



China-Germany-Africa Triangular Cooperation - paving the way for a new journey

Policy points:

Deepen the political dialogue on triangular cooperation with Africa to achieve better understanding of respective development strategies and include ideas and requests from African partners at early stage

Strengthen triangular technical exchange to narrow the knowledge gap of each other's development cooperation work and prepare collaboration

Establish local stakeholder networks for informal communication and collaboration niche identification

Create independent funding sources specifically for triangular cooperation

China and Germany have both collected decades of development cooperation experiences with various partners globally. While both countries are also found supporting and implementing triangular cooperation in their own definition worldwide, the collaboration specifically between China, Germany and Africa has only begun to grow recently.

Building on more than 35 years of successful bilateral development cooperation, China and Germany are currently exploring new and innovative ways of international cooperation, which jointly put into practice the strengths of official development assistance, South-South cooperation and business involvement for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Development cooperation partnership takes time to build. It's even more the case for a more complex setting such as triangular cooperation with multiple actors involved. Despite the years of endeavour in seeking for such partnership, still several fundamental questions remained unanswered: What are the demands from beneficiary countries that call for triangular cooperation? How to define the scope of cooperation? Which modality is most effective? How to identify sector and country priorities? What are comparative strengths and added values?

With the aim of unmasking the cloud cast by those questions, the Sino-German Center for Sustainable Development initiated a scoping study for Sino-German triangular cooperation with Africa by a multinational team in 2019. Based on the study conclusion and recommendation, as well as the findings and lessons learnt since the establishment of the CSD, this policy brief seeks to highlight key points that will support paving the way for a new journey in China-Germany-Africa triangular cooperation.



Policies: cooperation frameworks matter

Despite the growing attention and extensive dialogues on Triangular Cooperation (TC), not all countries have developed and published explicit policies or strategies to indicate the direction of their respective TC future work.

The term Triangular Cooperation is not unfamiliar among China, Germany and African countries and yet the global community has not reached consensus on the definition of TC. Such varied understanding often leads to different approaches, expectations and procedures which are critical in forming such complex partnership. Lack of mutual knowledge on the systems, principles and terminology, processes and procedures and concrete projects, is still one of the most important hindering factors for match-making towards Sino-German triangular cooperation with Africa. Knowing each other better, however, must actively include the African partners

As BMZ plans to revise its TC strategy in 2020, CIDCA expects to publish a new White Paper on foreign aid, systematic triparty political dialogues with the aim of familiarizing each other with relevant policies can provide the backbone in developing triangular cooperation partnership that integrates the interests and focuses of all.

Language: common ground for discussion needed

Technical terms in development cooperation are mainly politically defined in policy documents either at country level or in multilateral or global fora. It cannot simply be assumed that all partners mean the same when using the same words, while the use of different words does not necessarily reflect that different approaches are pursued.

As a critical precondition to ensure successful planning and implementation of cooperation projects, there is an increasing need for creating a common language, especially in complex partnerships such as triangular cooperation.

Apart from the “lost in translation” factor, different interpretation of key terms was also found in Africa, China and Germany. Sustainability, in Chinese foreign aid practice, is largely referring to an aid project being self-sustained after handing over to the partner country, while for Germany, it is understood as the interdependence of environmental, economic, social and institutional goals. Different understanding exists in many key words which serve as the building bricks for cooperation development, such as demand driven, ownership, mutual benefits, effectiveness and quality, just to name a few.

To create a common language is not in pursuit of terminology unification but to pave the common ground of negotiation, especially since beyond official definitions, personal views also play an important role in practice and detailed criteria would be defined on the case by case basis.

There is generally more ambiguity and contradiction, than it may seem desirable from a project planning and implementation point of view. Meanwhile, discussing openly these ambiguities can be a source of inspiration and innovation within the setting of trilateral cooperation.

Practitioners need to create a common language in each new project. Once overcoming an initial feeling of nuisance in this kind of exercise there is a high potential for mutual enrichment, enlightenment and improvement of project quality.

