

## FOCAC and the roles of environmental NGOs

Since the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), environmental concerns as an agenda topic has gradually increased. From brief mentions in the first and second FOCAC conference to practical action plans by the fourth FOCAC in 2009, the environmental agenda has broadened to include tackling climate change, using new energy sources and pollution prevention among other concerns. The [2015 Johannesburg FOCAC Action Plan](#) was especially significant as it included ten environmental aims and for the first time cooperation mechanisms in tackling illegal wildlife trade. Bringing these important issues to the FOCAC agenda can be owed partly to the work of non-state actors such as journalists, environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), conservationists and academia. These actors importantly shed light on China's investment in environmentally-sensitive natural resources' sectors and major infrastructure projects with high environmental and social impact in Africa. In particular, environmental NGOs carry out extensive research projects, write reports, engage with governments and other stakeholders as well as provide practical solutions to address concerns. Still, while NGOs make significant contributions to addressing environmental concerns through their expertise, they remain outsiders to the FOCAC process. Globally NGOs play significant roles in addressing environmental concerns, however, there are a limited few who carry out essential projects in order to ensure that China-Africa engagement follows a sustainable pathway. Their expertise and capacity should not be taken for granted; rather their experiences and knowledge should be put to better use.

This policy brief discusses the important roles fulfilled by environmental NGOs, provides an overview of NGO work in the China-Africa field and deliberates various platforms where they could play a bigger and more influential role in FOCAC. The brief recommends that environmental NGOs from China and Africa should be formally included during FOCAC proceedings and action plans as well as encouraged to participate in the China-Africa partnership, particularly through people-to-people exchanges.

### Environmental NGOs as important role players

Environmental NGOs are highly diverse and operate at multiple levels. They include local/grassroots, national, regional and international groups with a range of interests and missions. The roles of NGOs in political participation are diverse. NGOs engage in functions such as advocacy and lobbying policy-makers for

changes in policy or putting new issues on the agenda; at times NGOs engage in all phases of the policy process: formulation, implementation and monitoring; NGOs carry out programmes stemming from policy initiatives such as educational programmes; and through platforms for public engagement such as letter writing to the media as well as protests and lawsuits, NGOs put pressure on governments and hold them accountable. All of these activities can be viewed as among the distinct roles played by NGOs. NGOs fulfil at least three overlapping roles:

"In the supplementary model, NGOs are seen as fulfilling the demand for public goods left unsatisfied by government [...] In the complementary view, NGOs are seen as partners to government, helping to carry out the delivery of public goods largely financed by government [...] In the adversarial view,

NGOs prod government to make changes in public policy and to maintain accountability to the public” (Young, 2000: 150-151).

In the environmental field, NGOs are seen fulfilling these roles through activities such as: providing environmental education programmes and raising awareness amongst the public on critical matters; developing and implementing projects on issues such as climate change, wildlife protection, conservation, energy and water saving techniques; assisting and consulting with government in developing or updating environmental policy; taking part in conferences and at times formally being included in state delegations to international summits for their expertise; and advocating for environmental rights by campaigning or taking on environmental violators through the legal system.

In the China-Africa field there are a few well known NGOs working on environmental issues. Generally, it is the larger NGOs that are able to work in this field as they have the resources and capacity to do so. While there are many smaller NGOs active in advocacy and raising awareness about Chinese environmental violations in Africa – only a limited few have programmes focused on the China-Africa field. Most NGOs have limited resources and tend to work on issues closer to where they are based. Similarly, there are only a few NGOs working on FOCAC and providing expertise and policy advice to the Chinese and African governments. An NGO that has done a great deal of work in this area is the [World Wide Fund for Nature \(WWF\)](#). The WWF has especially focused on engaging with Chinese and African delegates during the past FOCAC deliberations. While NGOs build their knowledge capacity in order to provide policy advice for FOCAC proceedings, they have only been allowed in FOCAC as observers. Therefore, NGOs often participate in side-events in the build up towards FOCAC meetings. Consequently, there is a need for a platform where environmental NGOs can play a much more critical role during FOCAC.

### **Environmental NGOs playing a role in the China-Africa field**

There are many local and international NGOs in Africa who often shed light on China’s environmental impact in Africa but most of them do not have the resources to develop a “China-Africa” programme. Still, there are a few who have managed to do so. Under their “[China for a global shift](#)” initiative, the WWF developed policy briefs and research papers such as a report on “[The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: From a Sustainable Perspective](#)” (Li Anshan et al., 2012). This report identified the impacts and shortcomings of FOCAC in terms of environmental protection. Since 2009 the WWF advocated for environmental protection to play a more prominent role in FOCAC through writing briefing papers as well as hosting seminars for relevant Chinese and African stakeholders. In 2015 WWF hosted a [high-](#)

[level conference](#) in anticipation of the sixth FOCAC in Johannesburg. The conference brought together stakeholders from government, state-owned companies, private enterprises and academia in exploring the role of FOCAC, focusing on wildlife trade, forestry, extractives, infrastructure and renewable energy.

