

## **Agricultural development in China and Africa: A comparative analysis**

Li Xiaoyun, Qi Gubo, Tang Lixia, Zhao Lixia, Jin Leshan, Guo Zhanfeng, Wu Jin.

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### **Reviewed by Isaac Odoom**

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China's increasing political and economic relations with African states across the continent is now a well-documented trend. However, the nature, motivation and significance of these increasing engagements continue to be debated in the media, academic and policy circles, both inside and outside of Africa. While some analysts express concern about China's motives and practices, others are optimistic about the opportunities presented by China's engagement with African countries. Some observers – mainly Chinese officials – project China as 'the largest developing country in the world' and an all 'weather-friend' of Africa, by emphasising, among other things, the value of China's development experience for transforming Africa through South–South collaborative efforts (GOV, 2010). Other recent publications such as Henk Baker's *Food security in Africa and Asia: Strategies for small-scale agricultural development*, recently reviewed in this journal by Franklin Obeng-Odoom, as well as Belinda Yuen and Asfaw Kumssa's *Climate change and sustainable urban development in Africa and Asia*, reviewed by Eric Yeboah (also in *AREF*), have highlighted common developmental needs and possible areas of learning between Asia and Africa. Specifically, in the area of agricultural development, China in particular has been presented as a success story which can be shared with African countries to support their economic transformation. But how much do you know of China's success in agricultural development? And considering the enormous societal and other differences between China and Africa, a continent of 54 states, what lessons can the Asian giant offer for Africa's agricultural development?

*Agricultural development in China and Africa: A comparative analysis* explores these questions in great detail. Written by seven Chinese authors, some of whom have had field research experience in Africa, the book gives a compelling account of agricultural development in China since the 1950s, and provides a 'Chinese perspective on the challenges of African agricultural development' (p. 268) as well as the lessons China's agricultural experience offers for African agricultural development (p. 3). The book, as the authors contend, is an attempt to explore some of the key conditions that enabled China to achieve success in agricultural development and poverty reduction, and to relate these (where possible) to the African context (p. 5).

They identify the effective interaction and coordination between the Chinese state, the market and households as central elements in the success of China's agriculture. The Chinese government's administrative capacity to develop and implement policies which prioritised food crop production and land reform, coupled

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with market reform for agricultural products and the integration of agricultural development with non-agricultural sector development through the encouragement of agricultural diversification and rural enterprise development, account for China's impressive record of food production. Further, they suggest that whereas China has a food security-focused agricultural strategy, many African governments treat agriculture as a source of export income and financial revenue for central government, thereby giving priority to export-oriented economic crop production, rather than focusing on food production and food security (p. 258). In their view, most African countries, in addition to a lack of capital, lack a strong state with well-established administrative capacity to formulate agricultural strategy and policy, to implement these, and to organise farmers to provide their labour. For them, state intervention to ensure food production in China (which is missing in Africa) is the main difference between the Chinese and the African agricultural development strategies and policies (p. 258).

The authors also acknowledge the negative consequences of China's agricultural success. While China has made impressive progress towards increasing its total food production, it is argued that this success has been achieved at the cost of a depletion of its water and soil resources, and the creation of an urban–rural dichotomy which has led to income disparity between urban and rural residents, and the social exclusion of large fractions of society (p. 268).

Based on China's experience of agriculture development, the authors offer several strategies for transforming African agriculture towards food self-security. African states are advised to focus on strengthening state capacity to develop and implement agricultural policy, to make effective use of markets for resource allocation, and to reform smallholder farming systems (pp. 7, 278).

The book also offers recommendations to the Chinese government (on agricultural cooperation in Africa) and international development organisations engaged in Africa, on how to effectively assist with agricultural development. International agencies should work with China (which has a long history of agricultural cooperation in Africa) to explore a trilateral relationship, where international agencies offer funds and China provides experts within African compacts, innovation strategies and African-level planning for agricultural development (p. 275). These recommendations are based on a systematic examination of the historical background of agricultural development in both China and Africa; a comparison of their differences in terms of agricultural policies, an assessment of production conditions and inputs; the development of agricultural science and technology; a comparative analysis of small farmer policies; as well as an examination of the role of external actors in the development of agriculture in the two regions.

