Institutionalising China-Africa Cooperation in Basic Education: A Review of China's Policy Documents

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Abstract: Most research on China's education cooperation with Africa has focused on tertiary education, with basic education remaining underexplored. This article addresses this gap by reviewing 18 of China's policy documents related to education cooperation with Africa, with a specific focus on basic education and its institutionalisation. The analysis examines three dimensions: China's core cooperation principles and objectives; the initiatives and mechanisms supporting basic education; and the evolution and institutionalisation of these strategies over time. The findings reveal that China consistently emphasises equality, mutual benefit, and partnership, framing its engagement as "cooperation" rather than traditional "aid". Key initiatives include human resource development programmes, Confucius Classrooms, educational infrastructure provision, school and youth exchanges, and targeted assistance projects. China's approach has evolved through three stages: from sporadic exchanges before 2000, to structured and institutionalised cooperation under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) from 2000 to the mid-2010s, and to comprehensive and systematic engagement from the mid-2010s to the present, strengthened by the Belt and Road Initiative (2013) and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (2018). The study concludes by highlighting the need for further empirical research to examine implementation processes, outcomes, and the roles of African stakeholders, thereby contributing to broader debates on South-South education cooperation.

Keywords: Basic Education, China, Africa, Cooperation, Institutionalisation

Introduction

According to UNESCO, basic education comprises primary education and lower secondary education, along with a diverse variety of non-formal and informal activities, both public and private, intended to meet the basic learning needs of people of all ages (UNESCO, n.d.-a). Its definition and scope vary from country to country, and even region to region. For example, in China, basic education includes early childhood education (typically 3-5 years old), compulsory education (typically 6-15 years old), secondary education (typically 16-19 years old), and adult literacy education (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2007); while the Department of Basic Education in South Africa views basic education as education from Grade R (also called the Reception Year, typically 6 years old) to Grade 12 (typically 17-18 years old), including adult literacy programmes (South African Department of Basic Education, 2021).

Basic education is regarded as a priority for all countries. While countries in the Global North have largely achieved widespread access to basic education, many developing nations continue to pursue this objective, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Fredriksen & Brar, 2015). According to UNESCO (2023a), the youth literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa stood at 77%, and the adult literacy rate reached 87% in 2016, but progress has since stagnated, remaining considerably lower than the global average of 91%. The World Bank (2025) reports an even lower figure, estimating that the adult literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 69% in 2024, the highest since 1985. Primary school net

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enrolment rates have improved but remain concerning: progress has stalled since 2010, plateauing at just under 80% in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with near-universal enrolment above 95% in North America and Western Europe (Our World in Data, 2024).

Moreover, stark disparities persist across African regions and within countries, with rural areas and poorer households experiencing significantly lower enrolment and completion rates. Only one-third of countries with recent data have achieved parity between rural and urban areas in primary completion, and in some countries, secondary school completion rates among rural youth are up to 20 percentage points lower than those of their urban counterparts (UNESCO, 2025). In sub-Saharan Africa, only 65 of the poorest children attend school for every 100 of the richest (UNESCO, 2016a). Educational infrastructure also remains inadequate, with many African countries experiencing severe shortages of trained teachers, learning materials, and suitable school facilities. Approximately 20% of primary school-aged children and nearly 60% of upper secondary school-aged children in sub-Saharan Africa are currently not attending school (The Borgen Project, 2024).

Since the 1980s, major multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have been committed to financing basic education in developing countries (King, 1993). International conferences, including the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, and its subsequent World Declaration on Education for All, followed by the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar and the Dakar Framework for Action, have highlighted the global consensus on the importance of basic education as a foundation for sustainable development and poverty reduction.

For China, key policy documents, such as the 2005 China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration and the 2021 White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era, reinforce the importance of prioritising basic education in developing nations (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2005; CIDCA, 2021). Despite these widespread commitments, academic research on China's international cooperation in the field of basic education remains minimal.

In examining China's educational cooperation with Africa, it can be observed that the majority of existing research has focused on higher education (Niu, 2013; King, 2014; Gonondo, 2017; Bouchaib, 2023; Hodzi & Amoah, 2023; Knight & Zhang, 2024). As King (2019, p. 13) observes, China has "not focused very much on basic education or on Education for All, but much more on higher education". Similarly, Nordtveit (2011, p. 104), through his case study of China's education aid in Cameroon, notes that "the Chinese were not much involved in basic education." However, a closer examination reveals various forms of cooperation in basic education dating back to the 1950s, highlighting an apparent research gap.

Against this backdrop of Africa's persistent challenges in basic education and the limited scholarly attention to China's role in addressing them, this article investigates how China has engaged in basic education cooperation with Africa. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1) What core principles and objectives underpin China's basic education cooperation with Africa?
2) Through what initiatives and mechanisms has this cooperation been implemented?
3) How have these cooperation strategies evolved and become institutionalised over time?

This article aims to answer these questions through a review of Chinese policy documents related to basic education cooperation with Africa, with particular attention to how these policies have shaped the institutionalisation of such cooperation.

Methodology

Research Design

Following the research questions outlined above, this study employs a qualitative document analysis to examine the institutionalisation of China's cooperation with Africa in basic education.

The analysis focuses on official Chinese policy documents issued after the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, a milestone that marks the shift from ad hoc bilateral engagement to a formalised, cyclical, and multilateral policy architecture for China-Africa relations. FOCAC is a triennial forum jointly convened by China and African states at the ministerial or summit level, with each meeting producing an action plan that codifies shared priorities and implementation mechanisms across multiple sectors, including education.