The [Global Environmental Institute \(GEI\)](#) – a China-based NGO – works alongside policy-makers and international partners to develop solutions for the environmental and social risks surrounding China’s outward investment. GEI has worked in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda and Mozambique. Their China-Africa programme particularly focuses on timber trade and includes: conducting training workshops and creating exchange opportunities for journalists covering China-Africa timber issues; researching export and import laws, and customs practices; researching bilateral investment treaties; and finally, establishing and participating in annual [Forest Governance Learning Platforms](#). China-Africa timber trade is an important concern. Forests contribute to African societies’ and economies’ by providing an export product, energy, food and shelter. Timber and wood industries are the second-largest source of export earnings after petroleum in Gabon. In 2012, Chinese imports of African timber reached 4.5 million cubic metres (m<sup>3</sup>). Illegal logging, however, is a major concern. Local government officials and Chinese enterprises in Africa have been caught exporting illegal logs to China. African countries such as Gabon and Mozambique have banned the export of raw logs in order to build the local processing sector but the illegal trade continues. In particular, the highly-sought after [rosewood](#) from West Africa commands extremely high prices on the international market. China represents the main destination for illegally harvested rosewood driven by the high demand for rosewood furniture.

#### ***Guidelines for overseas Chinese companies: Global Environmental Institute***

The GEI is also well-known for helping the Chinese government create guidelines on environmental and social corporate responsibility (CSR) for overseas investment companies. After noticing the vast environmental impacts of overseas Chinese companies, GEI first made the government aware of the issues in 2007. At the time awareness was still very low, so they produced a research report on outward Chinese investment which led to the need to improve the environmental impact of Chinese companies. The NGO’s guidelines in collaboration with the government were released in 2013.

[China House](#), the first Chinese NGO founded in Africa, established in Nairobi in 2014 to help Chinese companies working in Africa with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

China House conducts research related to the problems affecting Chinese overseas investment such as operation management issues, labour conflicts and environmental impacts. The organisation is also committed to wildlife conservation. In 2015 China House launched its “Engaging Chinese Against the Ivory Trade campaign,” and invited Chinese firms to participate in wildlife conservation and anti-ivory initiatives. The illegal wildlife trade of ivory and rhino horn in China is a great concern as African rhinos and elephants continue to be poached. In South Africa 1,028 rhino were poached in 2017. A range of actors including NGOs continue to work on a number of international and local platforms in order to fight this scourge.

Lastly, [TRAFFIC](#) - an international wildlife trade monitoring network and NGO - carries out critical work on the illegal trade of wildlife and plant species often involving Chinese actors’ in Africa. TRAFFIC specialises in activities such as investigating and analysing wildlife trade trends, patterns, impacts and drivers; as well as informing, supporting and encouraging action by governments to adopt, implement and enforce effective policies and laws. In 2017 TRAFFIC organised a workshop under the supervision of Cameroon’s Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF) between forestry representatives from Cameroon, Congo and China, aimed at strengthening legality within the forestry sector and in particular the international trade in timber. The workshop took place as part of the 2015 FOCAC Action Plan’s commitments on addressing illegal wildlife trade through collaborative efforts by both sides.

These examples show NGOs who are invested in working on improving the China-Africa environmental relationship and who already have programmes set up. Therefore, formal links and platforms should be encouraged and arranged for these NGOs to come together and make a greater impact on FOCAC. Including environmental NGOs could contribute significantly to FOCAC discussions and action plans. These and other platforms should be encouraged.

### Fitting NGOs into existing FOCAC platforms: people-to-people exchanges

During the last few FOCAC events greater attention was given to “people-to-people” exchanges which essentially calls on a range of actors from China and Africa to enhance the cultural and social links between the two sides. This is an important call as it includes institutions, civil society, private companies, NGOs, friendship associations and youth forums among others in the implementation of FOCAC action plans. Exchanges between Chinese and African labour unions, NGOs and social groups are encouraged as well as the advancement of cooperation through visits, academic events and personnel training. There is a belief that these types of exchanges complements state relations. So far friendship associations have established, FOCAC-related think tank, media and youth forums held and exchange opportunities created.

There have been occasions where environmental NGOs have participated in forums such as the “China-Africa civil society and academia dialogue meeting.” The first dialogue meeting brought together individuals and organisations from China and Africa in Shanghai in 2007 in order to highlight China’s new role in Africa and the South. Since then two similar dialogues have taken place (Nairobi, 2008 and in Beijing, 2010). While these events were successful in bringing together academics and civil society representatives, their agendas and discussions were quite broad. Environmental NGOs may be useful in giving alternative ideas and thoughts during these workshops, however, having their own forum to discuss environmental concerns as a primary theme could be more useful in the China-Africa and FOCAC dialogue.