The book is a timely volume. It is well written and carefully presented. The authors draw on their experience as agricultural researchers and field agriculturalists in Africa and Asia, to consider the growing and pervasive problem of food insecurity in Africa, and make recommendations for reform. The authors' call to make food

security a priority on the African continent is consistent with recent publications on the subject, such as *Food and development*, reviewed by Gillian Hewitson in this journal.

Also, the use of tables and graphs to explain differences and similarities in crop production, agricultural inputs, etc. between China and Africa proved helpful. More importantly, the methodological approach adopted provides unique and persuasive insights into a key aspect of China's economic success, and the corresponding lessons China's experience offers other regions with similar economic realities are commendable. The book's comparative approach to agricultural development in China and Africa offers a useful basis for policy-makers in Africa, as well as in international organisations, to better understand what China did right in its agricultural development. Also it will enable China to better understand Africa's agricultural development. The book is, therefore, a useful text for anyone looking for a critical evaluation of China's agricultural development story.

That said, the text has its shortcomings. First, as regards field data collection, we are informed that the book is partly based on field studies conducted in Liberia, Tanzania and neighbouring Zambia. But we are offered no explanation or justification for the choice of these countries as field cases. Besides the fact that these three cases will 'offer insights at the micro level' (p. 5), the reader is given no further reasons why informants from these countries were more relevant for the study than those from any other African country. What makes Liberia, Tanzania and Zambia important case studies for this research?

Second, some of the recommendations offered for dealing with Africa's agricultural development challenge, based mainly on the Chinese experience, could prove problematic not least because of the enormous difference in societal structures, state capacity and politico-economic institutions present in China and Africa. But mainly because these 'one-size-fits-all' solutions add to an old debate, namely whether (for example, in agriculture development policy) it makes sense to refer to 'Africa' at all, since the continent is clearly heterogeneous in several ways. Policy development, implementation and outcomes are, after all, conditioned by domestic configurations (placing African society and politics at the heart of any understanding of success in agriculture development). Some lessons from China may prove realistic and should be considered for their merit and suitability. It should be emphasised, however, that for the past several decades African policymakers have been flooded with often conflicting advice on agricultural development strategy, mostly motivated by divergent theoretical views of how agriculture development works (or should work) in Africa and its anticipated impact on overall economic welfare. But who is behind the recommendations? How well do they understand local conditions? African policy makers should ask these crucial questions.

Further, while some observations about the challenges facing African agricultural development are quite revealing, the authors acknowledge the problem of examining the agricultural development of a continent comprised of 54 countries. But at times

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the authors appear to engage in overgeneralisations. For example, in discussing the results of the study, several generalisations about the African ‘condition’ were impugned which may not only conflate the diversity within Africa, but could potentially distort reality (see especially p. 255ff). Some generalisations could be avoided simply by making reference to notable exceptions, in cases where compelling examples of differences abound across Africa (as was done in isolated instances, see pp. 7, 45, 269). Moreover, successful examples of how African governments have undertaken tough reforms, enacted laws and implemented progressive (land) policies, post-1970, to benefit poor communities, are not systematically examined. On land tenure, for example, encouraging evidence from country pilots in Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda, receive less attention in the book.

Lastly, the authors conclude on an optimistic note about the potential for a ‘win-win approach for foreign aid to Africa’ through a trilateral cooperation model involving international development agencies, Africa and China (p. 275). Such optimism, which is also aimed at increasing transparency in China’s development practices across Africa, is becoming popular among many researchers and practitioners. However, very little empirical evidence exists to substantiate the claimed potential benefits of such arrangements. Any such optimism therefore needs to be measured, and the situation indeed calls for further research, for instance, on how Chinese agriculture cooperation modalities in Africa function on the ground in specific African contexts.

Overall, however, *Agricultural development in China and Africa: A comparative analysis* is a revealing, interesting and well-organised look at the successes and challenges of agricultural development in China, and the lessons therein for African agricultural transformation. This reviewer recommends the publication as a valuable resource for readers and policy-makers alike.

### Biographical note

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