

Sustainability of China's Educational Cooperation in West Africa Implications for Human Capital Development in the Post-Focac Era

Eugenia Chinenye Ndukwe¹

¹Jilin University, Changchun, Jilin, China.

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Abstract: The education cooperation between China and Africa has increased tremendously in the post-FOCAC period, and it is now far beyond the focus on infrastructure and small scholarships to include various programme packages to aid education, capacity building and human capital. This paper is based on the current academic sources and policy reports on the educational cooperation of China in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. It questions the success of the educational strategy of FOCAC in that it evaluates the efforts of the Chinese government on the set-up of the Confucius Institutes, vocational education programmes and the provision of the government scholarships. It has been found that the three countries have gained through the increased access to educational opportunities, but the extent and the sustainability of the outcomes is quite different because of the differences in local rules and regulations, institutional capacity and priorities of national development. The research finds that the educational diplomacy of China has significant skills development opportunities, yet it should be more responsive to the local labour market demands, should monitor the outcomes better, and develop the curriculum in cooperation with the local authorities to maintain the sustainability in the long term.

Keywords: *China-Africa Cooperation, Educational Diplomacy, FOCAC, Human Capital Development, Soft Power, South-South Cooperation, Sustainability.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between China and Africa has been revolutionized over the past few decades where the relationship which was based on political solidarity was changed to one based on developmental goals which include; the provision of infrastructure to Africa, developing its human capital, facilitating trade along with cooperation in agricultural sectors. This has especially been the case in West Africa whereby China has come out as a major funder of infrastructure and an increased collaborator in education and technological relations.

China has also enabled it to finance and construct several infrastructural sub-units in the West African area such as roads, railways and ports. When it comes to Sino-African port projects, West Africa is now the top performer with 53 percent of projects in the continent, East Africa comes in second with 27 percent, North Africa with 15 percent, and Southern Africa with 5 percent (Ya & Pei, 2022). This infrastructural involvement has been intimately supported by education and human resource development

investments which have been increasingly institutionalized by FOCAC since 2000.

In spite of such developments, the relationship between the Sino-African has been surrounded by incessant and in many cases fierce criticism. Optimists also emphasize on the growth of trade, infrastructure, and education of African students and professionals. Critics express issues relating to foreign dependency, quality training, and suitability of Chinese programmes to local labour market needs plus anxieties over debt risks in the case of large infrastructure projects, enduring trade imbalances, and the possibility of bilateral engagement to façade regional integration programs like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). However, China has supported AfCFTA and sees the prospect of a bigger integrated African market to serve its own trade and investment interests (Miao et al., 2020).

Additionally, other political settings, the level of governance and national priorities lead to different results in African states. This paper summarizes Chinese educational

relations with Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal with an aim of assessing the consequences of sustainable development of human capital. In that respect, it offers a background of China-Africa cooperation prior to and after FOCAC, conceptual and analytical framework of the understanding of the outcomes of human capital development, country-level analysis of the educational interventions of China, discussion of sustainability outcomes and policy recommendations to improve cooperation in the post-FOCAC period.

II. BACKGROUND: CHINA–AFRICA DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IN THE FOCAC ERA

➤ *Pre-FOCAC Engagement*

The relationship between China and African countries before the formation of FOCAC mainly revolved around the aspect of political and diplomatic relationship. China supplied solidarity assistance in the anti-colonial and liberation movements that took place in Africa between the years 1950s and 1970s (Sun et al., 2022). This aid was premised on the spirit of common anti-imperialism and South-South solidarity of Bandung, and not on any developmental calculus. During the 1980s and even the 1990s, China increasingly changed the approach to its African engagement into economic cooperation. The African countries were offered developmental assistance in the form of technical assistance, infrastructure development, and human resource enhancement programmes in this period (Sun et al., 2022). The concessional funds were granted especially to roads, railways, ports and power infrastructures. Other scholarships and training programmes that were offered by China were to develop African students and professionals. These instruments were used by China to gain access to African markets and natural resources and at the same time establish good diplomatic will.

