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## **CHINA AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: KNOWLEDGE, GOVERNANCE, AND PRACTICE**

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# Triangular Cooperation: Different Approaches, Same Modality<sup>\*†</sup>

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**Abstract** Triangular cooperation aims to utilise the comparative advantages of a pivotal partner (usually an emerging country) and a facilitating partner (usually a traditional donor) to generate development impacts with and for the benefit of a beneficiary, through simultaneously strengthening their partnership and providing opportunities for mutual learning. Utilising the triangular cooperation modality, China has acted primarily as a pivotal partner, implementing projects with facilitating partners and beneficiaries. Roles and responsibilities between China and facilitating partners differ greatly. Three approaches can be distinguished: (a) facilitating partner provides financial resources and China provides expertise; (b) China provides financial resources and facilitating partner implements; (c) China and facilitating partner provide financial resources and jointly plan and implement together with the beneficiary. This article argues that approach (c), currently practised in triangular cooperation projects between China, Germany, and beneficiary countries, provides the partners with the most potential for effectively generating developmental impacts and partnership effects.

**Keywords** international aid architecture, triangular cooperation, South–South cooperation, China, Germany, Ethiopia.

## 1 The transition of the international development cooperation architecture and the rising of the triangular cooperation modality

For the past seven decades, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, organised in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), have taken up a central role in the international development landscape. Through the provision of official development assistance (ODA), they provided the biggest share of finance for global development assistance (OECD 2021a). Among them, the top five donors including the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Japan, Germany, and France contributed the most (*ibid.*).

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Through providing modalities and norms, OECD-DAC countries have been playing a dominant role in international development cooperation. The turn of the century witnessed a transition of the international assistance structure in line with an increasingly multipolar world order. New providers of aid (emerging donors) increased their bilateral development assistance contributions as well as their contributions to, and influence in, multilateral development institutions (Kolsdorf and Müller 2020). Non-DAC countries steadily increased their share in global development assistance. Net ODA disbursement (even from different reporting standards) from non-DAC donors rose to 15.2 per cent in 2018 (OECD 2021b).

Starting in the 2000s, four High-Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness were convened to adapt development cooperation to the changing international landscape and improve aid effectiveness,<sup>3</sup> ushering in a transition from development aid to development cooperation. With both ODA and South-South cooperation (SSC), providers have been facing criticism within the aid effectiveness debate (Moyo 2009; Lengfelder 2016), and efforts made to systematically leverage synergies between them. In 2008, the Accra Agenda for Action acknowledged SSC as a significant complement to traditional North-South cooperation and encouraged the providers of SSC to support the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD 2008).<sup>4</sup> The High Level Event on South-South Cooperation and Capacity Development held in Colombia in 2010 concluded that SSC is 'an important instrument of effective and inclusive partnerships'.<sup>5</sup> The Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, held in Busan in 2011, concluded that SSC and traditional development cooperation were both needed until 2015 to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (OECD 2011).

With these developments, the conventional narrative of 'Northern' OECD-DAC countries being the providers and 'Southern' countries being the recipients has been largely contested and increasingly replaced by new approaches that ensure countries work together for sustainable development on a more equal footing (Kolsdorf and Müller 2020). Triangular cooperation is one of the modalities which has increased in prominence as a vehicle for traditional donors and emerging donors to work together with beneficiary countries to support their sustainable development (Altenburg and Weikert 2006).

Triangular cooperation is not a new mode of working together. A reference to the concept was present in the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action for Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (United Nations 1978). The application of the modality of triangular cooperation became more widespread in the 2010s. A survey on triangular cooperation conducted by the OECD in 2015 showed significant increases in triangular cooperation projects in all regions and a

multitude of actors involved (OECD 2015). Triangular cooperation is seen as a modality with the potential to bridge the approaches of traditional donors and emerging donors and provide the opportunity to take the strengths of both approaches while preventing existing weaknesses from lessening the effectiveness of the intervention (Huang and Tang 2013; Yuan 2020).