Since 2013, China's education cooperation with Africa has increasingly been aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global development framework launched by China that promotes connectivity and cooperation through infrastructure, trade, people-to-people exchanges, and education. As of January 2026, 52 African countries have joined this initiative. Only two African countries had not signed a formal BRI Memorandum of Understanding: Eswatini (which has no diplomatic relations with China) and Mauritius (which maintains close relations with China but has not concluded a formal BRI MoU). Together, FOCAC and the BRI constitute the principal institutional channels through which China-Africa education cooperation is articulated, normalised, and coordinated.

To interpret the findings, this study adopts the analytical perspective of institutionalisation, a concept widely discussed in policy and organisational studies (Brett, 2024; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Li, 2023; Li & Zhong, 2025). In this research, institutionalisation refers to the process by which China's education cooperation policies have evolved from sporadic, fragmented initiatives into a more structured and systematic framework. This transformation is particularly evident in the creation of formal institutions and mechanisms for policy implementation. It reflects not only China's growing commitment to long-term partnerships but also its strategic alignment with Africa's development priorities, especially in basic education. Moreover, this perspective provides a useful lens for analysing how China's education cooperation policies have become increasingly embedded within national and international development frameworks, aligning with broader initiatives such as the BRI and the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035.

Document Selection

In total, 18 key policy documents were reviewed. These include the China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration (2005), China's Africa Policy Papers (2006 and 2015), China's Foreign Aid White Papers (2011 and 2014), the Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2016), the White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era (2021), the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035 (2021a), the Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development (2023), and the nine FOCAC Action Plans issued following each FOCAC summit (the first titled Program for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development, with subsequent documents referred to as Action Plans).

The selection of documents was guided by three criteria: authenticity, authority, and representativeness. In terms of authenticity, all 18 documents were officially issued by the Chinese government or its official institutions, ensuring their reliability as primary policy sources. Each document is available in both Chinese and English, and both versions were consulted to support accurate interpretation.

In terms of authority, the selected documents occupy the highest level of the Chinese policy hierarchy. The FOCAC Action Plans, for instance, represent the central institutional mechanism governing China-Africa cooperation and contain explicit commitments to education cooperation.

In terms of representativeness, the corpus captures the breadth and depth of China's education cooperation policy. It includes high-level strategic texts (Africa Policy Papers; Foreign Aid White Papers), sector-specific frameworks (Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative; Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development), and the FOCAC Action Plans, which translate these principles into operational mechanisms. Together, these texts form a coherent and representative

corpus reflecting both the evolution and institutionalisation of China's basic education cooperation with Africa.

While this study focuses on formal policy documents, other potential sources, such as bilateral agreements, implementation reports, and leaders' speeches, were not systematically included for methodological and practical reasons. Most bilateral agreements are inaccessible to the public and vary widely in form and scope, making a comprehensive comparison difficult. Speeches and implementation reports, although valuable for understanding political discourse and practice, are often rhetorical in nature and lack the formal status of policy documents (Martin, 2022; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

It should be noted that before the 2000s, few formal Chinese policy documents specifically addressed China-Africa education cooperation. Nevertheless, the discussion of the historical background later in the paper draws on secondary data to trace earlier developments from the 1950s to 2000, offering a broader historical perspective on the evolution of China's educational engagement with Africa.

Analytical Approach

In this study, policy documents are not treated as neutral descriptions of practice; rather, they are analysed as authoritative texts that actively construct policy problems, rationales for cooperation, and institutional arrangements (Bacchi, 2009; Yanow, 2000). This perspective is particularly relevant in the China-Africa cooperation context, where official documents are central to producing a coherent narrative of South-South cooperation, mutual benefit, and development partnership.

Document analysis offers several methodological strengths for this study. First, it enables longitudinal tracing of continuity and change by comparing recurring commitments and shifting emphases across successive FOCAC cycles and related strategic texts. Second, it provides access to formalised mechanisms, such as forums, plans, and implementation channels, that are core indicators of institutionalisation. Third, it allows examination of how basic education is positioned within broader development agendas and how cooperation is legitimised through policy language and framing.

However, official documents impose epistemic limits. As normative and strategic texts, they are often written to signal alignment, legitimacy, and commitment, and may understate uncertainty, disagreement, or implementation constraints (Ball, 1993; Rapley, 2018). Documents also contain "silences", such as tensions and trade-offs, and actors whose perspectives are marginalised or absent, such as local implementers and communities, which can be analytically meaningful but cannot be filled in without additional data (Bacchi, 2009; Prior, 2003). For these reasons, documents-as-data can illuminate policy intent, institutional priorities, and official mechanisms, but cannot on their own establish causal impact, implementation fidelity, or stakeholder experience (Yanow, 2000; Bowen, 2009). Accordingly, this study's claims are bound to what the corpus can support: the evolution of formal policy framing and institutional structuring of cooperation, rather than outcome evaluation.

Beyond these general considerations, the bilingual nature of the corpus requires specific analytical attention. Cross-language policy texts may differ not only in wording but also in emphasis, scope, and the pragmatic force of commitments, particularly when key concepts carry culturally and politically situated meanings across language versions (van Nes et al., 2010).

Although full back-translation is commonly used in interview- or survey-based research (Brislin, 1970; Behr, 2017), it is rarely applied to large corpora of official policy texts, where both language versions are publicly available as authoritative documents. Rather than back-translating entire documents, this study adopted a guided bilingual comparison approach. Following principles recommended in cross-language qualitative research, such as prioritising conceptual over literal equivalence, documenting interpretive decisions, and carefully handling politically or institutionally loaded terms (Temple & Young, 2004; van Nes et al., 2010; Squires, 2009), key analytical terms were tracked across both language versions. These included: 合作 (cooperation), 援助 (aid), 互利 (mutual

benefit), and related policy concepts. When passages were central to coding or interpretation, the Chinese and English versions were examined side-by-side to identify meaningful discrepancies. Where differences in emphasis, scope, or framing emerged, the Chinese text was treated as the semantic reference point, given its status as the original policy formulation, and interpretive decisions were recorded to ensure consistency across the corpus.