NGOs have also taken part in other forums such as the “[China-Africa People’s Forum](#).” The fourth forum took place in 2015 in Yiwu, China, under the formal auspices of the China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) and the African Union (AU) Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). The critical role that civil society organisations (CSOs) stand to

#### Box 1: NGOs and FOCAC 2015

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is the highest platform for dialogue between China and African countries. At the triennial Ministerial Conference of December 2015, a renewed emphasis was placed on environmental protection and people-to-people exchanges. The FOCAC Action Plan 2015 includes the following:

##### 5.4 People-to-people exchanges

5.4.2 “The two sides agree to continue small and micro social livelihood projects, promote mutual visits by *NGOs*, and encourage and support extensive people-to-people exchanges and cooperation between these organisations”.

5.4.7 “The two sides will encourage exchanges between Chinese and African labour unions, *NGOs and social groups*, and further advance cooperation through mutual visits, academic events and personnel training” (5.4.7).

play in both Africa and China as partners and collaborators of government was emphasised, especially on development issues. The AU representative called on the integration of CSOs into the FOCAC process, for instance, as observers. It was underlined that CSO participation in FOCAC would lead to better understanding, appreciation and dissemination of the merits of the FOCAC process within the civil society sectors across both continents. The call for civil society as observers in FOCAC processes is important, however, greater impact could be made by organisations if they are given an official platform in FOCAC to engage official delegates on matters such as environmental protection.

People-to-people exchanges have also established on a bilateral level. In 2017 the [China-South Africa High Level People-to-People exchange mechanism](#) was launched. This initiative stemmed from FOCAC where relations between China and South Africa were upgraded to a comprehensive strategic and co-operative partnership. During the launch of the mechanism, the South African representative noted the importance of civil society in strengthening relations between the two countries. Perhaps it is in this area where civil society groups and environmental NGOs should be further included. Through these mechanisms that already exist, a greater role and platform could be given to environmental NGOs – so that not only FOCAC is given attention. For instance, bilateral exchanges can be used for African NGOs to initiate partnerships with Chinese counterparts on addressing environmental challenges, especially stemming from China's impact on the African continent.

Under Section 5.4 of the 2015 Johannesburg Action Plan there are two points that resonates with civil society and perhaps where they can contribute to FOCAC processes (See box 1). These commitments clearly demonstrate that civil society groups are important in the China-Africa relationship and that they can further contribute to addressing various issues. Consequently, further exchanges and cooperation mechanisms can be put in place for environmental NGOs from China and Africa to partner on addressing common concerns in their relevant fields of expertise or based on their locations. While a few environmental NGOs participated in the think tank forums and hosted their own FOCAC side events, there is no formal forum for this particular sector within the people-to-people exchanges framework. Seeing as NGOs are one of the most important role players in addressing environmental issues globally, establishing an environmental NGO forum in FOCAC or under the people-to-people exchanges framework could be a useful platform where NGOs can meaningfully engage both sides in addressing critical issues.

Some of the ways in which NGO involvement in FOCAC could be useful include: tackling critical issues on both sides by

enhancing cooperation between Chinese and African NGOs with similar interests; NGOs can strengthen dialogue between Chinese and African actors by initiating meetings and bringing together relevant stakeholders on specific topics – NGOs act as facilitators in this regard using their expertise to guide discussions and formulate solutions; NGOs can further act as mediators for the public in FOCAC and share their opinions and concerns on environmental problems faced on the ground - In the illegal wildlife trade of rhino horn and ivory local communities may have inside information on poachers which they would be more willing to share with NGOs than government officials. This type of information can be communicated in an NGO forum; in the same vein NGOs can raise awareness about environmental commitments in FOCAC to the public - most NGOs use social media platforms and the internet to get their messages across. This could help FOCAC in reaching a bigger audience on critical environmental concerns. NGOs can also share their expertise and capacity with FOCAC action plan committees in order to develop further practical/workable solutions. Finally, NGOs can bring environmental violators to book through law enforcement channels stemming from FOCAC initiatives.

### Recommendations

- More NGOs with the resources and capacity should be encouraged to engage on environmental issues in the China-Africa field
- A forum for environmental NGOs working in the China-Africa field should be established. In this forum environmental concerns will be the primary theme addressed while actors from other sectors may join to share their ideas.
- Bilateral relations and exchanges between China and African governments should include a platform for environmental NGOs to engage relevant officials and policy-makers as well as corresponding NGOs.

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