11 China's agricultural footprint in Africa – scale, patterns, and implications

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This chapter examines the trajectory of China's contemporary involvement in African agriculture. The central argument is for a more disciplined African approach – built on clearer priorities, firmer rules, and stronger African agency. With strategic coordination, anchored in continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), African countries can reshape this relationship with China into a resilient and mutually beneficial model. Ultimately, realizing the opportunities of this partnership, while mitigating its risks, demands a decisive shift in mindset and strategy from African governments, complemented by a smart and supportive recalibration of engagement by traditional partners such as Sweden.

Introduction

This chapter examines China's contemporary involvement in African agriculture and its impacts on food-system outcomes. The chapter also explores the African response to the Chinese involvement and offers policy recommendations. The central argument is not for a "divorce" from Chinese engagement, but for a more disciplined African approach built on clearer priorities, firmer rules, and stronger African agency. With strategic coordination, anchored in continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063[1] and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), African countries can reshape this relationship into a resilient and mutually beneficial model. Ultimately, this demands a decisive shift in mindset and strategy from African governments, complemented by a smart and supportive recalibration of engagement by traditional partners such as Sweden.

Food security remains one of Africa's most pressing and urgent challenges, with almost two-thirds of the continent's population experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity—nearly twice the global average (World Bank, 2025). Agriculture supports the livelihoods of over 60% of Africa's workforce (with women constituting nearly 50%), and the sector contributes to over 17% of GDP (far above the global average of just over 4%). Ending hunger, malnutrition, and poverty, therefore depends heavily on the capacity of African governments to build sustainable agricultural sectors and resilient, inclusive food systems (Abu Hatab et al., 2019).

China has emerged in recent decades as a pivotal player in African agriculture, channeling substantial investments, technology transfers, and aid across the continent through engagements marked by distinct characteristics. While other donors have combined multiple channels to support development, China's approach is distinctive in the deployment of multiple instruments—including aid, trade, in-

[1] Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview

vestment, and technical cooperation—all steered by a unified policy framework and implemented through strong state-owned institutional actors. This results in a more centrally orchestrated and strategically aligned form of South–South cooperation (Zeng et al., 2025). Another distinct characteristic of China's engagement in African agriculture is a stronger emphasis on the "production" side of agrifood value chains, like irrigation, mechanization, and input supply.

However, many aspects of China's agricultural engagement remain underexplored. Compared to high-profile sectors such as infrastructure and mining ventures, agricultural cooperation has attracted less attention due to its decentralized, small-scale nature, limited data availability, and low visibility. Debates over how to characterize China's involvement in Africa underscore the need for delving deeper. Although China is not a former colonial power and frames its actions as South–South cooperation, critics and some scholars argue that structural asymmetries, emerging dependencies, and expanding political influence mirror dynamics associated with neo-imperialism (Seifudein & Babagana, 2023). Whether or not one adopts this terminology, a clearer understanding of China's involvement in African agriculture is crucial for African countries in order to maximize the benefits of investments, while at the same time mitigating risks such as environmental degradation and uneven economic gains.

For development partners like the European Union (EU) and Sweden, a deeper understanding is essential to strategically position aid and investment initiatives, avoid duplication of efforts, foster collaborative opportunities with China where aligned, and counterbalance potential geopolitical influences, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness in addressing Africa's pressing challenges of improving food security, reducing poverty, and building climate resilience.

China's domestic agricultural policy

To understand China's m'ore recent engagement in African agriculture, there is a need to examine the constraints and priorities of its own agricultural policy. For a long time, China has prioritized expanding and upgrading domestic production to meet the rising demand. Under Xi Jinping, this agenda has intensified. Food policies have been strengthened, efforts to reduce food waste have expanded, and the protection of arable land has been tightened. Food has been explicitly framed as a matter of national security, with Xi repeatedly insisting that the "rice bowls" of China's 1.4 billion citizens must remain firmly in Chinese hands[2]."

By 2004, China shifted from net food exporter to net food importer; and between 2000 and 2020, the self-sufficiency rate fell from 93.6 to 65.8 percent. Projections suggest that food demand is expected to increase and the demand for meat and dairy products is expected to nearly double by 2050. Since 2013, agricultural policy has had a dual approach: pursuing self-sufficiency in staple grains and key proteins while relying more on global markets for non-staple commodities (Zeng et al., 2025).

China's arable land is shrinking due to rapid urbanization and industrialization. At the same time, agricultural productivity is undermined by soil degradation, driven by pollution, acidification, and intensive fertilizer use, alongside desertification caused by overgrazing and poor water management. Climate change intensifies these pressures, while population growth pushes the limits of China's self-sufficiency (Chen et al., 2019). It is within this context that Africa has become a strategic pillar in China's response to its domestic agricultural constraints. Africa's vast reserves of uncultivated arable land present an important external opportunity for China as it seeks to secure long-term food and agricultural resources.