A clear example is the translation of aid-related terminology in FOCAC documents. In the English version of FOCAC IX's Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027), for instance, the word "aid" appears only three times, whereas the corresponding Chinese term "援助 (yuanzhu)" appears 26 times in the Chinese version. In standard development discourse, "援助" is conventionally translated as "aid"; however, in the official English versions of the FOCAC Action Plans, it is often translated as "assistance" or "assist" rather than "aid". This is not a neutral linguistic substitution but a deliberate lexical choice that avoids donor-style terminology and reframes China's engagement as cooperation rather than aid. This pattern is discussed further in the following section and illustrated in Table 1. Although absolute term frequencies differ across languages, the overall temporal trends remain comparable, allowing both versions to be analysed as parallel representations of policy framing for different audiences.

Coding Procedure

Drawing on Bowen (2009)'s guidelines for using documents as data sources in qualitative research, this study employed a systematic, iterative process to analyse the selected policy documents. Consistent with a critical document analysis approach, the procedure combined thematic coding with attention to policy framing, repetition, and omission, treating documents as both sources of content and instruments of institutional meaning-making (Bacchi, 2009; Prior, 2003; Rapley, 2018). Guided by the research questions outlined above, the thematic analysis was organised around three preliminary codes corresponding to the study's key analytical dimensions: principles and objectives, initiatives and mechanisms, and evolution and transformation.

The coding process involved several stages: 1) All 18 documents were read carefully to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content, context, and policy framing. 2) Each document was re-read in detail, and passages relevant to the three preliminary codes were identified and annotated. 3) All documents were uploaded into NVivo, where the data were coded according to the established framework. 4) Emergent codes such as human resources development, education facilities provision, Confucius Classrooms, and education assistance projects were identified. As new ideas and insights appeared during the coding process, additional emergent codes were incorporated into the codebook. 5) These codes were then reviewed to identify and resolve redundancies or overlaps, and overly broad codes were refined into sub-codes to capture more nuanced meanings. 6) The coding continued until no new or redundant codes emerged, ensuring saturation. 7) All codes were re-examined for hierarchy and relevance, allowing the analysis to be organised into three main analytical sections below.

China's Core Cooperation Principles and Objectives

Equality and Mutuality as the Guiding Norm

Since China began providing aid to African nations in 1956, Africa has been a primary recipient of China's foreign assistance. According to China's Foreign Aid White Papers, Africa received 45.7% of all Chinese foreign aid in 2009, and 51.8% between 2010 and 2012 (Central People's Government of PRC, 2014; CIDCA, 2018). However, as King (2019) argues, this pattern contrasts with the donor-recipient relationships typically seen between Western countries and African nations. Unlike Western donors, which often position themselves as benefactors, China advocates for South-South Cooperation, a philosophy grounded in mutual development and equality. Within this framework, both China

and Africa are seen as equal partners working together for common advancement. But in practice, achieving such mutuality is challenging, given China's growing economic and political power and the imbalance between China's significant presence in Africa and the relatively limited African presence in China. As Jiang and Holst (2025) note, this mutuality is not precisely equal or symmetrical, yet stakeholders in China's international aid initiatives perceive their work as fostering mutual benefit.

These guiding principles were first articulated in 1964 by Premier Zhou Enlai during his visit to Ghana through the Eight Principles of Chinese Economic and Technological Aid. The first two principles underscore China's commitment to fostering reciprocal relationships in its foreign aid initiatives:

1. Equality and mutual benefit: China views foreign aid not as unilateral charity but as mutual assistance where both parties gain.
2. Respect for sovereignty: China ensures that its aid does not come with conditions or political demands, emphasizing respect for the recipient country's sovereignty (Xinhua Net, np, 2016).

Although these principles were initially articulated when China was economically weak and in urgent need of political allies during the Cold War, they have since become the cornerstone of China's foreign policy towards Africa, including its educational initiatives, and have been consistently upheld by successive Chinese governments. Notably, China rarely uses the term "aid" in its policy documents. Instead, China prefers terms such as "cooperation" to reflect the mutual aspect of the relationship (Mawdsley, 2012; King, 2014). For instance, in FOCAC action plans (English versions), the word "cooperation" appears far more frequently than "aid" or "assistance" (See Table 1).

Table 1. Occurrences of the Words "Aid," "Assistance," and "Cooperation" in FOCAC Action Plans

Year	FOCAC Number	FOCAC Documents	Aid	Assistance	Cooperation
2000	I	Program for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development	1	3	51
2003	II	Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004-2006)	0	9	79
2006	III	Beijing Action Plan (2007-2009)	0	14	88
2009	IV	Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan (2010-2012)	0	7	84
2012	V	Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015)	1	13	141
2015	VI	Johannesburg Action Plan (2016-2018)	0	14	151
2018	VII	Beijing Action Plan (2019-2021)	4	17	211
2021	VIII	Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024)	1	23	293
2024	IX	Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027)	3	20	312

Note: This table reports term frequencies from the official English-language versions of the FOCAC Action Plans. Differences between "aid" and "assistance" in the English texts are interpreted through comparison with the corresponding Chinese term 援助 (see Methodology for details).

Sources: FOCAC (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2024).