Contact: merits of informal practitioner’s exchange



So far, one of the great challenges in Sino-German triangular cooperation is that competences on the system of the other providing partner (China and Germany) and on-the-ground realities and requirements fall apart. Those who know more about the potentials of working with China or Germany respectively are so far rather based in Beijing, but those who would be able to identify potential triangular projects with reasonable effort are based in the African partner countries. A big reason why this division of expertise is so strict, lies in the lack of contacts between Chinese and German experts in the partner countries.

Interviews during a mission to Ghana carried out by CSD in 2019 showed that both German and Chinese actors have the interest in getting to know each other more in order to identify common interests, comparative strengths and cooperation potentials. Establishing contacts and starting a conversation has its own value even if it does not lead to joint projects or other forms of cooperation.

Strategies to improve the contacts in beneficiary countries could be special Sino-German events in the beneficiary countries, participation of Chinese representatives in donor rounds in the partner countries or mutual project visits, where both sides can illustrate their respective approaches and share their experiences.

In 2019, a delegation from Ghana, Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Germany carried out a one-week study trip on [rice value chains](#) in China, where the extensive exchanges on knowledge and expertise had led to many interesting cooperation ideas between visitors and Chinese partners.

Such interaction can also promote China-Germany-Africa triangular cooperation concept to local partners.

Informal contacts play an outstanding role in this case and should be especially encouraged.

This is generally easier when all parts know that decision-making takes place elsewhere but that good ideas coming out of informal contacts will be honoured within their own structures.

Funding: independent cooperation power sources

In existing bilateral projects and programmes, the available funding is generally bound to the planned results and activities. It is therefore unlikely to expect the funding from existing bilateral projects and programs to cover the costs of trilateral cooperation projects.

In Chinese development cooperation, the provision of Chinese technical cooperation services is sometimes funded by multilateral or bilateral donors or in some other cases, Chinese funding is channelled through international organizations. However, in most of cases, this does not fit with the German understanding of triangular cooperation which requires each partner make substantial contributions on content as well as funding of the joint projects.

Consequently, on either side solutions for independent funding of trilateral cooperation need to be developed. In-kind contributions can be considered in this context but should be quantified in order to create the necessary clarity on contributions.

There are several options for the provision of funding for triangular cooperation, for instance regional funds for triangular cooperation in the German development cooperation system. Such models can serve as an orientation for the development of new funding mechanisms. In order to reduce complexity, at least in a first step, both China and



Germany could generate independently the funding sources for their respective contributions to joint projects.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

From a needs-perspective Africa remains the most poor and vulnerable part of the world. Development cooperation with African countries is high on the agenda for both China and Germany. And both countries are among many the most important supporters for Africa's economic and social development. It is beyond debate the necessity of leveraging and utilizing all available resources to its optimal. Although there is no one size fits all solution, the following policy recommendations are believed to be critical for a strong foundation to build upon triangular cooperation between China, Germany and Africa.

Deepen the political dialogue on triangular cooperation with Africa to achieve better understanding of respective development strategies and include ideas and requests from African partners at early stage. It can be facilitated by:

- Political dialogue fora to adjust concepts and contents to on the ground realities and operational requirements in African countries.
- Study and exposure missions carried out by policy makers to respective countries.
- Continuous and regular exchange to incorporate practice results in the planning of triangular projects.

Strengthen triangular technical exchange to narrow the knowledge gap of each other's development cooperation work and prepare collaboration. Several measures can be taken:

- Joint research on general topics, such as definition of triangular cooperation and language,
- Joint studies on specific technical issues regarding sectoral approaches but also on the way how development cooperation is done (monitoring and evaluation, safeguards and risk management etc.).
- Capacity development measures including trainings, study trips, joint feasibility and technical preparation missions for projects.

Establish local stakeholder network to engage experts, non-governmental organization as well as implementing agencies for informal communication and identify collaboration niches through development needs reflection and comparative strength analysis.

- Entrusting local experts with good understanding of local development issues and access to either or both Chinese and German actors
- Bring all parties together for in-depth discussion in an informal setting
- Organize field visits to each other's development work/projects

Create independent funding sources specifically for triangular cooperation, since the available funding for existing bilateral projects are usually bound to the planned results and activities, therefore unlikely to extent to cover the cost of triangular cooperation. In-kind contributions should be quantified in order to create clarity on contributions.