➤ *Post-FOCAC Expansion and Institutionalization*

In 2000, FOCAC was established formalising and significantly increasing the programmes of aid China provides to Africa. FOCAC established a multilateral institutional system in China to establish collective relationships with the African Union and individual African states, leaving behind the bilateral relationships (Miao et al., 2020). It has since been used as a political level platform on which major Chinese aid and investment packages are announced. The FOCAC framework also facilitated economic collaboration by the China-Africa development fund and by debt relief programmes to the African countries.

Since 2006, the Chinese development finance and investment has grown with a lot of contributions to infrastructural development of Africa. The trade volume between Africa and China increased to more than 200 billion in 2019 compared to the 10 billion in 2000 (Miao et al., 2020). Africa as the continent has been the biggest recipient of the Chinese foreign aid with 44 percent of the total amount of foreign aid being to Africa as compared to 36 percent in Asia and 3 percent in Europe. Educational Cooperation became a part and parcel of this wider

framework, and China established thousands of scholarships, training programmes and cultural exchange programmes, and assisted language education by setting up Confucius institutes all over the continent. The African countries, in their turn, considered these opportunities as the key to the improvement of the human capital base and economic competitiveness.

III. CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

➤ *Human Capital Development and Education*

The research paper follows a conceptual framework based on the human capital theory and South-South development cooperation. It applies it to analyze how educational cooperation by China through FOCAC helps in the sustainable human capital development in West Africa. The human capital theory assumes that the investment in education, skills, and training improves the productivity of individual workers and in the long run, helps to contribute to the growth and structural change of the economy (Miao et al., 2020). Education is generally considered to be one of the core poverty reduction, technological absorption, and inclusive development tools in the context of developing economies.

China's post-2006 engagement with Africa is a strategic change to incorporate education and capacity building as part of its overall cooperation agenda (King, 2020). In contrast to the conventional models of donor which focus on conditionality and governance reforms, the Chinese model focuses on infrastructure development, skills transfer and practical training. It is provided in the form of scholarships, job training, institutional relations, and cultural exchange programs (Alden and Anshan, 2021). These interventions are also presented as win-win and demand driven, which are in line with the concepts of South-South cooperation.

➤ *China's Educational Cooperation Under FOCAC*

Education has served as a strategic pillar in both the FOCAC declarations of the past and the present linking scholarships, professional training, cultural diplomacy, research collaborations, and digital efforts to the overall Chinese objectives of development, soft power, and geopolitical influence (Alden et al., 2021; King, 2010; King, 2014; King, 2020; Naidu, 2007; Taylor, 2010; Taylor, 2012). The tools with the help of which this engagement is implemented are government-sponsored scholarships and academic exchange programmes that allow African students to study undergraduate and post-graduate in China; vocational and technical education projects to develop skills and employability; institutional partnerships in the form of Confucius Institutes and university partnerships; training and capacity-building projects to train and improve educators, civil servants, and technical professionals (King, 2020; Taylor, 2012). These tools are aimed at increasing access to education, raising the level of skills, and increasing the capacity of institutions in recipient countries. These initiatives exemplify the level of Beijing commitment to long-term partnership in African human capital development.

In reality, though, application differs greatly among African nations, and the results reflect the difference in institutional and governance settings where cooperation is integrated.

➤ *Analytical Framework: Variables and Relationships*

The analytical framework has three components that are interrelated and they are the independent variables, moderating factors and the dependent outcome variable. The independent variables are the leading types of Chinese educational activity in West Africa under FOCAC as expounded in Section 3.2 above and it forms the inputs the growth returns of which this study aims to measure.

The moderating variables influence the connection among the Chinese educational cooperation and the sustainable outcomes of human capital. They are the quality of governance and coherence of policy; alignment of cooperation programmes with the national development priorities; structure of labour markets and access of employment opportunities to graduated trainees; presence of monitoring and evaluation frameworks of education programmes; and the robustness of the domestic education system and institutions (Marsh, 2022; Zhu and Chikwa, 2021). These contextual variables articulate the reason as to why the same Chinese interventions yield different results in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. The high labour market absorption capacity and linked education-industry ties of countries in a better place to maintain the benefits of educational cooperation (Gu & Corbett, 2020). The case study of the China International Strategy Review (2021) says that in the nations that have poor labour market alignment, Chinese African graduates find that there is a pro-Western preference in the local jobs or no industries can absorb their respective technical training.