[2] Xinhua News Agency https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-09/22/content_5711153.htm

Cultivating partnership: three phases of China–Africa agricultural engagement

The trajectory of China's agricultural involvement in Africa traces its origins back to the late 1950s (Siu & McGovern, 2017). Over the decades, this partnership has matured, evolving from modest aid initiatives into a multifaceted framework that integrates large-scale projects, trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), and technical assistance (Zhao, 2020). Notably, this engagement has been shaped by wider global geopolitics such as China's pursuit of international alliances, resource security, and responses to tensions with the West. China's own domestic political priorities, including economic reforms and food security, have also shaped the trajectory. The subsequent sections explore this progression within three distinct phases:

Phase I: Solidarity and non-reimbursable assistance (late 1950s–1960s)

In the first phase of non-reimbursable assistance during the Mao era, China positioned itself as a champion of Third World solidarity, using agricultural aid as a non-monetary tool to strengthen ties with newly independent African countries (Buckley, 2013). This era featured the provision of free food aid to address immediate shortages, the establishment of agricultural demonstration farms, and the development of water conservancy projects (Alden, 2013). For instance, Chinese experts were dispatched to Guinea and Mali to set up testing and extension stations that introduced basic farming techniques including rice cultivation methods adapted from China's own experiences (Li et al., 2022). By the end of the 1960s, these efforts had resulted in over a dozen projects across the continent, helping to lay foundational infrastructure that supported local food production and symbolized China's commitment to anti-imperialist partnerships (Shinn, 2011).

Overall, during this phase, China prioritized diplomatic alliances, such as securing UN recognition, over economic gains (Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2009).

Phase II: Cooperation based on economic pragmatism (1970s–1999)

This period marked a clear pivot from ideologically framed solidarity to results-oriented collaboration, following China's "Reform and opening up" in 1978. Aid was increasingly paired with trade and investment. Relationships were negotiated bilaterally to meet concrete economic goals (Ayenagbo et al., 2012). State-owned enterprises moved to the forefront as delivery vehicles, shifting from small grants to larger turnkey projects in farm rehabilitation, irrigation, agro-processing, and mechanization (Hairong & Sautman, 2010). Financial instruments were diversified. China extended concessional loans, undertook waves of debt relief worth hundreds of millions of dollars, and used supplier credits tied to Chinese equipment, while high-level diplomacy intensified to unlock contracts and long-term partnerships.

On the ground, projects coupled technology transfer with capacity building. Zimbabwe's 1980s cotton program, where Chinese firms helped install ginneries and training schemes that lifted exports and jobs, became an emblem of the era's aid-plus-commerce model (Mukwereza, 2013). By the end of the 1990s, China had established a template—pragmatic, project-driven, and increasingly market-linked cooperation—that laid the groundwork for the expansive, investment-led engagement that would follow.

Phase III: Comprehensive and strategic partnership (2000s–present)

During this phase, China–Africa relations shifted to a more institutionalized, whole-of-government partnership that links aid, trade, investment, and diplomacy, following the first Forum on China–Africa

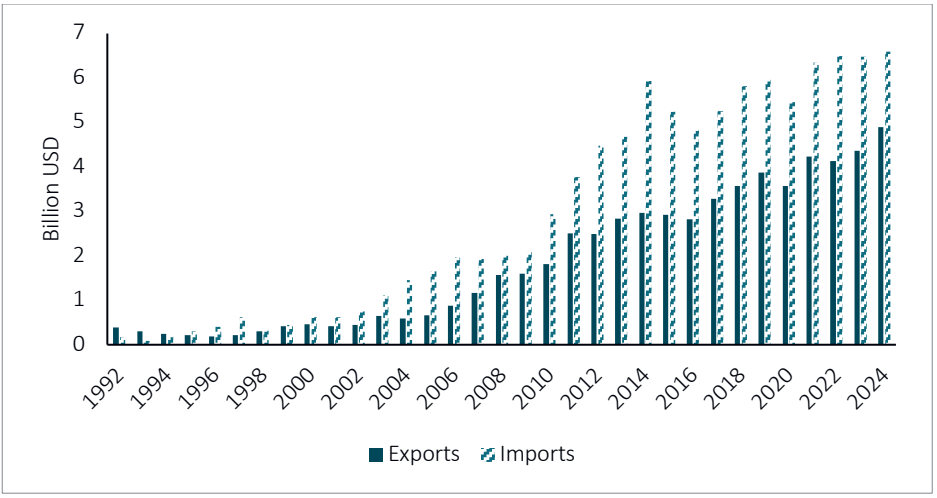
Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 (Large, 2022). Chinese FDI and policy-bank finance expanded rapidly, guaranteeing roads, storage, irrigation, and power that reduce post-harvest losses and connect farmers with regional markets (Siméon et al., 2022).

