

# The New Prospect of African-Chinese Partnership

By **OLUSEGUN OBASANJO**

**A**T the beginning of each year, Chinese diplomats visit Africa as a symbol of the special relationship that exists between our peoples. In February 2021, China and my country, Nigeria, celebrated the 50th anniversary of our bilateral cooperation. Fifty years ago, Africa also played an important role in helping the People's Republic of China attain its rightful place at the United Nations. Nigeria and China are two of the world's most populous nations, with Nigeria projected to become the third most populous country by 2050. With our shared desire for collaboration in development and maintaining peace and security in the world, we have much in common for mutual and global interest.

In Africa, we have the youngest population of any region. According to statistics of the United Nations, three quarters of Africa's population is under the age of 35. Given access to education and opportunity, these young people will transform their countries, the continent of Africa, and the rest of the world. As many nations face the challenges rising out of an aging demography, we have the potential for tremendous innovation and economic growth, some of which is already realized, as evidenced by the report on health, education, and agriculture in Africa, entitled "Making Africa's Population an Asset," released by the Africa Progress Group, which I chair.

During my time as president of Nigeria, we recognized that effective transportation was a key driver of economic growth, and we made the modernization of our railway one of the priorities of our 25-year strategic vision. This vision is also in line with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which countries around the world have received support in their efforts to con-

nect communities and facilitate growth. The flagship BRI project in East Africa, the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, which was completed in 2017, reduces passenger travel time between the two cities from 10 hours to four and a half hours. Nigeria formally joined the BRI in 2018 but worked with China on infrastructure projects during the years prior to that. The completion of the Abuja-Kaduna rail line in 2014 was an example of such success: the 186 kilometer line transports both goods and people quickly and safely, and has employed thousands of Nigerians in its construction and operation.

When Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed African leaders at the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, he committed to help Africa reach its infrastructure and development goals, stating, "Poverty is the root cause of chaos while peace is the guarantee for development." A recent World Bank report has forecast that the BRI has the potential of increasing world trade by 6.2 percent and increasing global real income by 2.9 percent.

Trade and jobs are central to our vision of making "Africa's population an asset." In Nigeria, we have witnessed what can happen when young people are uneducated and consequently unemployed: Many people are forced to leave their homes in pursuit of job opportunities elsewhere, and some are preyed on by radical forces. This was the theme of a Youth Migration Summit hosted at my presidential library in Abuja at which we emphasized the importance of building bridges of opportunity within and between countries – not walls. One positive example is Africa's Great Green Wall, which combats climate change through large-scale planting and restoring degraded land, while at the same time creates jobs and reduces migration. I proposed this idea in Burkina Faso during

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At Sinopec's Tianjin LNG receiving terminal, workers are unloading liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Nigeria on August 8, 2020. With the largest natural gas reserve in Africa, Nigeria has attracted more than US \$16 billion investment from Chinese companies in the field.

a Climate Change Summit when I was still president of Nigeria. The success of this project will have a great impact on flora and fauna throughout Africa.

In my keynote speech to the InterAction Council in 2016, I spoke about the importance of China as an economic trading partner with Africa and how that relationship helped insulate Africa from the 2008 financial crisis. That same spirit of partnership is needed to solve Africa's infrastructure deficit on the basis of a mutually beneficial and balanced relationship.

A large infrastructure gap continues to hold Africa back from reaching its full potential. Without leapfrog development of infrastructure in Africa, the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, which took effect on January 1, 2021, will not advance fast. McKinsey projects that there needs to be a doubling of annual investment in infrastructure in Africa to US \$150 billion by 2025. According to McKinsey, "Nearly 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa lack access to grid electricity – accounting for over two-thirds of the global population without power." The way to move forward, of course, is to promote sustainable energy, and here China is a leader with the pledge made by President Xi at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly

(UNGA) last September that China would be carbon neutral by 2060.

In that same UNGA address, President Xi called for a "green recovery of the world economy in the post-COVID era" and efforts to achieve sustainable development in all countries. Given the tremendous energy needs in Africa, there is a real opportunity to achieve a "green revolution" through investment in renewable energy.

China is the largest single investor in the green finance market, while Africa needs green bonds to finance infrastructure – yet another good example of a "win-win" cooperation. I believe that China and Africa can also learn from one another. Indeed, I recently co-authored the book *The Asian Aspiration* that examines development lessons from East Asia for Africa. An African-Chinese partnership can help the world implement the UN development mission of "a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all." Africa and China should continue to work together for this desirable objective. ■

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