Sustainable human capital development is the dependent variable of the framework, which is defined as the long-term increase of skills, knowledge and productive capacity as an aspect that fosters inclusive economic growth and social mobility (Miao et al., 2020). In this respect, sustainability means not only greater access to education but the sustainability, appropriateness and flexibility of skills obtained in the changing economic conditions (King, 2020). The framework believes that educational partnership should not be limited to numerical results, which include the number of scholarships given, but need to be related to quality, relevance and the effects of development in the long run. In, nutshell, the framework claims that educational collaboration of China under FOCAC also has an effect on sustainable human capital formation by the national education systems, and the consequences are predetermined by the quality of governance, labour market relations, and policy orientation.

IV. CHINA'S EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION IN WEST AFRICA: COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

➤ *Nigeria: Scale without Sustainability?*

Nigeria is the biggest and most prominent recipient of the Chinese educational cooperation in West Africa. That is indicative of the population, economic significance, and

strategic significance of Nigeria in relations of China-Africa (Zhang et al., 2022). There is a great variety of Chinese educational programs in Nigeria, which under the FOCAC framework have included government-sponsored scholarships, short-term professional training programmes, vocational and technical education support, and institutional partnerships (King, 2020).

One of the most important aspects of China in Nigeria is the establishment of Confucius Institutes, especially on the University of Ibadan and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, which facilitate the teaching of the Chinese language and cultural exchange and academic cooperation in addition to standing as an educational diplomacy platform. The Nigerian students form one of the biggest African populations pursuing science, engineering, medicine and technology related degrees in China. China has also assisted in vocational and technical education in Nigeria, which is usually directly related to Chinese-financed infrastructure and industrial projects (Osei-Kyei et al., 2019), and these programs are intended to fill skills deficiencies in construction, manufacturing, and engineering.

Although the level of involvement is high, there is potential concern about how the training programmes are aligned to the requirements of the labour market in Nigeria, and there are still very limited mechanisms used to monitor the outcome of graduates. This has left sustainability and long-term developmental effects of such initiatives unbalanced. The greatest problem is not the volume but the relevance and institutional absorption. The case of Nigeria demonstrates how massive participation in engagement without related coordination of policies and labour market can result in creation of graduates who are ill-served by the very cooperation that aims at serving them.

➤ *Ghana: Policy Coordination and Moderate Success*

Educational cooperation between China and Ghana is an average yet relatively well-integrated interaction based on the FOCAC framework (Marsh, 2022; King, 2020). The political environment has made good use of Chinese government scholarships, capacity-building efforts, and institution relationships, which are helped by the Ghana government (Sarpong et al., 2020). The level of engagement is less than those of Nigeria, although it has been more organized and managed in a strategic manner.

One of the main aspects of this cooperation is creating Confucius Institute on the University of Ghana and the University of Cape Coast to facilitate teaching Chinese language, cultural exchange, and academic cooperation (UCC, 2025). The Ghanaian students have gained access to scholarships and professional training in engineering, science, and education and this has helped in capacity building and strengthening of the institutions. China has also encouraged educator training and vocational capacity building with specific programmes such as vocational teacher training as well as programs under UNESCO-China Funds-in-Trust which have both helped to enhance the quality of teaching and delivery of curriculum. Difficulties however do not cease.

The overdependence on informal sectors of the economy restrains the adoption of high-technological vocational skills by returning graduates in Ghana. It has been a continuing challenge to coordinate training programmes fully to the formal demands of the labour market. The experience of Ghana, however, underscores the role of the quality of governance and the coherence of the institution in the formation of the sustainability of the outcomes of educational cooperation (Marsh, 2022). It is further assumed that modest-volume interaction with appropriate coordination can bring forth better long term human capital returns than high volume interaction without institutional support.

➤ *Senegal: Targeted Engagement and Institutional Constraints*

The educational collaboration between China and Senegal is not as large-scale but more focused (Sall, 2016). Senegal has interacted with China mainly by granting scholarships, technical training courses, and a Confucius Institute was opened in Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar (Sall, 2016; UNESCO, 2019). These programs promote higher education and language training and cultural exchange and also improve academic and institutional capacity of Senegal. Senegalese students can study engineering, agriculture and information technology using Chinese scholarships. China has also funded the training programs of officials in the public sector and teachers, which leads to the capacity building in the state institutions (UNESCO, 2019; King, 2021).