New policies such as the "Go Global" strategy in 2001 and the "Outward Investment Direction Policy" in 2006 facilitated overseas investment. The latter identified agriculture as a priority sector (Bernasconi & Johnson, 2012). This spurred Chinese state-owned and private enterprises to invest directly in African agrifood value chains, including farming, processing, and agribusiness. African agriculture offers high returns due to low labor costs and abundant land. Chinese firms have invested in diverse crops like cassava in Uganda and rubber in Cameroon, while also reducing reliance on volatile Western markets (Assembe-Mvondo et al., 2015).

China's agricultural engagement is driven partly by the need to secure its own food supply. For instance, Chinese agribusiness investments in countries such as Mozambique, Zambia, and Ethiopia have focused on producing crops primarily destined for export to China's domestic market, such as soybeans, hybrid rice, and sesame (Carmody & Taylor, 2016).

The toolkit has diversified further to digital agriculture (e.g., drone-based crop monitoring in Kenya and urban and peri-urban farming pilots in Ethiopia), and scaled mechanization. Policy moves on market access, such as green-lighting Kenyan avocados and expanding demand for Ethiopian sesame, have complemented Chinese exports of fertilizers and machinery (Mwaura & Hualing, 2023). Trade patterns mirror this, as Figure 1 suggests. China–Africa agri-food trade grew from negligible levels in the 1990s to multi-billion-dollar flows in recent years.

Figure 1. Chinese exports to and imports from Africa, 1992–2024 (USD billions)



Source: World Bank. WITS Database (2025).

The architecture of China's engagement: key players and approaches

China's involvement in African agriculture is characterized by an ecosystem of diverse state and non-state actors, which collectively advance its strategic objectives of securing food resources and expanding markets for Chinese agribusiness. Within this ecosystem, the various actors—ministries, SOEs, provincial authorities, and commercial entities—operate with overlapping but sometimes competing interests, a dynamic that reflects the fragmented, decentralized nature of the contemporary Chinese party-state (Jones and Hameiri, 2021).

State actors, including the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, are key players, and have developed policy frameworks like the 2021–2023 Action Plan by FOCAC, emphasizing agricultural modernization. State-owned enterprises (like China National Agricultural Development Group) execute large-

scale projects overseas, often financed by policy banks like the China Development Bank (e.g., rice farming in Nigeria and irrigation infrastructure in Ethiopia) (Kupoluyi, 2024). By 2020, state-owned enterprises accounted for a significant portion of Chinese FDI in Africa, including dams in Sudan and farms in Zimbabwe, which have increased agricultural productivity but raised concerns about debts and environmental impacts (Gu et al., 2022).

These involvements typically blend aid with investment. Another example is the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers in Mozambique, where aid-funded infrastructure and training has evolved into investments in commercial rice farming by Chinese firms. Another example is the China–Zambia Friendship Farm, established in 1994 as a development aid project to boost arable land use via sprinkler irrigation for maize and wheat, which has since transitioned into commercial crop production through the involvement of Chinese state-owned groups.

Non-state actors and private Chinese companies often engage in diverse activities in partnership with local African businesses (Kefela, 2012). Smaller actors have run seed and machinery dealerships and contract-farming arrangements in countries such as Zambia, Tanzania, and Cameroon (Assembe-Mvondo et al., 2015). Private initiatives pursue commercial profits but also help absorb domestic overcapacity by creating external outlets for surplus production. Such exports maintain utilization and employment in China, easing pressure for politically difficult restructuring and aligning with Chinese national food-security goals (Carmody & Taylor, 2016).

The complexity of these engagements arises from the intertwined roles of state-owned and private sectors, often blurring lines through hybrid models that combine official aid, commercial investments, and public–private partnerships. This is not unique to China (many donors and development finance institutions also blend aid, guarantees, and commercial capital through PPPs and risk-sharing facilities), but in the Chinese case, the distinction between state and commercial interests is often intentionally ambiguous. This strategic

ambiguity allows for flexible, opportunistic engagement that can adapt to local conditions while consistently advancing the overarching priorities set by Beijing's policy framework.

China's approach in relation to engagement with multilateral organizations in African agriculture is to support its strategic objectives by embedding bilateral initiatives within wider international frameworks. This enhances legitimacy and amplifies China's influence. Unlike Western donors, which frequently link aid to policy conditionalities and governance reforms, China emphasizes flexibility and alignment with host-country priorities. Through platforms like FOCAC, China integrates agricultural pledges into multilateral dialogues, such as committing 10 billion USD in concessional loans for agribusiness under the 2021 Dakar Declaration. This aligns with African Union (AU) agendas like the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) that promote hybrid seed technologies and training programs in over 20 countries. China thereby secures African support in global forums like the UN General Assembly (FOCAC, 2021).