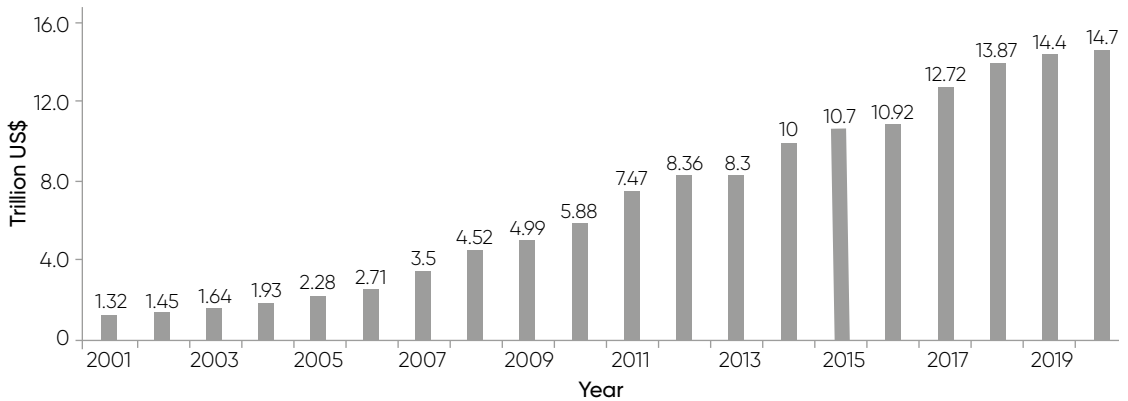
As the modality is gaining momentum, the debate on its effectiveness is still ongoing. While the perceived benefits include the use of comparative advantages such as similarities in development challenges between pivotal and beneficiary countries, cost-effective expertise provision, the possibility of mutual learning and thus improving aid delivery systems, practical challenges to the effectiveness of the modality are found in the transaction costs incurred through the coordination challenge of bringing everyone to the table (Fordelone 2009). An evaluation of the triangular cooperation modality in German development cooperation in 2020 attributed to it the potential for improving aid effectiveness, strengthening international development partnerships, and creating opportunities for mutual learning.

The evaluation found that these impacts are all usually generated, but unevenly, depending on the concrete project concepts. It distinguished impacts along two dimensions: (1) the programmatic-content dimension, which includes developmental impacts generated in beneficiary countries that improve outcomes for the target groups of the intervention, and (2) the political-strategic dimension, which includes strengthening partnerships between actors involved in the cooperation as well as improving development cooperation structures. In the political-strategic dimension, impacts are generated for all partners involved. The evaluation attests the main benefits being in the second dimension, while impacts in the first dimension are relatively low because of the low volumes of the cooperation projects (Kaplan, Busemann and Wirtgen 2020).

There is currently no internationally accepted definition for what constitutes triangular cooperation. Variant terms are used and even if the same terms are used, interpretations can vary. For example, OECD-DAC uses 'trilateral cooperation' (OECD 2013), and the United Nations Economic and Social Council and Germany both use 'triangular cooperation' (ECOSOC 2008; BMZ 2013). China uses 'tripartite cooperation' (SCIO 2021).

This article uses the term 'triangular cooperation' as defined by the Global Partnership Initiative on Effective Triangular Cooperation (GPI) and the OECD. There, triangular cooperation is defined as an initiative in which at least three partners work together in a combination of three roles, which can revolve throughout the implementation of the initiative. The roles are that of a beneficiary partner, which seeks support to tackle a specific development challenge, a pivotal partner, which

Figure 1 China's GDP, 2001–20



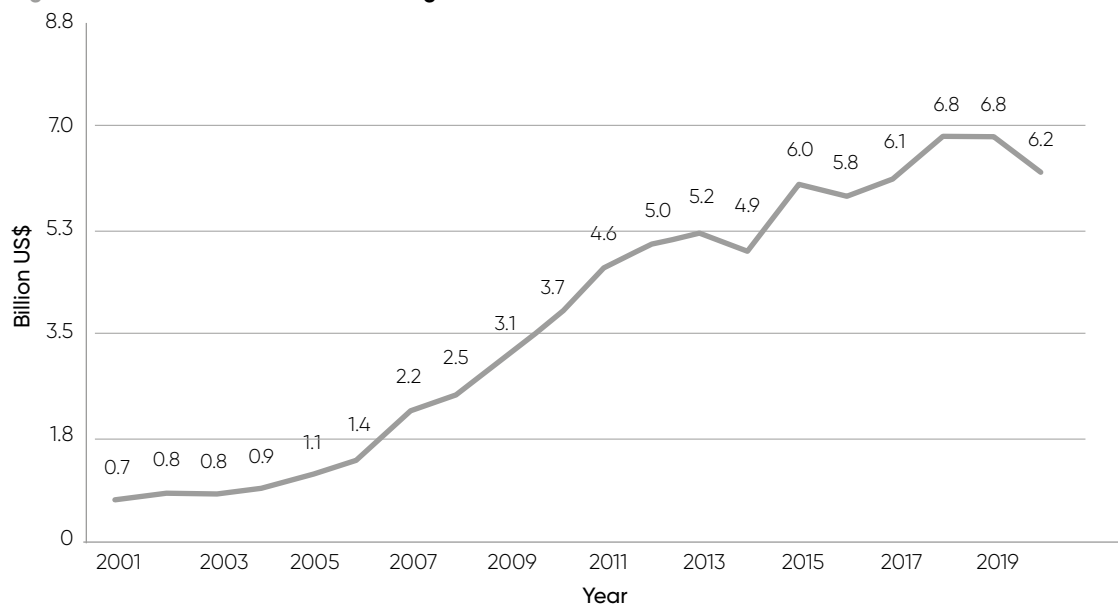
Source Authors' own, based on data from National Statistics Bureau of the People's Republic of China.<sup>6</sup>

has proven experience in the issue, and shares its resources, knowledge, and expertise, and a facilitating partner, which helps connect the beneficiary and the pivotal partners, supporting their collaboration financially and technically (OECD 2019). China has a unique experience with the triangular cooperation modality, stemming also from its own experience of being a recipient of ODA and at the same time providing SSC.