As demonstrated, the term "cooperation" dominates FOCAC action plans, reflecting a partnership-oriented approach that contrasts with the hierarchical connotations of traditional aid. When the term "assistance" is used, it sometimes refers to mutual support, such as the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund or mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, as outlined in the clauses of the FOCAC VII's Action Plan, rather than to one-sided aid transfers. The 2021 White Paper on China and Africa in the New Era reinforces this framing by adopting "A Partnership of Equals" as its subtitle, underscoring the Chinese government's consistent emphasis on reciprocity and equality in its engagement with African countries. King (2020) similarly observes that FOCAC documents use the phrase "both sides" when referring to cooperation projects, whereas "the Chinese government"

is more commonly used in reference to aid-related initiatives, indicating a deliberate linguistic distinction between mutual engagement and unilateral assistance.

It is noteworthy that China's preference for the term "cooperation" over "aid" in its official development discourse also mirrors a broader discursive shift among traditional Northern donors. In recent years, countries such as Sweden and Denmark, while remaining members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), have increasingly adopted the term "development cooperation" to project a more equal and partnership-based model of engagement (OECD, 2019; King, 2019). However, a key difference lies in the institutional and normative frameworks behind the terminology. OECD-DAC members are required to report detailed aid flows and conform to internationally agreed standards, often coordinated through the OECD headquarters in Paris. China, by contrast, does not participate in the DAC and is not subject to its reporting obligations or policy guidelines (Brautigam, 2011; Mawdsley, 2012). This reflects China's desire to distance itself from the traditional donor community and to define its role instead as a South-South cooperation partner (Li, 2026).

In line with this positioning, China favours flexible, bilateral arrangements that emphasise mutual benefit, non-conditionality, and respect for national sovereignty. This approach distinguishes it from DAC donors, even those that have rhetorically embraced more horizontal partnerships. As a result, China's persistent use of the term "cooperation" not only signals a political and ideological distinction from the traditional donor system but also contributes to the increasing blurring of boundaries between aid, trade, and diplomacy in contemporary development engagements.

Objectives of China-Africa Cooperation in Basic Education

A foundational document outlining the objectives of China's cooperation with Africa in basic education is the 2005 China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration. This official document, dedicated to China-Africa education cooperation, asserts that:

> We believe that free compulsory primary education is a fundamental human right… Developing countries should spare no effort to prioritise the development of basic education, ensuring that children, regardless of gender, have access to a certain number of years of education… High-quality primary education is the solid foundation of the educational system (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2005, paras. 5, 8 and 9).

This idealistic vision, however, contrasts with the educational realities in some African countries, where free and compulsory primary education remains far from universal. As Bray (2021) observes, large numbers of families continue to rely on private education, and in some parts of Africa, particularly in Francophone countries, free primary education is still lacking. To address such challenges, the Beijing Declaration outlines a set of strategic measures aimed at achieving high-quality basic education. These include improving teacher quality, enhancing teaching methods, upgrading facilities, developing appropriate curricula and teaching models, adopting flexible management systems, and leveraging distance education (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2005). These proposed approaches are later operationalised in the FOCAC Action Plans through specific initiatives and mechanisms, which serve as policy instruments for realising the goals set out in the Declaration. These will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

An important development in China's educational engagement with Africa is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 under President Xi. The 2016 Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative further expanded the scope of basic education cooperation by encouraging sister-school partnerships, multilingual and foreign-language teacher development, the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, full-time and volunteer Mandarin teacher training, teacher and student exchanges, international understanding education, Silk Road cultural heritage protection, curriculum-related cooperation, and the export of teaching equipment, courseware, and

"full-package teaching solutions" to support more balanced educational development across Belt and Road countries (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 2016, paras. 14–16, 20, 29).

The BRI has significantly expanded China's educational outreach and influence among participating countries, including those in Africa. It has fostered institutional partnerships, supported teacher and student exchanges, enhanced access to multilingual education, and, in some cases, contributed to improving perceptions of China through educational initiatives (d'Hooghe, 2021; Romadhoni et al., 2024; Yue et al., 2024; King, 2020). These institutions, projects and mechanisms are examined in the subsequent sections.

More recently, the White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era (2021) places basic education within the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the fourth section, titled "Promote the Implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", Supporting Basic Education is identified as the first task under the subsection on Ensuring Quality Education, which states that "education is the foundation of development" and that.

> China enhances the educational development level of other developing countries and provides people with better and more educational opportunities by building schools, training teachers, and expanding the scale of scholarships (CIDCA, 2021, paras. 77 and 78).

Similarly, the 2023 Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development emphasises that:

> China supports efforts to improve the education levels of all Africans, particularly women, children, and adolescents, and is willing to continue providing high-quality education to African countries through various scholarships and training programmes (FOCAC, 2023, para. 8).

Although both documents frame their commitments under "cooperation", the language used – emphasising building schools, training teachers, and providing scholarships – clearly indicates the provision of aid-like support to address Africa's basic education challenges. What remains less clear, however, is how these high-level commitments are implemented at the country level. How are the broad and aspirational goals articulated in FOCAC declarations and white papers translated into concrete action? How can we assess whether they are being realised on the ground? A number of such initiatives and mechanisms are, in fact, outlined in China's policy documents. These are examined in detail in the following section, which explores how China's cooperation with Africa in basic education is operationalised and institutionalised.

Supportive Initiatives and Mechanisms

Before 2000, China's cooperation with Africa in the field of basic education was characterised by sporadic and fragmented projects, which is examined in greater detail later in the paper. Since the founding of FOCAC in 2000, basic education has emerged as an important area of cooperation. Several key initiatives and mechanisms can be identified in the policy documents.