Moreover, China collaborates with UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), contributing to joint projects via the South-South Cooperation Trust Fund, which helps offset criticisms of opacity by demonstrating commitment to global standards without surrendering sovereignty (FAO, 2020b).

In alternative multilateral frameworks, including the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), lending has tended to prioritize large-scale infrastructure aimed at enhancing connectivity and trade. Such projects—ports and transport corridors among them—can advance the commercial and strategic interests of key stakeholders, including China. These institutions nevertheless operate within established multilateral norms and frequently engage in co-financing and coordination with existing international financial institutions. The distinction with traditional lenders, like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), lies not in the funding of infrastructure per

se, but in differences in institutional procedures, conditionality, and project timelines, with more extensive safeguard and review processes often shaping the pace of implementation (Wang, 2019).

Agricultural cooperation also functions as diplomatic currency for China in Africa, cultivating political goodwill and counterbalancing Western influence. Historically, agricultural aid was used to secure alliances and support China's bid for international recognition, particularly against Taiwan during the Cold War (Scoones et al., 2016). Today, through FOCAC summits, China continues to leverage agricultural cooperation to strengthen ties with African countries. These initiatives enhance China's soft power and position it as a reliable partner in Africa's development, with high-level visits and agreements reinforcing diplomatic bonds (Belt & Road Portal, 2025).

The fallout and the fruits: the contested impacts of Chinese engagement

Across each area of China–Africa agricultural partnership, evidence points to tangible opportunities alongside recurring debates over scale, sustainability, governance, and who benefits. This section briefly overviews the forms of Chinese involvement and assesses the observed outcomes, both beneficial and adverse.

Technology transfer and productivity

China's technical assistance to African agriculture is spearheaded by Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers (ATDCs), "pilot farms." ATDCs operate in many African countries including Mozambique, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania, combining grant-funded set-ups with commercial activities to pursue financial viability while transferring varieties, mechanization, and agronomy (Bräutigam & Huang, 2016). In addition, stand-alone expert deployments and short-course trainings target mechanization, soils, and water management. Tangible yield gains and skills upgrading are common where trials match local agro-ecologies—e.g., hybrid rice and

mechanized methods in Tanzania have in some cases doubled output and improved market integration. However, critics argue results can be uneven, with demonstration effects not always scaled nationally and mixed evidence on sustained adoption after projects end.

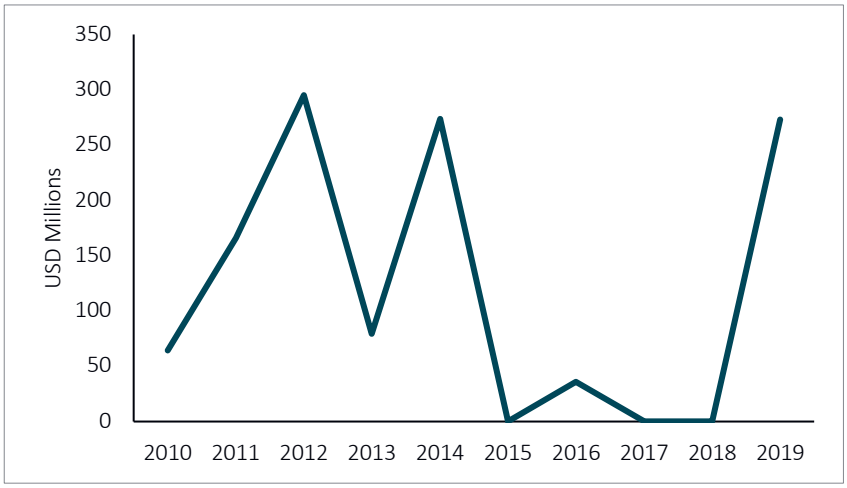
Recent empirical work using ATDCs as a quasi-natural experiment finds positive but context-dependent effects, while reviews note both strengths (hands-on training, business spillovers) and weaknesses (limited integration with national research and extension systems) (Lin & Cui, 2024). Challenges largely arise because trials are often tailored to specific local agro-ecologies, limiting their applicability elsewhere, and because projects frequently operate in isolation from national research and extension systems, reducing long-term adoption. Sustainability is further constrained when incentives, inputs, or technical support cease after project completion.

Funding sources and trends

Loans are a central instrument of China's engagement with African agriculture, channeled mainly through the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank to finance irrigation, agro-processing, seed systems, and rural infrastructure. As Figure 2 shows, lending has been highly cyclical, rising from roughly 100 million USD in 2000 to a mid-2000s peak, dipping around the global financial crisis, climbing again with FOCAC pledges in the early 2010s, and falling sharply by 2016 before a modest post-2019 rebound. This volatility reflects a mix of external shocks (commodity cycles, global downturns), borrower-side constraints (debt distress, governance capacity), and China's own risk recalibration and shift toward more commercial terms. In addition, critics also warn of rising debt burdens and fears of "debt-trap diplomacy," where unsustainable repayment terms could lead to concessions over strategic assets, including agricultural lands or resources, as seen in debt relief arrangements that facilitate Chinese access to farmland and labor mobility (Abu Hatab et al., 2024).

