014. “JICA Training and Dialogue Programs 2014.” http://www.jica.go.jp/english/our_work/types_of_assistance/tech/acceptance/training/about/lineup.html.

2. Academy for International Business Officials. 2012. “商务部对外援助培训项目实施管理工作手册 [MOFCOM Manual for the Management of Foreign Aid Training].” <http://china-aibo.cn/>.

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