Initiatives of Human Resources Development

Since the establishment of FOCAC, China has focused on supporting human resources development in Africa (King, 2020), particularly in basic education. The African Human Resources Development Fund (AHRDF), launched at FOCAC I in 2000, plays a key role in training African personnel, including those in the education sector. Successive FOCAC action plans have underscored China's commitment to this cause. For example, FOCAC II's Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004–2006) pledged that, "China will,

in the next three years, further increase its financial contribution to the African Human Resources Development Fund for the training of up to 10,000 African personnel in different fields" (FOCAC, 2003, para. 51). Chinese institutions have actively collaborated with the AHRDF to implement programmes aimed at improving basic education in Africa. For example, between 2002 and 2011, Zhejiang Normal University's African Basic Education Management Training Program trained 602 individuals from 48 countries (China Youth Daily, 2011). Similarly, Northeast Normal University conducted five basic education training workshops for African education personnel from 2004 to 2007 (Chen et al., 2016).

China has also made significant contributions to international education initiatives, particularly through its partnership with UNESCO. On 22 November 2012, the Chinese government launched the UNESCO-China Funds-in-Trust (CFIT) project with an initial donation of 8 million US Dollars to support teacher development in basic education across Africa (UNESCO, 2023b). Three phases have been implemented to date. Phase 1 (2012–2016) supported teacher training in eight countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Namibia, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Tanzania, and Uganda (UNESCO, 2017). In Phase 2 (2017–2018), China contributed an additional 4 million US Dollars, expanding the programme to include Togo and Zambia (UNESCO, 2016b). While Phase 3, launched in October 2019, shifted its focus to higher technical education (UNESCO, n.d.-b), the earlier phases of CFIT are particularly noteworthy as they represent the first large-scale initiative led by the Chinese government to directly support the professional development of basic education teachers across Africa.

It is important to note that the CFIT project's design emphasises local ownership and country-driven implementation. According to the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "local stakeholders in each of the 10 beneficiary countries were able to set priorities and design strategies to meet national and local needs" (UN DESA, n.d., para. 5). In each participating country, national education ministries collaborated with UNESCO field offices to conduct needs assessments and identify priority areas. Local institutions, such as teacher training colleges and education resource centres, acted as implementing partners by providing facilities, administrative support, and follow-up mentoring for trained teachers (UN DESA, n.d.). UNESCO (2016c, para. 10) further noted that the project's success was largely due to "strong ownership of the development and implementation by the beneficiary countries, the high engagement of relevant ministries and institutions, and the alignment with country priorities and the global SDGs." This collaborative structure ensured that training programmes were aligned with national curricula and certification frameworks, thereby enhancing the sustainability of outcomes.

More recently, FOCAC IX (2024)'s action plan initiates the China-Africa Cooperation Programme for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Teacher Training, aiming to provide training in the next three years for African teachers tutoring STEM subjects. These efforts reflect China's long-standing commitment to addressing the critical shortage of trained teachers in sub-Saharan Africa, as highlighted by Fredriksen and Fossberg (2014), and to enhancing the quality of basic education on the continent.

Cooperation through Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Classrooms (CCs)

Launched in 2004, the CI and CC initiative aims to promote Chinese language and culture globally. Central to China's basic education cooperation with Africa, the CCs are mainly partnerships between Chinese schools and African schools, while the CIs are usually joint ventures between Chinese universities and local higher education institutions. As of October 2025, the CIs and CCs operate in 49 African countries. While the current number of African CIs is 69, the number of CCs is harder to pinpoint. The CI website lists ten CCs in Africa (Confucius Institute, n.d.), while other reports suggest there were 48 CCs by mid-2020 (FOCAC, 2022). In many cases, the CIs establish multiple teaching centres or branches under the CC banner in local schools. For instance, the CI at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana has established 14 teaching centres, including three under the banner of CC (Confucius Institute, 2023).

Since FOCAC III (2006), support for the CIs and CCs in Africa has been emphasised in FOCAC action plans. Beyond offering Chinese language courses, these institutions play broader educational and cultural roles, including facilitating student exchanges, offering scholarships, supporting curriculum integration at both higher and basic education levels, and promoting local employment opportunities (Li, 2021). However, most existing research focuses on the CIs (King, 2013; King, 2017; Procopio, 2015; Wheeler, 2013; Repnikova, 2022; Li, 2023), with very few studies dedicated to the CCs. Yet, the CCs play a critical role in advancing Chinese language teaching in Africa and in deepening China–Africa cooperation at the basic education level.

For instance, Li and Zhong (2025) provide empirical evidence from Uganda, showing that the country's only CC played an essential role in implementing the Local School Chinese Language Teacher Training Programme. The institutionalisation of Chinese language teaching in Ugandan schools resulted from collaboration among multiple actors: the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports, the National Curriculum Development Centre, the Uganda National Examinations Board, the Chinese Ministry of Education, the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (formerly Hanban/CI Headquarters), and the Chinese Embassy, with the CC serving as the central training venue. This case illustrates the often-overlooked yet crucial function of CCs in embedding Chinese language teaching within African education systems and institutionalising China-Africa cooperation in basic education.

Provision of Basic Education Facilities

China has been providing aid to Africa since 1956, initially aimed at strengthening political ties and securing support on the global stage (Song, 2015). Major initiatives, such as the Tan-Zam Railway, exemplified these early efforts. From the 1980s to the 2000s, as China's economy grew following the Reform and Opening-up, aid continued, though educational support was modest and sporadic. For example, in response to Botswana's shortage of qualified teachers during the rapid expansion of basic education in the early 1990s, China sent three groups of over 40 university teachers to teach in secondary schools (Chen & Zhang, 2015). Between the 1980s and the early 21st century, China also donated educational supplies, such as books, sports equipment, laboratory instruments and computers, to 24 African countries (Luo & Lu, 2005).