However, this narrative has been challenged by some, who argue that the concept of "debt-trap diplomacy" is often overstated and lacks strong empirical support; for example, Bräutigam (2020) describes it as a "meme" that has shaped perceptions of Chinese lending, noting that most Chinese loans are restructured rather than leading to asset seizures, and that borrowing countries generally retain control over their strategic assets.

Figure 2. China's yearly total loan commitments to Africa's agriculture sectors



Source: Authors plotted using data from China's Overseas Development Finance Database, Boston University Global Development Policy Centerhttp://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinas-overseas-development-finance/).

Land, tenure, and "land grab" debates

Chinese agribusiness engagement in Africa has combined long leases (15–99 years) with a growing shift toward contract farming, concentrated in countries such as Zambia, Mozambique, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and the DRC (Batterbury & Ndi, 2018). Portfolios often emphasize sugar, rubber, cotton, palm oil, and occasionally soy. These ventures can bring capital, processing facilities, and feeder infrastructure, yet they also generate distributional tensions. Export-

oriented crops may divert prime land, water, and finance from staple crops. Tenure disputes may arise, and many high-profile projects have underperformed or been abandoned due to logistical bottlenecks, overambitious planning, or ecological constraints.

Positive examples include rice and horticulture projects in Ghana and Mozambique where clarified tenure, credible oversight, and active local participation led to shared benefits and increased productivity. Yet outcomes vary widely. By contrast, projects in Zambia and parts of Laos illustrate negative outcomes when tenure is insecure, regulatory monitoring is weak, and communities are poorly integrated, resulting in displacement and resource conflicts.

These variations show that the design, governance, and local engagement of LSLA projects are key determinants of social and environmental outcomes. Critics frame Chinese agribusiness engagement in Africa within the broader Large-Scale Land Acquisition (LSLA) concerns like displacement, social disruption, and inequality (Shang & Zhang, 2018), and some warn of neo-colonial commodity dependence (Okolo & Akwu, 2016). Concrete flashpoints include Chinese-backed tobacco schemes in Zimbabwe linked to deforestation, water pollution, and community displacement (Gumbo et al., 2025), and rubber plantations in Cameroon accused of evicting smallholders without adequate compensation (Assembe-Mvondo et al., 2015).

Trade access and market dynamics

Chinese initiatives like the zero-tariff policy announced in June 2025 have signaled expanded agricultural market access for African exporters. This policy grants duty-free entry for products from 53 African countries. This builds on commitments from the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027), which emphasizes deepening e-commerce cooperation and facilitating greater agricultural exports from Africa[3]. To support this, China has promoted harmonized standards, enhanced quarantine protocols, launched pilot export

[3] https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202409/t20240905_11485719.html

programs for faster inspections, and zero-tariff treatments for 98 percent of items from the least developed countries. These efforts have enabled a range of African products to gain footholds in the Chinese market, such as sesame, peanuts, citrus fruits, and fish meal.

The potential benefits for African economies include access to China's vast consumer base. Africa's agricultural exports to China are estimated to increase toward ambitious targets like 20 billion USD by 2030. This shift could encourage investment in value-added food processing, reduce the reliance on raw commodity exports, and support trade dynamics where Africa's agricultural strengths align with China's import needs (Rarieya & de Vicente, 2024). However, several concerns temper this optimism. Hygiene standards imposed by China pose significant barriers, with only 12 African countries meeting requirements for certain products as of 2023, often requiring costly compliance measures that smallholder farmers struggle to afford. Trade remains concentrated in a narrow set of commodities, leading to vulnerabilities from market fluctuations and overdependence on a few items like nuts and fruits. Exposure to policy shifts in China, such as sudden changes in import quotas or tariffs, adds uncertainty, compounded by broader challenges like Africa's infrastructure deficits, climate vulnerabilities, and low mechanization levels.

Africa's agricultural exports to China have increased over the past two decades, with the agricultural trade balance recently shifting modestly in Africa's favor (see Figure 1). This challenges the previous notion of Africa primarily as a supplier for China's food needs, particularly in light of China's long-standing position as a major exporter of agricultural products to African markets.

Employment, skills, and enterprise development

Chinese agribusinesses and input suppliers (suppliers of seeds, fertilizers, equipment, etc.) have contributed significantly to job creation across Africa, generating employment in farming, processing, and distribution. For instance, in Zambia, China–Africa Cotton has employed local workers, providing on-the-job training in machine op-

erations and extension services that have enhanced yields and efficiency for over 37,000 farmers.