In comparison to Nigeria, Senegal shows a comparably more effective policy coordination and direction of the development that has enabled more efficient absorption of educational cooperation advantages (Sall, 2016). Still, there

are restrictions, including such factors as the comparatively small nature of the engagement, the underdeveloped nature of the vocational education programs, and the confrontation between the Chinese technical standards and pedagogical practices with Senegal institutional conformity to the French-centric curricula (Sall, 2016). Such moderating factor also tends to make institutional partnerships not to be fully accredited or incorporated in the national degree system. Although the educational cooperation has been used to complement the wider investments of Chinese infrastructure in Senegal further incorporation between education programmes and home employment strategies is required to improve sustainability.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: SUSTAINABILITY OUTCOMES ACROSS COUNTRIES

The effects of Chinese educational collaboration in West Africa are not universal but are mediated, instead, by the local conditions of the recipient countries. Nigeria is more effective and policy coherent and more formalised programme management than Nigeria where high-volume participation is usually diluted by institutional fragmentation and labour market mismatches. Senegal is an example of a directed and scale-restricted approach that is constrained by the existing resource base and language-institutional environment (Marsh, 2022). These differences substantiate one of the key conclusions of this research: the efficiency of educational tools offered by FOCAC depends not so much on the number of scholarships or training programmes offered but on the robustness and compatibility of the host country system of internal governance and economy (King, 2020).

Table 1 China's Educational Cooperation in West Africa: FOCAC Intervention Levels, Moderating Factors, and Human Capital Outcomes Across Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal

Country	FOCAC Intervention Level	Moderating Factors	Human Capital Outcome
Nigeria	Very high. two Confucius Institutes, Thousands of scholarships, rail-technology TVET programmes.	Weak policy alignment. Lack of conformity of Chinese training in technical fields with the local needs of the private sector. High brain drain of Chinese trained graduates.	Graduates are finding it hard to secure senior positions elsewhere other than Chinese companies. Result sustainability is lopsided.
Ghana	High. Powerful vocational orientation, Luban Workshops, Two university Confucius Institutes.	Overdependence on informal sectors limits absorption of high-tech vocational skills.	Skill acquisition is high with inclusive development that is below expectations because of the lack of formal sector jobs..
Senegal	Moderate. Specific scholarships, a single Confucius Institute, training in the public sector.	French-oriented institutional structures cause tension with the Chinese technical standards. There are constraints of governance that restrict programme integration.	Less institutional partnering development than Anglophone neighbours. Relatively stronger policy coordination.

These divergences can be structured as shown in Table 1. The high level of intervention over the years in Nigeria has not been translated into the corresponding sustainability levels mainly due to poor policy alignment and the labour market that is not well equipped to absorb the technical competencies of the specific Chinese cooperation to be generated through the cooperation programmes. Ghana is already at the middle ground, with moderate government capacity giving more lasting, even though still uneven,

results. The case of Senegal is a teaching case in a different sense: it shows that effective, intensive involvement, even on small scale, can be rewarded with significant institutional benefits when domestic interests are well defined and controlled over governance costs.

In all three cases, the moderating variable of the central interest is the strength and coherence of the national systems of governance. This observation concurs with the argument

by Ibonye (2020) in Sino-Nigeria scenario, where a country is affected by the returns of the Chinese educational co-operation, which depends on the strategic agency and institutional capability of the recipient country. It also echoes the point of Marsh (2022) that educational diplomacy in China has grown more professionalised and differentiated in its African settings to yield mixed results that reflect diverse institutional settings in which it functions.

VI. DISCUSSION: SUSTAINABILITY OF CHINA'S EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE POST-FOCAC ERA

➤ *Sustainability Versus Short-Term Gains*

The results of this research provoke a cardinal inquiry on the nature of the Chinese educational cooperation in West Africa. The Nigerian, Ghanaese and Senegalese experience all points to the fact that FOCAC educational tools are better at achieving short-term results, such as scholarship admissions, institute establishment, training groups, etc., than long-term, self-regenerating human capital benefits that are the main focus of the sustainable development framework. This difference in output and outcome is not accidental: it represents one of the structural characteristics of the Chinese model of cooperation, which values visibility and magnitude and quantifies its performance accordingly.