Under the framework of FOCAC, China has steadily increased its support for basic education infrastructure and school facilities across Africa. Successive FOCAC Action Plans have included concrete pledges to build or upgrade schools: 100 schools under FOCAC III (2006), 50 schools under FOCAC IV (2009), 10 schools under FOCAC VIII (2021), and 20 schools under FOCAC IX (2024). In addition to school construction, China has also committed to donating books and educational equipment, as outlined in FOCAC VI (2015), FOCAC VII (2018), and FOCAC IX (2024). As China's economic power continues to expand, particularly after it became the world's second-largest economy in 2010, this trend of supporting basic education through infrastructure and resource provision is likely to deepen. While FOCAC documents pledge school construction, publicly available sources provide limited detail on how African governments participate in site selection and design decisions, representing a gap in transparency that merits further research.

Inter-School Cooperation and Youth Activities

Apart from the Confucius Classroom project discussed above, FOCAC VIII (2021)'s action plan marks the first inclusion of a specific China-Africa basic education cooperation initiative: the CubeSat Middle School Student Science Project. This initiative aims to establish a China-Africa Youth Space Alliance to facilitate space-related exchanges between Chinese and African middle school students and promote the popularisation of science in the context of space cooperation (FOCAC, 2021b). This initiative was also included in FOCAC IX (2024)'s action plan.

Under this initiative, the HOPE (Hyperspace Opportunity for Pioneering Education) project, a collaboration between China, African, and Arab countries, was proposed by Beijing 101 Middle School and China Spacesat Co., Ltd in 2021. During the first meeting of the HOPE project, officials from the aerospace and education departments of China, Egypt, and Ethiopia, as well as students and teachers from four schools in the three countries, discussed the basic information and applications of the CubeSat project. The focus was on the "101 Science Popularisation Mini-Satellite" from Beijing 101 Middle School, which was successfully launched into space in December 2021. Future activities include joint aerospace education camps, forums, and collaborations with universities and industries (Beijing 101 Middle School, 2021).

Moreover, events such as the Tiangong Dialogue, which invited school students from Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and South Africa to participate in a live online session with Chinese astronauts aboard China's Tiangong Space Station (Xinhua Net, 2022), and the My Dream Painting Competition, which engaged over 2,000 youth from 42 African countries with China's space program and exhibited the winning paintings in the Tianhe core module of the Tiangong space station (People Net, 2023), are prominent examples of basic education exchange projects. While these initiatives showcase China's advanced capabilities in space technology, their effectiveness in addressing broader educational priorities, such as equitable access, teacher training, and curriculum development, remains uncertain. Moreover, the extent of African stakeholder participation and ownership is unclear, particularly in contexts where national capacity in space technology is limited.

Comprehensive Education Assistance Projects

A notable term in theEducation Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative(2016) is "full-package teaching solutions," as seen in "we will facilitating the exportation of high-quality teaching equipment, courseware, and full-package teaching solutions from countries along the routes" (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 2016, para. 20). A prominent example of this is the South Sudan Education Technology Cooperation Project, launched in January 2017. Led by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and managed by China South Publishing & Media Group, the project aims to modernise South Sudan's education system. Its components include curriculum development, teacher training, textbook production, and the establishment of an ICT teacher training centre. The project specifically focuses on creating curriculum standards and textbooks for primary school subjects such as mathematics, English, and science (China South Publishing & Media Group, 2018).

Over 22 months, the project produced and distributed 1.29 million textbooks for first-grade students in these subjects and trained 200 South Sudanese teachers (China Daily, 2019). This project was also highlighted in the "Supporting Basic Education" section of the 2021 White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation, representing China's first comprehensive education assistance initiative and its first attempt to establish an education system abroad. Considering China's position as South Sudan's largest trading partner and its significant economic presence in this country, particularly in the oil sector (Patey, 2017), the project also strengthens bilateral ties. This initiative highlights China's capability to implement large-scale education projects and provides a model for future education assistance, particularly in strengthening basic education systems in developing nations. However, the limited availability of public documentation makes it difficult to evaluate the extent of South Sudanese stakeholder participation in the project's design and implementation. This limitation underscores the need for further empirical research to examine local ownership, decision-making processes, and the on-the-ground impacts of such cooperation initiatives.

Establishment of China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA)

Most nations in the North have dedicated aid agencies, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, founded in 1961) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency

(JICA, established in 1974). In contrast, before 2018, China's foreign aid system was fragmented across approximately 30 agencies, with the Ministry of Commerce's Department of Foreign Aid playing a central but uncoordinated role. This decentralised structure resulted in overlapping responsibilities, project duplication, weak strategic oversight, and the absence of a unified evaluation framework (Zhao and Jing, 2019; Zhang and Smith, 2017).

To address these issues, China established the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) in March 2018, under the direct supervision of the State Council. The agency was created to centralise and streamline China's foreign aid efforts. It assumed many of the responsibilities previously held by the Ministry of Commerce's Department of Foreign Aid, and it is also tasked with integrating the objectives of foreign aid into the broader diplomatic policy framework, as designated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Specifically, CIDCA is responsible for:

> (f)ormulating strategic guidelines, plans, and policies for foreign aid; coordinating major issues related to foreign assistance and providing recommendations; promoting reforms in foreign aid modalities; developing foreign aid schemes and plans; identifying foreign aid projects and supervising and evaluating their implementation (CIDCA, n.d.).