Chinese agriculture-related infrastructure aid projects have boosted local employment probabilities by 2–3 percentage points in the short term, shifting workers toward skilled manual labor and formal, cash-earning roles. Training programs, often informal but practical, have upgraded agronomic and managerial skills in sectors like cotton and tobacco. Exposing African staff to advanced techniques in China has promoted enterprise development and productivity gains.

However, debates persist on the quality and longevity of these jobs, which are often low-skilled, low-paid, and seasonal, with limited upward mobility. High turnover rates also hinder sustainable skill embedding (Rodgers, 2011). In Mozambique and Tanzania, smallholders report exploitative conditions in Chinese investments, such as strict quotas, salary reductions, and a dominance of expatriate Chinese staff in managerial roles, without meaningful knowledge transfer or integration into local economies. Challenges around contract enforcement are prominent, with non-binding agreements leading to unfulfilled promises on inputs, land access, and compensation, exacerbating tenure insecurity and conflicts for smallholders, while cultural and capacity gaps limit effective technology absorption and long-term local capability building.

Under the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027), China has committed to provide 60,000 training opportunities prioritizing women and youth, including programs in agricultural sciences and rural development. In Nigeria, for example, Chinese-funded agricultural training in 2016–2019 (provided by Green Agriculture West Africa Limited [GAWAL]) enabled female smallholders to acquire skills in hybrid rice and cassava cultivation. Such targeted interventions have supported knowledge sharing in communities, improved yields, and contributed indirectly to food security and rural livelihoods.

However, gender disparities persist, and in many cases these same initiatives reinforce pre-existing inequalities. As Mutasa (2025) notes, participation opportunities for women remain restricted, with structural barriers such as limited access to credit, land, and extension services constraining their ability to translate training into economic gains. In the Nigerian GAWAL case above, women experienced smaller income improvements than men.

Resource use and environmental sustainability

Chinese investments in African agriculture have produced a mixed record of environmental impacts. On the positive side, certain projects have advanced renewable energy and resource efficiency (Kampini & Kalepa, 2024). For example, hydroelectric dams associated with agricultural irrigation not only supply clean electricity that reduces reliance on fossil fuels but also improve water management systems in regions vulnerable to drought. In some contexts, Chinese engagement has supported the introduction of conservation-oriented technologies such as drip irrigation, terracing, and soil fertility management, helping farmers to adapt to climate variability and curb land degradation. Moreover, China's involvement has in some cases fostered comparative advantages in "green" agricultural products, particularly in horticulture and organic farming, which can strengthen Africa's positioning in environmentally sensitive global markets.

In contrast, the negative environmental consequences are more widespread and frequently more severe (Adugu, 2025). Large-scale projects often exert significant pressure on fragile ecosystems, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions where intensive irrigation strains already scarce water resources. The expansion of monoculture cash crops such as sugarcane, palm oil, and rubber has contributed to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and soil depletion, while also heightening vulnerability to pests and diseases (Weng et al., 2018). Deforestation linked to plantation agriculture accelerates resource depletion, undermines carbon sinks, and increases greenhouse gas

emissions, running counter to global climate commitments. In addition, inadequate regulation and oversight have led to cases of chemical pollution from fertilizers and pesticides, contaminating water sources and threatening both human and animal health.

Infrastructure developments tied to agriculture, such as road construction, can fragment habitats and intensify encroachment into ecologically sensitive areas. These environmental challenges are compounded by weak institutional capacity in many African states to enforce environmental standards and monitor the long-term ecological consequences of foreign investments. In some instances, environmental impact assessments are either absent or inadequately implemented, limiting accountability. Critics argue that this replicates patterns of "extractive environmentalism", where short-term gains in output and trade are prioritized over sustainable land stewardship and intergenerational resource security (Merem et al., 2021).

Governance and policy alignment

China's non-interference policy in African agriculture enables swift project implementation through an "ask less, do more" approach, offering an often pragmatic and flexible alternative to Western aid models (Wu, 2012). This flexibility that appears to respect national sovereignty has strengthened diplomatic ties and fostered a sense of mutual benefit, giving partner countries greater autonomy to pursue their own development agendas and allowing the rapid deployment of agricultural projects. Some evidence highlights that African governments exercise significant agency in negotiations, leveraging Chinese loans for long-term growth in infrastructure and agriculture, with outcomes proving catalytic when integrated into credible national plans, open procurement processes, and robust institutional capacities (Chen et al., 2014).

However, the same policy of non-interference creates significant governance and transparency challenges (Alden & Alves, 2015). It often leaves accountability gaps and weakens oversight by sidestepping fragile institutional structures (Mohan, 2014). In addition, the

fragmented nature of Chinese engagement adds layers of opacity, making it difficult to track financial flows, project performance, or compliance with local regulations. This lack of transparency has amplified concerns over debt sustainability, with some African countries incurring large loans for agricultural and infrastructure projects under opaque terms, fueling fears of "debt diplomacy" (Monyae & Chapotera, 2023). For instance, Chinese loans contribute to rising debt-to-GDP ratios in vulnerable countries like Zambia and Djibouti, where repayment difficulties have raised concerns about asset concessions and strategic dependence.

