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The Chinese Development Model in Perspective and Lessons for Africa



In today's rapidly changing global landscape, the pressing need for inclusive development has captured the world's attention like never before. Nowhere is this urgency more evident than in Africa, where the quest for development independence and sustainable progress has given rise to ambitious initiatives such as the Lagos Plan of Action, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and the Agenda 2063, all envisioned by the African Union to steer the continent towards long-term prosperity.

However, despite Africa's immense potential and prospects for growth, the continent's development endeavours have been fraught with stagnation and plagued by debates about perceived 'development failures' spanning decades.

Amid the persistent search for viable solutions to the common development challenges, many governance and development models have since emerged. For instance, the 'Washington Consensus' economic and development policy was a notable model that gained prominence in the 1990s. Marketed as a one-size-fits-all solution for developing nations, this approach has, however, faced widespread criticism for its inability to deliver the promised results.

In contrast to the Western-centric development models dominating the international development sphere, an interesting alternative has emerged: the 'Chinese Model.' The unprecedented growth and transformation witnessed in China have reshaped the global order,

prompting growing interest in its approach as a potential blueprint for other developing countries to emulate.

What is the Chinese Model?

Before the late 1970s, China was a deprived country with an economy that produced insignificant goods. However, with the policy reforms and opening-up initiated by Deng Xiaoping, the country underwent a transformative process. Over the course of a few decades, China has risen to become the second-largest economy in the world. This remarkable turnaround is evident in a 2022 World Bank report highlighting China's success in lifting over 800 million people out of poverty. This achievement represents more than 70% of global poverty reduction efforts.

Undoubtedly, this unprecedented feat is the most significant development transformation witnessed in the past half-century, propelling China into debates about successful development models. The 'Chinese model' concept has gained widespread attention, drawing comparisons to Western development models. In its simplest terms, the Chinese model encompasses the economic and political development policies that China has implemented over the last few decades. Additionally, it is often seen as an evolution of the East Asian development state model, which has been credited for the successes of countries like Japan and Singapore.

In 2006, Chinese scholar Zhang Weiwei authored an article titled "The Allure of the Chinese Model," which was published in the New York Times. In this article, Zhang outlined six core features that define the Chinese model as follows:

- 1. Down-to-earth strategic reform and modernization that takes the people and local conditions into account;*
- 2. Constant experimentation—try and error of ideas before applying them elsewhere;*
- 3. Gradual reform and reorienting of institutions, rather than the shock therapy approach;*
- 4. A strong developmental state capable of shaping and ensuring national consensus on modernization and stability;*
- 5. Selective learning and borrowing of outside models and ideas while safeguarding its policy space; and*
- 6. Sequencing and prioritizing reforms, i.e., easy reforms followed by difficult ones where the experience gained in the first stage creates conditions for the next stage.*

Based on the information presented above, it is reasonable to argue that the Chinese model is distinguished by its pragmatic approach to tackling development challenges and its rejection of political liberalization as a necessary condition for achieving sustainable development. In contrast to Western-oriented models, which often advocate for standardized solutions to various challenges, the Chinese approach values the individuality of each situation and strives to employ flexible and adaptable problem-solving methods.

The Chinese Experience as a Unique Exemplar

The success of the Chinese model has given rise to numerous suggestions on how Africa can replicate China's achievements. Many consider China's development approaches a viable roadmap for African countries to follow, offering a superior alternative to the conventional Western patronizing development ideas and methods, which have proven unsuccessful for many nations. As a result, many discussions have centred on the potential benefits of emulating the Chinese model for Africa's development journey.

Considering all factors, Africa should draw valuable lessons from the Chinese experience but avoid blind imitation. The Chinese experience is a unique exemplar, offering inspiration and insightful lessons rather than being viewed as a broad model that Africa should replicate. In his book “The Governance of China I,” Chinese President Xi Jinping explicitly stated on page 337 that “there is no one-size-fits-all development model in the world.” Consequently, “China will continue to firmly support African countries in their quest for development paths that suit their national conditions and increase exchanges of experience in governance with African countries.”

The preceding viewpoint indicates that China supports the idea of African nations finding their own solutions to their development challenges. Moreover, China consistently emphasizes its principle of not imposing its development preferences on other countries. A clear example of this stance was evident at the 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing, where President Xi unambiguously stated that China's relations with Africa are guided by two essential principles: “no interference in African countries’ pursuit of development paths that fit with their national conditions” and “no imposition of China’s will on African countries.” These principles highlight China's commitment to respecting the sovereignty and autonomy of African nations and allowing them to determine their development trajectories independently.

Final Thought

After exploring the fundamental principles and strategies behind China’s success, we have gained valuable insights that can guide Africa in shaping a more prosperous and inclusive future. As the global development landscape undergoes continuous changes, Africa must grasp this opportune moment and draw upon the experiences of other prosperous nations to carve a path toward sustainable growth and prosperity.

By learning from the achievements of China, Africa can better position itself to navigate the challenges ahead and achieve its development goals.



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