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WHY PEOPLE MATTER: REIMAGINING THE FUTURE OF AFRICA-CHINA COOPERATION



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Africa–China cooperation has entered a moment of maturity. Over the past two decades, the partnership has delivered visible and transformative outcomes—roads and railways, industrial parks, power plants, hospitals, trade corridors, and growing investment flows. These achievements, anchored in pragmatic cooperation and mutual respect for development priorities, have reshaped Africa’s economic landscape and expanded its strategic options.

Yet as cooperation deepens and becomes more embedded in African societies, a critical question emerges: *What will ultimately determine the depth, legitimacy, and sustainability of Africa–China cooperation in the decades ahead?* Increasingly, the answer lies not only in capital flows, contracts, or infrastructure delivery, but in people—how Africans and Chinese interact, work together, understand one another, and build trust in everyday contexts.

The growing emphasis on people-to-people exchanges within the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework reflects this recognition. Reimagining the future of Africa–China cooperation requires placing people at the centre—not as an add-on to economic engagement, but as a strategic pillar in its own right.

From Projects to Partnerships

Africa–China cooperation has evolved through distinct phases. The early period of solidarity and development assistance gave way to large-scale infrastructure and trade engagement, followed by a more recent focus on industrialisation, investment, and value addition. Each phase responded to Africa’s development needs and China’s growing global role.

This model has been particularly effective in delivering speed and scale. In countries such as Ghana, Chinese-financed roads, energy projects, and industrial facilities have addressed long-standing infrastructure gaps. Across the continent, industrial parks and special economic zones have supported job creation and export diversification. These outcomes should not be understated.

However, as cooperation expands from discrete projects into broader social and economic ecosystems, expectations change. Communities increasingly ask not only *what* is being built, but *how* it affects local livelihoods, skills, culture, and opportunity. In this context, the success of cooperation is measured as much by social legitimacy and local ownership as by physical completion. The future therefore demands a shift from a predominantly transactional model to a more relational partnership.

Why People Matter More Now Than Ever

People have always been part of Africa–China relations, but they matter more today for four interrelated reasons.

First, the partnership has become more complex. Beyond governments and large state-owned enterprises, cooperation now involves small and medium-sized businesses, local workers, students, media professionals, researchers, and communities. Managing this complexity requires human understanding that cannot be legislated through agreements alone.

Second, perception increasingly shapes outcomes. Public narratives—often influenced by incomplete information or external framing—affect political space and societal support for cooperation. Direct people-to-people engagement helps counter misperceptions by replacing abstraction with lived experience.

Third, local impact determines sustainability. Projects that integrate local labour, respect community norms, and invest in skills transfer are more likely to endure. In Ghana’s construction and manufacturing sectors, for example, Chinese firms that prioritise local workforce training and community engagement often experience smoother operations and stronger local acceptance.

Finally, human capital defines long-term value. Infrastructure depreciates; skills, knowledge, and networks appreciate. African engineers trained on Chinese-built power projects, Ghanaian technicians working in Chinese-operated factories, or entrepreneurs linking African markets with Chinese supply chains carry forward the partnership long after individual projects conclude.

Reimagining Cooperation Through a People-Centred Lens

Reimagining Africa–China cooperation does not mean abandoning its economic foundations. Rather, it means enhancing them through a people-centred lens. This involves several important shifts.

The first is moving from a primarily state-to-state model toward a society-to-society approach. Governments remain essential, but durable cooperation is built when universities collaborate, journalists exchange perspectives, businesses form partnerships, and communities interact directly.

The second shift is from delivery-focused engagement to experience- and impact-focused cooperation. Success should be measured not only by outputs—kilometres of road or megawatts of power—but by outcomes such as skills development, technology absorption, and local enterprise growth.

The third is from one-directional exposure to mutual learning. People-to-people exchanges are most effective when they are reciprocal, allowing Africans and Chinese alike to learn, adapt, and innovate together. This mutuality strengthens trust and reinforces the principle of partnership.

Strategic Domains Shaping the Future

Several domains illustrate how people will shape the next chapter of Africa–China cooperation.

- **Youth, education, and the future workforce** are central. Under FOCAC, thousands of African students have studied in Chinese universities, while vocational training programmes have expanded across the continent. In Ghana, technical training linked to construction, energy, and manufacturing projects has helped bridge skills gaps. The next step is deeper alignment with Africa’s industrial, digital, and green transitions—ensuring that education and training translate into sustainable employment and entrepreneurship.
- **Business, labour, and community relations** are equally decisive. Africa–China economic engagement increasingly takes place at the level of SMEs, industrial parks, and local supply chains. Trust built through language training, cultural understanding, and fair

labour practices reduces friction and improves productivity. Where workers feel valued and communities feel included, economic cooperation gains resilience.

- **Media, culture, and public perception** shape how cooperation is understood by wider society. Journalist exchanges, cultural festivals, film collaboration, and digital content creation humanise the relationship beyond statistics. Ghanaian journalists who have reported from China, and Chinese media professionals who have spent time in African societies, often return with more nuanced perspectives that enrich public discourse.
- **Health, technology, and knowledge exchange** demonstrate cooperation at its most human. Chinese medical teams working in African hospitals have combined service delivery with training and mentorship. In Ghana and elsewhere, technology cooperation—from telecommunications to renewable energy—has involved on-the-job learning that builds local capacity. These shared problem-solving experiences foster solidarity rooted in practical outcomes.

Africa's Agency in a People-Centred Future

A people-centred future for Africa–China cooperation requires strong African agency. African governments, universities, think tanks, civil society organisations, and the private sector must actively shape priorities, design programmes, and define success metrics. People-to-people exchanges are most impactful when they reflect local development strategies and societal needs.

This agency is already visible in initiatives where African institutions lead programme design, identify skill gaps, and set research agendas. By doing so, Africa ensures that cooperation enhances sovereignty, builds endogenous capacity, and supports long-term development objectives.

Conclusion

The future of Africa–China cooperation will not be decided solely in conference halls or through signed agreements. It will be shaped in classrooms, workshops, factories, newsrooms, laboratories, and communities—where Africans and Chinese encounter one another as partners in shared endeavour.

By placing people at the centre, Africa–China cooperation gains depth, legitimacy, and resilience. Skills are transferred, trust is built, and networks are formed that endure beyond political cycles and project timelines. In aligning economic ambition with human connection, the partnership moves from being merely productive to being sustainable.

Reimagining Africa–China cooperation through a people-centred lens therefore offers more than continuity; it offers renewal. It lays the foundation for a partnership that is economically dynamic, socially grounded, and capable of adapting to the challenges and opportunities of a changing world.



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