

## Broader Brushstrokes: Forum Widens China-Africa Cooperation

By Ni Yanshuo



**BEIJING, China, July 04, 2012 (ChinAfrica)** - As the relationship between China and Africa takes on increasing significance, one of the most important events in the growing cooperation takes place this month in Beijing. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) will be held in the Chinese capital on July 19-20.

"This, of course, is the greatest event for us whose work is related to Africa. I am waiting to see what new measures will come out for furthering bilateral cooperation for the next three years," said Ma Li, President of Beijing-based ZT Consultancy. "With these new measures, we will have broader areas to cooperate with Africa."

By working with domestic traditional Chinese medicine companies, Ma's company is supplying anti-AIDS herbal medicines to Zambia Institute of National Medicine and Research. According to Ma, the new business opportunity was initiated because of this Sino-African platform.

At the Fourth FOCAC Ministerial Meeting held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao proposed eight measures to further enhance Sino-African cooperation, including strengthening cooperation in medical care and other health sectors.

On hearing this news, Ma immediately contacted the Zambian institute to discuss cooperation in related sectors in the country, and got positive responses. "Cooperation in this sector can benefit both Chinese enterprises and African people," Ma told *ChinAfrica*, adding that the work is now progressing smoothly.

Ma noted that he had long hoped to tap into Africa's medical industry, as this sector is beneficial to both African and Chinese people. "The 2009 FOCAC meeting helped broaden my work channel," Ma said. "I am sure that with the new measures proposed at this year's meeting, we will have more things to do in the coming years."

### Ongoing efforts

So far, China has put out proposed commitments to strengthen Sino-African cooperation at each FOCAC summit and implemented them in the three years that follow.

"From the previous conferences, including the Beijing Summit of FOCAC held in 2006, all the measures proposed by China have been thoroughly implemented, including the proposals made three years ago in Sharm el-Sheikh," Lu Shaye, Director General of the Foreign Ministry's Department of African Affairs, told *ChinAfrica*. Lu added that Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and Minister of Commerce Chen Deming will discuss how these measures were implemented in the last three years at this year's summit.

Experts believe the effective implementation of the commitments also reflects the widening channels of Sino-African cooperation in the past decade.

"The conference is a good tradition as it helps us continue to expand our cooperation areas by putting forward new measures at each meeting," said Zhang Zhongxiang, Deputy Director of African Studies Center of Shanghai Normal University, adding that China is pooling its resources to push the forum.

According to Zhang, what China has done based on its commitments from the previous ministerial conferences has contributed a continuous effort to constant expansion of Sino-African cooperation channels. "The past 12 years were a process during which China and Africa were expanding cooperation for sustainable development," said Zhang.

At the First FOCAC Ministerial Conference held in 2000, China vowed to exempt debts from African countries, totaling 10 billion yuan (\$1.58 billion), a goal it met two years later. Additionally, at the Second FOCAC Ministerial Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2003, China announced its commitment to help develop human resources in Africa. According to the Addis Ababa Action Plan, China would increase its financial contribution by training up to 10,000 African personnel in different fields.

"This is a significant expansion as human resources development and cooperation can improve African countries' capacity of independent development," said Zhang.

At the FOCAC Beijing Summit held in 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao announced eight measures to boost China-Africa cooperation. When the Fourth FOCAC Ministerial Conference was held in Egypt in 2009, the world was suffering from grave financial crisis. Thus, the focus of the conference shifted to making joint efforts to cope with the financial crisis and climate change.

"I believe the Fifth FOCAC Ministerial Conference will continue this tradition and open new areas for cooperation," said Zhang. "Under the current circumstances, we have a lot of areas that we can cooperate on, such as urbanization."

Zhang noted that China is on the fast lane in terms of urbanization and has accumulated much experience in this regard. "We can share this experience with African countries."

Another potential sector for future cooperation is cross-border infrastructure construction. China has a long history of constructing infrastructures in African countries, but mainly within one country at a time. "Africa is accelerating its pace of integration and needs projects of cross-the-border infrastructures," said Zhang. "I think this will be discussed at the coming summit."

## **Close relations**

Thanks to efforts from both sides, Sino-African relations have witnessed rapid development in all aspects, especially in the past three years. "This can be witnessed from the growing economic and trade figures," said Zhang.

Due to the world financial crisis, the trade between China and Africa in 2009 was only \$91.2 billion. But both sides soon recovered. In 2011, the figure exceeded \$160 billion. Meanwhile, China promised to provide \$10 billion of preferential loans to African countries in 2009. In fact, China's preferential loans to Africa have exceeded the promised figure.

"The most notable improvement in Sino-African relations in the past three years is that China has strengthened cooperation with the African Union (AU) and sub-regional organizations," said Zhang.

On January 28, after financing and constructing the AU Headquarters, China officially transferred the building to the AU in Addis Ababa. In addition, China announced to provide 600 million yuan (\$95 million) in aid to the AU in the next three years for Sino-African cooperative projects.

"African integration is the general trend for the continent's development," said Zhang. "In order to better engage with Africa, China should strengthen cooperation with the AU and sub-regional organizations, because they are playing increasingly important roles in Africa's integration and regional peace and security and in other fields."

The AU was formally admitted as a member of the FOCAC at the Senior Officials Meeting of FOCAC in Hangzhou (China) at the end of October 2011.

**Mind power**

Zhang noted that exchanges between scholars and think tanks in China and Africa are another highlight in Sino-African relations in the past three years as they promote mutual understanding between peoples on both sides.

On March 30, 2010, the China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange Program was officially launched in Beijing. This program held a series of events promoting exchanges between scholars and think tanks, such as the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum and the Workshop on Environmental Sustainability in Sino-African Cooperation.

"Launching the joint research program to increase exchanges and cooperation among Chinese and African scholars and think tanks is one of the eight measures proposed by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at the the Fourth FOCAC Ministerial Conference," said Zhang. "2012 is the third year after the program was established and everything is progressing well."

According to Zhang, due to the long distance and historical reasons, for a long time, Chinese scholars did not understand Africa and African scholars did not understand China correctly. These scholars lacked first-hand knowledge as their information about the other side mainly came from third parties - mostly from the Western media. This inevitably led to misunderstandings on both sides, Zhang said.

"Scholars and think tanks can influence the policy makers and the common people with their research findings," said Zhang. "They can only get correct research results with first-hand information they obtain directly from these countries."

"Undoubtedly, thanks to FOCAC, the relations between China and African countries have greatly improved in the past decade," said Zhang. "I believe the Fifth FOCAC Ministerial Conference will have more pragmatic measures to further strengthen the cooperation." (END)

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