As King (2020) notes, in all the FOCAC Action Plans, the indicators of educational cooperation are overall too quantitative: scholarships and trained personnel and institutes founded are all numbers. The intangible measures, such as graduate employability, rates of skills utilisation, premiums in salaries, and institutional integration of training are what sustainability needs. Such inability to match what is counted and what counts is the core lack of accountability of the FOCAC educational strategy in West Africa, to which a fundamental redefinition between output-based and outcome-based evaluation paradigms, which have so far been inadequately incentivized by both sides, will be necessary to put it to action.

➤ *The Role of Governance and Labour Market*

The evidence of comparison of Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal continually indicates the quality of governance and the structure of the labour market as the key factors that determine the presence or absence of sustainable human capital effects in a Chinese educational cooperation. This is not a new observation in the development cooperation literature in general. It is, nevertheless, a discovery that is in a great contradiction with the principle of non-interference that China expressed in the internal affairs of countries of its partners. Such principle is the very thing that makes FOCAC not conditionalise the educational cooperation on the governance reforms or the development of the labour market which are the conditions that would make the cooperation the most successful.

This strain has been most evident in Nigeria, where the lack of policy alignment, the absence of any real coordination between ministries, and a decentralized labour

market has resulted in a situation that Lefifi and Kiala (2021) describe as the reverse of the so-called haigui problem: instead of the graduates being absorbed and consumed by the national institutions, Nigerian graduates of Chinese universities often find themselves ill-served by a local economy that is poorly prepared to harness their skills. The outcome is that there will be higher brain drain, as such graduates are willing to work in situations, usually within the Western or Chinese commercial enterprises, which can actually use their training. The investment in human capital is thereby made, its developmental pay elsewhere coming.

The experience of Ghana indicates that even small changes in the nature of governance coherence and policy coordination can change this relationship significantly, even in the absence of institutional perfection. Instead, it must have enough transparency on the priorities in national development and enough inter-agency coordination such that the training programmes are developed within the consciousness of the absorption context at the very beginning. The experience of Senegal provides a further dimension, this being that the language and the institutional systems are non-trivial moderating variables which the cooperation systems must explicitly reason about, especially where the institutional frameworks based on French tends to create systemic friction between Chinese technical and pedagogical standards.

➤ *Limits of the FOCAC Education Strategy*

This comparative analysis of the FOCAC education strategy, as it has developed since 2006 to the current extent, is typified with three structural constraints, which are highlighted by this study. The initial one is the incompatibility of the industrial rationality of the TVET programmes in China and the real economies of the host countries in West Africa. The Luban Workshops and vocational training programmes in china are geared, as Jamestown Foundation (2021) notes, according to the demands of Chinese-built infrastructure, with graduates receiving training in the use of Chinese-built rail systems, building equipment and power infrastructure. It can be helpful in those areas that have such infrastructure and in which it is actively maintained, but in those areas that have none of it, or where the industries involved are characterized instead by informality than by formal enterprise, the training cultivates skills whose domestic demand is very weak.

The second limitation is the lack of an institutional feedback mechanism between the educational programmes of FOCAC and the national education systems of the partner countries. In contrast to the SMASSE model in Japan, which addresses the business environment and national education systems via and through the national curricula and national education systems, the cooperation in the educational sphere in China focuses more on running parallel to the existing systems, instead of running through them. Confucius Institutes are located close to national universities and Luban Workshops to national partner institutions. The absence of this parallelism constrains the transformational institutional effect of cooperation and renders its results

more vulnerable in cases where the Chinese funding or human resources are pulled out.

The third organizational weakness is associated with management and responsibility: FOCAC commitments are proclaimed on the continent, and their realization on the country level is discussed on a bilateral basis, through Chinese embassies, with scarce transparency and practically no independent assessment. It is this lack of transparency that renders recipient governments unable to hold the cooperation to account, negotiate more effectively on their behalf to programmes that better reflect the national priorities, create the evidence base upon which it would be possible over time to adapt and improve. These three structural limitations should be discussed in combination, and this issue is the main challenge of educational cooperation in the post-FOCAC period.

