

Wake Up Africa: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is Here

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The Cooperation between Africa and China, through Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China Africa Think Tanks Forum (CATTFF), among others, has gained momentum and triggered much interest in the recent past. This is because China is playing an increasingly prominent role in global trade, investment, finance, and governance to the extent that Made in China is becoming a household name; an indication of a deepened engagement between these societies. This deepening extends also to diplomatic and cultural relations, as evidenced by the established of Confucian Institutes in a number of African countries with a view to promote people to people exchanges.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, is yet another framework, not only for consolidating and complimenting the existing China- Africa relations, but also for addressing Africa's socio-economic challenges more comprehensively, given its rich menu of objectives; ranging from connectivity promotion, industrialization, development

of agriculture, provision of finance, to enhancing inter-and intra trade. Looking at the menu and taking into consideration Africa's development challenges, across the board, and the attendant aspirations to address them, the BRI is indeed a timely savior cum a wakeup call to Africa's political leadership to grasp this unfolding, rare and unprecedented opportunity in the history of global partnerships in socio-economic development process.

It needs to be emphasized that the BRI has two important characteristics which appear to be a departure from past initiatives that is; its compactness and wide synergic effects. In other words, it is holistic and each of its goals leads to achieving two or more of the others. This is the re-enforcement process. For example, pursuing the goal of connectivity by provision of the requisite infrastructure will not only enhance and upgrade regional and global trade, but also improve the investment climate of the partner countries. Subsequently, the improved investment climate would in turn lure foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to countries, which are again (the flows) critical vehicles for industrialization. Ultimately, this culminates into sustainable transformation of countries in terms of poverty reduction, environmental sustainability and inclusive social development. This virtuous cycle of results cum events emanating from the implementation of BRI is a clear indication of the uniqueness of the Initiative. It is in this context that we urge African countries to embrace the Initiative in order to tackle its wide ranging development challenges.

Indeed, Africa's development challenges are enormous: firstly, seventy percent of the world's poor are located in Africa. Secondly, about 600 Africans live without electricity and thus depend on biomass sources of energy, such as wood and charcoal, which subsequently harm the environment. Thirdly, 37 percent of people who lack access to clean water, globally, live in Africa. Fourthly, the African continent is the least industrialized region in the globe, to the extent that its accessibility to global value chains is the lowest. Fifthly, agriculture which is the mainstay of the continent's economy and the source of livelihood for over 64 percent of the population displays the lowest productivity in the world. Sixthly, to the extent that Africa is home to 16 landlocked countries and the transport infrastructure is underdeveloped and therefore connectivity is very poor. As a consequence, intra-regional trade is at 17.7 percent; the lowest when compared to other regions of the world: 55.2, 59.4, and 68.7 percent for America Asia and Europe respectively. Lastly, the continent performs poorly in mobilizing domestic financial resources. In other words, financial resources are relatively scarce in Africa.

Africa's development aspirations, aimed at addressing the above challenges are clearly stipulated in a number of planning frameworks at continental, regional and national levels, such as Africa Union's Agenda 2063; regional economic communities' (RECs) development agendas, such as the industrialization plan of the East African Community (EAC) and that of Southern Africa Development Community (SADC); and national development visions, coupled with five year development plans of various countries.

These frameworks are complimented by global development frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A closer look at the content of the BRI shows that the initiative has a component for addressing each of the challenges facing the African continent. This being the case, it is high time African leadership were to wake up and seize the opportunity and become key stakeholders of the Initiative. The experience of China- Africa cooperation in the last few decades has clearly shown that China is trustworthy and a non-wavering development partner, and one who consistently adheres to regionally or globally set principles cum agreements, such as those of Bandung Conference (1955), United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), etc. Further, experience shows that those who have already joined the Initiative in Africa, and beyond, have already benefited enormously from it. This being the case, Africa should ensure that their development aspirations are well alignment with BRI.

However, in order for the alignment to be effective, African policy-and decision makers should, first and foremost, make an assessment of the conditions and premises of their respective countries, under which BRI –related engagement would take place. This will provide information on existing and the required policies, human and institutional capacities, which are necessary for effective domestication of the Initiative. Further, to the extent that a country's national development agenda is a sub-set of regional, continental and global agendas, effective coordination at all these levels is unavoidable.

In a nutshell, each country's efforts to engage in the BRI will realize better results and outcomes when they are informed by effective alignment with national strategies for domestication of supra-national initiatives, such as those of RECs, Africa Union and SDGs. Likewise, and given the cross-border nature of BRI investments, domestic policy, institutional and governance frameworks have to be underpinned by strong coordination of efforts at these various levels, with the view to unlock and tap the synergic effects cum spillovers of BRI in terms of investment, trade and financing.