Navigating the dragon in the fields: strengthening Africa's strategic position in China's agricultural engagement

The dramatic expansion of China's engagement in Africa's agricultural sector marks a profound transformation in the continent's developmental landscape. This shift forces a move beyond the simplistic and often polarized narratives that cast China as either a "neocolonialist" threat or a benevolent "all-weather friend." In reality, the views held by African stakeholders are complex, nuanced, and often internally contradictory, oscillating between a pragmatic recognition of unprecedented opportunity and a deep-seated anxiety over strategic vulnerability.

Compounding this complex dynamic is a critical problem of representation and voice. For too long, the core dialogues determining the future of African agriculture have occurred in a bipolar fashion, primarily between traditional donors like the European Union and the new powerhouse, China. In this dynamic, European partners frequently view Chinese activities with deep-seated skepticism, questioning their transparency and sustainability, while Chinese representatives often position themselves as providing a modern, efficient, and respectful alternative to what they characterize as the outdated, patronizing, and inefficient support strategies of the West.

Regrettably, the voices and priorities of the most crucial stakeholders, i.e., African policymakers, ministries of agriculture, civil society organizations, and the farmers themselves, are too often sidelined in both academic and political discussions.

The subsequent sections develop this approach by outlining a strategic roadmap for African stakeholders and by discussing the specific supportive role that Swedish development actors can fulfill.

A strategic roadmap for African governments and stakeholders

Beyond the mixed views of African governments discussed in earlier sections, a spectrum of perspectives exists among other critical stakeholders. The African private sector often views Chinese partnerships with cautious optimism; agribusinesses see avenues for investment and access to supply chains, yet they simultaneously fear being outcompeted by well-resourced Chinese state-owned enterprises and imported finished goods that stifle local processing.

Civil society organizations and smallholder farmer cooperatives frequently express profound skepticism, raising alarms over land tenure security, environmental degradation from intensive farming models, and the marginalization of women who form the backbone of food production but are often excluded from high-level negotiations. The prevailing "no-strings-attached" approach, while appealing to many governments, often sidelines the very social and environmental safeguards that ensure equitable and sustainable development, leaving civil society watchdogs with limited power to hold investors accountable.

For many rural youth, Chinese-led agricultural projects represent a potential source of coveted wage labor and technical training, a powerful lure in contexts of high unemployment, even if these roles are often precarious and unskilled. This complex tapestry of stakeholder opinion underscores that the Sino–African agricultural partnership is not a monolith but a series of localized engagements producing

distinct sets of winners and losers, which policy must address explicitly (Tadrous, 2025).

Navigating this reality demands a move beyond reactive postures. A critical task is for African governments to evolve from being junior partners in these engagements to becoming the lead architects of their own agricultural future and to move from merely managing the symptoms of this engagement to proactively designing its fundamental terms. This transformation requires a sequenced, coherent set of policy actions with clear accountability.

Strategic coordination and agency

There is a significant opportunity for African governments to move beyond ad hoc, opportunistic engagement toward more coordinated strategies that clarify national positions and strengthen bargaining leverage vis-à-vis China. Greater regional alignment—alongside calibrated engagement with Western development partners—could enhance negotiating power and reduce asymmetries in bilateral dealings. At the continental level, the African Union is well placed to amplify collective agency by articulating shared priorities, aligning FOCAC commitments with existing AU frameworks, and conveying country-level needs through a more unified voice.

Anchoring prospective agreements within explicit agri-food strategies presents an opportunity to ensure that investments advance national development objectives while reinforcing regional integration. Engagement through regional economic communities offers scope to leverage combined market size, enabling countries to secure terms that may be difficult to achieve individually.

Value addition and local content

Building on a more strategic posture, Sino–African agricultural cooperation presents opportunities to embed value addition and local content more systematically into trade and investment frameworks. Moving beyond the export of raw commodities toward onshore pro-

cessing, skills development, and technology transfer could help shift relationships up the value chain. There is also scope to integrate clearer expectations around training, employment, and managerial participation for African agronomists, technicians, and managers.

Closer alignment between agricultural policy and industrial strategy offers further potential. Drawing selectively on lessons from China's own development experience, localization of seeds, skills, maintenance, and operations could reduce long-term dependency. Aligning these approaches with AfCFTA rules of origin and national agrifood strategies would help capture greater value domestically, support job creation, and deepen regional integration.