VII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the results of this paper, it can be concluded that although the educational cooperation between China and West Africa under FOCAC has increased the access to and skills training, its long-term developmental effect relies on more coherent and adjusting and accountability systems (Marsh, 2022; King, 2020). In order to promote sustainability and effectiveness of the initiatives, the following policy imperatives are progressed.

It is the need of African governments to intensify inter-ministerial liaisons between education ministries and labour and the industrial stakeholders. This is needed to make sure that education and training programmes funded by Chinese are in line with the national development policies and employment priorities (Sall, 2016). The most solvable of the structural constraints that were found during this study is the continuing lack of contact between the trainers and the trainees of the outcomes of training. It can be dealt with by establishing national coordination bodies that have an explicit mandate of dealing with the intake, monitoring and placing beneficiaries of the FOCAC education programmes.

Chinese policy-makers and African governments must go beyond output-based to outcome-based evaluation models by shifting away to counting scholarships given or trainees enrolled and to measures that evaluate the utilisation of skills in the labour market, employability, and labour market integration of beneficiaries of the programmes (Gu & Corbett, 2020). This is not just a technical change: it involves a political promise on both sides to take the accountability consequences of the outcome measurement such as the fact that programmes that score highly on quantitative indicators might score lowly on developmental effect.

More focus ought to be on the management of curriculum jointly with African schools, Chinese associates and local players in the industry. This is necessary so that vocational and technical training programmes are aligned to the domestic economic requirements more than the

operational requirements of the Chinese enterprises only. A possible example of this is the Djibouti Luban Workshop, which was discussed in the last paper in this series, articulating what demand-responsive TVET design can offer when it is well-founded in the host economy and particularly in the industrial profile of that specific economy.

Formal monitoring and evaluation frameworks must be integrated into FOCAC education programmes to improve transparency, accountability, and evidence-based learning, and allow improvement of the programme at any point in time (King, 2020; Alden and Anshan, 2021). Without such frameworks, each party lacks a stable point on which to base their ideas of effective and ineffective interventions, and also lacks the institutional knowledge to enhance cooperation with successive FOCAC cycles.

Increased trilateral and regional cooperation is another agenda to the post-FOCAC period. The policy coherence can be enhanced through joint activities by African institutions and Chinese partners, regional organisations like ECOWAS or African Development Bank and increase the scalability and sustainability of the educational cooperation outcomes in West Africa (Marsh, 2022). This kind of cooperation would also help resolve to some extent the conflict between the bilateral logic of FOCAC and the regional integration needs of AfCFTA and Agenda 2063.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The post-FOCAC educational collaboration between China and West Africa is a significant development in the relations between China and Africa in terms of development. China has also helped to increase access to education and skills training in Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal by providing greater access to scholarships, institutional partnerships and vocational training programmes. These benefits differ greatly in degree and permanence between countries, but they do so based on the inequalities in the quality of governance, capacity to establish institutions, and labour market situations.

This paper has suggested that the sustainability of educational cooperation between China and West Africa is not necessarily a factor of the magnitude of investment but the consistency of systems into which investment is channeled. In those locations that have good governance, coordination in policies, and labour markets that facilitate the absorption of the trained graduates, Chinese educational cooperation creates significant and sustainable returns on human capital. In the absence of these conditions, the outputs of high-volume engagement are seeable but weak.

The aftermath of FOCAC will give both sides a chance to rectify these structural constraints. In the case of China, this would necessitate a readiness to re-focus its educational diplomacy on a model that would focus more on scale and visibility, to one that focuses more on sustainability and developmental-impact. To the African governments in West Africa it would mean that there needs to be the political goodwill to come up with coherent national systems of

utilizing the educational cooperation programmes of China, to be able to negotiate more constructively on programmes that are more reflective of national priorities and that they should develop the institutional mechanisms to absorb, track, and capitalize on the human capital that they create with the aid of such partnerships. Unless both sides reorient, the educational cooperation of China in West Africa will keep producing high products and small results.

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