It can be gauged that since its inception, CIDCA has played a key role in shaping China's development cooperation strategy. Notable examples include the 2021 White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era and the 2023 Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development, both of which underscore China's growing emphasis on supporting basic education in partner countries. However, despite its central role in coordinating Chinese foreign aid, CIDCA does not directly implement aid projects, a responsibility that remains within the remit of ministries such as the Ministry of Commerce (Rudyak, 2019). This structure, which mirrors the Japanese aid model (King and Buchert, 1999), may present challenges in terms of effective coordination and oversight in project delivery.

Evolution and Transformation of China's Cooperation with Africa in Basic Education

China's education cooperation with Africa has undergone significant changes over the past seven decades, particularly since 2000. This evolution is characterised by distinct phases, each marked by different approaches and priorities, reflecting China's growing commitment to institutionalising its education cooperation with Africa.

Sporadic Exchanges and Gradual Diversification (1950s – 2000)

From the 1950s to the 1970s, China's education cooperation with Africa primarily focused on teacher exchanges, with Chinese teachers sent to African countries to teach Mandarin and science subjects at the basic education level; at the same time, African students and educators were invited to China under bilateral agreements (He, 2007). The scope and scale of these exchanges were limited, and their primary goal was political solidarity rather than addressing the educational challenges faced by either China or African countries.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China's foreign aid activities, including education cooperation, were severely disrupted. No formal educational aid programmes were carried out during this period, and many existing agreements with African countries were suspended or abandoned. In fact, some African students in China during the 1960s and 1970s faced harsh living conditions and ideological indoctrination, leading to critical accounts of their experiences (King, 2019; Hevi, 1963).

In the post-Cultural Revolution era (1980s–2000), China began to rebuild and diversify its education cooperation with other countries, although efforts remained largely concentrated in higher education. The expansion of Chinese universities and the country's economic reforms facilitated the establishment of partnerships between Chinese and African universities. During this period,

scholarships for African students to study in China increased, and China sent university teachers to address specific educational needs. While the scope of cooperation expanded, the absence of a formalised institutional framework meant that these efforts lacked coherence and were limited in addressing the basic education challenges faced by Africa.

Institutionalisation through FOCAC (2000 – Mid-2010s)

The establishment of FOCAC in 2000 marked a crucial moment in the institutionalisation of China's education cooperation with Africa. FOCAC created a structured and formalised platform for China to expand and coordinate its educational engagement with African countries, with basic education emerging as an important area of focus. As discussed above, through initiatives such as the AHRDF, the UNESCO–China Funds-in-Trust (CFIT) Project, and the STEM teacher training programme, China began to prioritise teacher training and human resource development in Africa. Additionally, the expansion of CIs and CCs across Africa further strengthened China's educational presence, particularly through the CCs, which contributed to the institutionalisation of Chinese language teaching within the basic education systems of African countries.

Policy documents such as the 2005 China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration and successive FOCAC Action Plans emphasised the importance of basic education, outlining specific initiatives aimed at enhancing teacher training, improving educational infrastructure, and strengthening capacity-building efforts. These documents formalised China's commitment to supporting basic education in Africa, providing a coherent institutional framework for the implementation of structured initiatives, as discussed in the analysis below.

The institutionalisation of China's education cooperation with Africa through FOCAC occurred against the backdrop of major global shifts in education and development policy. The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2000, particularly MDG 2 Achieve Universal Primary Education, established a global framework that placed basic education at the centre of strategies for poverty reduction and sustainable development (UN, 2000). Sub-Saharan Africa, identified as the region "furthest behind in progress" towards achieving the MDGs (Commission for Africa, 2005), became a key focus of international development efforts.

Between 2000 and 2015, primary school net enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa rose from approximately 60% to 80%, reflecting accelerated progress, in part, driven by the MDG framework (UN, 2015a). China's expanding educational cooperation through FOCAC closely aligns with these global priorities, positioning China as an active contributor to international development goals while advancing its own foreign policy objectives. Furthermore, China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 and its sustained economic growth, averaging around 10% annually throughout the 2000s (World Bank, n.d.), provided both the financial capacity and diplomatic impetus for deeper engagement with Africa, including in the education sector.

Although the 2008 global financial crisis severely affected the global economy, China's economy remained relatively resilient. Its GDP growth rate, though slowing from over 10% to 6.8% in late 2008, rebounded quickly to average 9.7% between 2008 and 2010 (US Congressional Research Service, 2018). This resilience enhanced China's reputation as a stable and reliable development partner in Africa, particularly through institutional mechanisms such as FOCAC, including in the field of basic education.

Comprehensive and Systematic Engagement (Mid-2010s – Present)

The mid-2010s marked the beginning of a more comprehensive and systematic phase in China's education cooperation with Africa. These developments unfolded within a changing global policy context. The 2015 adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", succeeded the MDGs and broadened the international education agenda beyond primary

enrolment to include quality, equity, and lifelong learning (UN, 2015b). Unlike the narrower MDG 2, SDG 4 explicitly covers all levels of education, from early childhood to adult learning, thereby aligning with China's own emphasis on comprehensive and lifelong education cooperation.

The BRI provided a strategic framework for expanding China's educational engagement through initiatives such as the 2016 Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, which promoted inter-school cooperation, teacher and student exchanges, and multilingual education (King, 2020). The establishment of CIDCA in 2018 further centralised and streamlined China's foreign aid system, likely enhancing the efficiency, coordination, and sustainability of education-related projects, given the priority of education in China's overall aid architecture.

The Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2016) and successive FOCAC Action Plans expanded the policy framework for China's education cooperation, supporting initiatives such as the HOPE CubeSat Project and the South Sudan Education Technology Cooperation Project. These documents not only formalised China's commitment to strengthening basic education in Africa but also provided a roadmap for implementing structured, sustainable initiatives. Continued support through programmes such as the AHRDF, CFIT Project, CIs and CCs, and the STEM teacher training programme further demonstrates China's deepening and diversified engagement in the education sector. However, empirical studies examining the actual outcomes of these initiatives remain limited, making it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness, scale, and long-term impact.

China's enhanced engagement during this period was also shaped by economic and geopolitical factors. The deteriorating China-US relationship, particularly after the Obama administration's 2011 "pivot to Asia" strategy aimed at rebalancing or even containing China's growing influence (De Castro, 2018), and subsequent trade tensions under the Trump administration, prompted China to strengthen ties with the Global South, including Africa. As Kuo (2024, para. 5) notes, "Where U.S. diplomatic bandwidth was often absorbed by issues in the Middle East and Europe, China increased its engagement in the Indo-Pacific and Global South." China's deepening cooperation with Africa can thus be understood partly as a strategic response to intensifying Western pressure, as Beijing sought to diversify diplomatic and economic partnerships and consolidate support in multilateral forums.

The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020, further disrupted global education systems and development cooperation, with school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners worldwide and disproportionately impacting sub-Saharan Africa (UN SDG, 2020). In response, China launched digital education initiatives and continued to support basic education infrastructure, as reflected in FOCAC IX Action Plan (2024), which pledged to "promote the implementation of digital education in more African countries" (item 8.1.5).

This phase has also seen increased emphasis on local ownership and participation, with policy statements encouraging closer collaboration with African governments and educational institutions to tailor projects to local contexts. For example, FOCAC VI (2015) pledged to "train 200,000 vocational and technical professionals locally in Africa" (item 4.3.6), yet it remains unclear how many individuals were actually trained, in which countries, and in what fields. Similarly, FOCAC VII (2018) called for the training of local Chinese language teachers (item 4.3.4), and FOCAC IX (2024) reiterated this focus by again committing to expanding digital education initiatives, though public documentation of these efforts' scope and outcomes is limited. While the emphasis on local participation aligns with international best practices and may enhance the long-term impact of aid efforts, a lack of monitoring and reporting mechanisms continues to hinder a comprehensive evaluation of China's contributions to basic education in Africa.

Finally, China's economic deceleration, with growth slowing from an average of 10% in the 2000s to below 8% in the 2010s, and further to around 4% in the early 2020s (World Bank, n.d.), may constrain the scale of future education cooperation initiatives, even as the institutionalised frameworks established through FOCAC and the BRI remain firmly in place.

Concluding Remarks

This article has examined China's cooperation with Africa in basic education through a systematic analysis of 18 key Chinese policy documents, focusing on cooperation principles and objectives, supportive initiatives and mechanisms, and the evolution of policy over time.

The analysis yields three principal findings. First, China's cooperation discourse foregrounds partnership rather than traditional aid hierarchies. The consistent use of "cooperation" over "aid" and the emphasis on equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference distinguish China's approach from OECD-DAC donors. Yet, tensions persist between these rhetorical commitments and the asymmetries in resources and decision-making authority. Second, China has developed a range of mechanisms, including teacher training programmes (AHRDF, UNESCO-China CFIT Project), education partnerships (Confucius Classrooms), infrastructure projects, youth/school exchanges, and full-package education assistance projects (South Sudan Education Technology Cooperation Project). The establishment of CIDCA in 2018 marked a significant institutional reform, centralising coordination and aligning education cooperation with broader initiatives such as the BRI. Third, policy evolution has proceeded through three phases: sporadic exchanges (1950s–2000), institutionalised cooperation through FOCAC (2000–mid-2010s), and comprehensive engagement (mid-2010s–present), shaped by both domestic factors, such as economic growth and institutional reforms, and external influences, including MDGs/SDGs, China-US tensions, and COVID-19.

Viewed through the lens of institutionalisation, these findings reveal three dimensions of institutionalisation: normative institutionalisation, reflected in the articulation of consistent principles and objectives across policy documents; structural institutionalisation, through the creation of formal mechanisms such as FOCAC, CIDCA, and Confucius Classrooms; and operational institutionalisation, through the introduction of standardised implementation procedures, notably the triennial FOCAC action plans. However, the analysis also reveals incomplete institutionalisation, particularly in relation to transparency, accountability, and meaningful participation by African stakeholders. This indicates that while institutional forms and discursive commitments have stabilised, their translation into genuinely reciprocal governance practices remains uneven.

Building on these insights, several recommendations can be made. Policymakers should improve transparency by establishing open monitoring and evaluation systems and by strengthening mechanisms for meaningful African participation in programme design and implementation. Chinese policymakers, in particular, should align education cooperation more closely with African national strategies and the objectives of SDG 4. Educators and practitioners are encouraged to document and share partnership experiences to facilitate policy learning and mutual understanding. Future research should move beyond policy analysis to investigate implementation processes, outcomes, and African stakeholder perspectives, as well as to conduct comparative studies that situate China's cooperation within the wider landscape of emerging donors.

This study acknowledges its limitation as a document-based analysis, which cannot fully capture on-the-ground dynamics. Future mixed-method and longitudinal research could assess sustainability, impact, and African agency in greater depth.

In sum, China has made notable progress in institutionalising basic education cooperation with Africa through diverse mechanisms and formalised commitments. Yet the central issue is not whether cooperation has been institutionalised, but how power, voice, and accountability are configured within these institutional arrangements. As China positions itself as a development partner to Africa and the wider Global South, the key question is whether its cooperation model can move beyond symbolic partnership towards substantively shared governance, rather than reproducing existing asymmetries in new forms.

Notes

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