Climate, environmental, and social safeguards

The scale of agricultural engagement also creates opportunities to strengthen climate, environmental, and social governance. Elevating safeguards from formal commitments to operational practice—through measurable, enforceable provisions embedded in agreements—could improve sustainability outcomes. AU- or REC-aligned environmental clauses, combined with climate-risk screening and robust environmental and social management frameworks, offer practical avenues to link investment approval and incentives to performance.

Inclusive investment models present another area of opportunity. Greater integration of smallholders and SMEs into certified value chains, alongside fair contracting arrangements and accessible dispute resolution mechanisms, could enhance distributional outcomes. Ensuring meaningful participation by women and youth—through targeted extension services, finance, and market access—would further strengthen social returns.

Enforcing the African Continental Free Trade Area

AfCFTA implementation opens space to reorient agrifood engagement with China toward more integrated continental strategies. Aligning export promotion with rules of origin, trade facilitation

measures, and strengthened sanitary and phytosanitary capacity could improve African competitiveness in segments where Chinese demand is growing. Investments in traceability systems, accredited laboratories, and cold-chain logistics are particularly well positioned to support this shift.

On financing, blended approaches that combine Chinese capital with multilateral guarantees and climate finance offer opportunities to improve transparency, risk-sharing, and resilience. Linking financing to climate-risk screening and AfCFTA compliance standards could further enhance coherence across policy domains. Regular lesson-sharing among African, Chinese, and European stakeholders—anchored in AfCFTA and REC platforms—could help diffuse best practices and reduce zero-sum dynamics.

Legal frameworks, financing, and knowledge

Stronger domestic legal and regulatory frameworks represent a critical enabling condition for maximizing benefits from agricultural cooperation. Clear land tenure protections, effective competition policy, and robust environmental oversight can help mitigate risks while improving bargaining positions. In parallel, more strategic debt management—supported by independent project appraisal and diversified partnerships—can reduce fiscal vulnerabilities.

Finally, investment in knowledge and institutional capacity offers a long-term opportunity to rebalance negotiations. Building in-house expertise on Chinese agricultural policies and market dynamics, supporting independent research, and strengthening regional analytical networks can enhance evidence-based decision-making and collective bargaining power.

The supportive role of Sweden and like-minded development partners

In this reconfigured landscape, the role of traditional development partners such as Sweden requires a refined approach. Development partners should adopt a "guardrails and bridges" stance: guardrails to prevent harm and lock in African ownership, and bridges that channel China's scale and speed toward African and regional priorities. While guardrails are not entirely absent—most African countries already possess regulatory frameworks and safeguards on paper—these mechanisms are often unevenly enforced, under-resourced, or poorly integrated into cross-border investments. Guardrails therefore mean not inventing new rules but strengthening and operationalizing existing ones, including insisting on transparent land governance and debt practices, enforceable social and environmental safeguards, and stronger domestic linkages.

Bridges mean targeted co-financing and technical partnerships that connect Chinese-built productive assets to African staple value chains, food processing, and consumer outcomes. Sweden's comparative advantage lies not in competing with China on its own terms of scale and speed, but in complementing and strategically shaping the China–Africa agricultural relationship through strengthening Africa's own capacity to manage it effectively. With a long-standing commitment to human rights, gender equality, good governance, and environmental sustainability, Swedish actors are uniquely positioned to play this role.

While Sweden cannot shape China's approaches, Sweden can play an active role in shaping the governance environment in which China operates—an arena where China is more likely to adapt because the incentives and parameters are set by African partners rather than external pressure. In this sense, Sweden's influence is indirect: it strengthens the institutional environment that China must navigate, rather than attempting to pressure China itself. This approach also aligns closely with Sweden's development cooperation objectives,

which emphasize democratic governance, rule of law, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and strengthening partner-country capacity.

A critical role for Swedish development cooperation actors could be to fill the gaps that Chinese agricultural investments typically ignore, particularly in the "soft infrastructure" of the sector. While China may construct warehouses and processing plants, Swedish support can focus on strengthening the rural agricultural extension systems that train farmers, supporting farmer-led research and development into indigenous crops, promoting soil health and agroecological practices, and ensuring the benefits of new infrastructure reach the most vulnerable, including women and smallholder farmers. This requires investing in the human and social capital that ensures that large-scale agro-industrial projects are sustainable and equitable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the deepening entanglement of China in African agriculture presents a historic opportunity to rectify the chronic underinvestment that has plagued the continent's most vital sector for decades. However, harnessing this opportunity while mitigating its inherent risks demands a fundamental transformation in mindset and strategy from African governments, and a smart, supportive evolution in the role of traditional partners like Sweden.

Through the formulation of unified policies, the strengthening of institutions, a focus on the needs of African citizens, and negotiation from a position of knowledge and collective strength complemented by the targeted support of partners focused on building capacity, African nations can aspire to transform the current relationship with China from one of potential dependency and extraction into a genuinely equitable, productive, and sustainable partnership that finally unlocks the vast, dormant potential of Africa's agrarian landscape.

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