## 2 China's foreign aid and triangular cooperation

The world has witnessed the rapid growth of China's economy in the last four decades. China has become a prominent emerging power, changing the landscape of international relations (Figure 1). China's development model and its approach towards SSC are topics heatedly discussed internationally. There is a broad range of opinions. Firstly, a favourable approach sees China being well placed, with its successful development experience to support, for example, African countries in their development (Guennoun 2019; Gu and Kitano 2018). It also sees Chinese development finance positively impacting economic growth in recipient countries (Dreher *et al.* 2021). The critical approach sees Chinese aid engagement as being primarily driven by the quest for material inputs (Kaplinsky, McCormick and Morris 2007) or producing only marginal impacts (Toktomushev 2019). Other views argue that Chinese foreign aid and traditional development cooperation by OECD–DAC countries have similar motives and goals (Dreher *et al.* 2015).

Starting from the 1950s, China began to offer aid to its neighbouring countries. In the 2000s, China expanded its foreign aid in volume (Figure 2), in terms of how it was channelled, and institutionalised its development cooperation system. In 2018, Chinese contributions to multilateral organisations totalled US\$1.4bn (OECD 2020).

**Figure 2 Net disbursement of China's foreign aid**

Source Authors' own, based on data from Kitano and Miyabayashi (2020).

The rise in contributions to multilateral organisations ran parallel with an increasing openness towards international cooperation and multilateralism. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) attested this in a 2017 discussion paper, which documented the rising financial support for UN agencies by China, China's initiatives to establish new multilateral organisations, as well as greater support for triangular cooperation by the Chinese government (Han 2017).

China began its first pilot triangular cooperation programme with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 2008. The scope of its engagement with the modality has steadily increased since then (Han 2017; Gu, Li and Zhang, this *IDS Bulletin*). Triangular cooperation was mentioned in the first White Paper on *China's Foreign Aid*, published in 2011 (SCIO 2011). In the second White Paper, published in 2014, it was reported that the scope of Chinese triangular cooperation had widened from working with multilateral partners to also working with bilateral facilitating partners (SCIO 2014).

In the White Paper on *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, published in 2021, triangular cooperation was linked closely to the exchange with other actors in international development cooperation. In the 2021 White Paper engaging with North–South cooperation actors, on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, triangular cooperation is presented as a modality that is to be steadily advanced, building on a complementarity of strengths

and creating synergies. Guided by the principle of mutual respect and learning, triangular cooperation is said to benefit recipient countries. Projects are to be proposed, agreed and led by recipient countries (SCIO 2021).

When discussing comparative advantages used in a triangular setting, China sees the experience of its own fast development and established networks under its SSC framework as a distinct advantage. Recently itself a beneficiary country, the development needs of other developing countries are believed to be firmly understood and China's development knowledge can be shared horizontally with other developing countries (Xu, Ma and Li 2019; Gu, Corbett and Leach 2019). China is engaging in triangular cooperation for several reasons. It enables China to share its own development experiences with other developing countries through more channels while at the same time providing development actors in China with the opportunity to learn from traditional donors (CSD 2021). China sends a signal through triangular cooperation to traditional donors that it is interested in cooperation (Zhang 2017). It is seen as having the potential of increasing the effectiveness of SSC while at the same time enhancing China's global image (Han 2017). Triangular cooperation increases the volume and scope of China's development cooperation, enabling it to draw from co-financing and in-kind support to leverage its resources (*ibid.*).

For the facilitating partner's side, during a survey conducted by UNDP China with traditional donors, the reasons for wanting to engage with China in triangular cooperation were twofold: generating sustainable development impacts in beneficiary countries and broadening the partnership with China, including policy dialogues on development cooperation and international standards. Traditional donors wanted to better understand how China's development cooperation system works, building on the lessons learned by China on lifting its population out of poverty, supporting China's contribution to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals, and contributing together to the protection of global public goods. Triangular cooperation is seen as a tool to work together, advocating for OECD standards, and overcoming a lack of donor coordination and transparency (UNDP China 2020).

Beneficiary country perspectives differ depending on the specific cooperation context. Compared to bilateral or multilateral projects, triangular cooperation projects are usually smaller in scale. They are seen as providing a chance to harmonise donor initiatives and benefit from comparative advantages while pooling resources and identifying more effective ways of promoting development (IPRCC and OECD 2013).

China has partnered up with traditional donors and international organisations in numerous projects (see OECD 2013; MOFCOM 2016; Tang 2019; Casado-Asensio and Piefer 2018; UNDP China 2020; CSD 2021).



### **3 Approaches of China's triangular cooperation with partner countries**

In the absence of a clear unified definition of triangular cooperation, concrete projects tend to differ greatly in their set-up regarding the three roles involved. This holds true for the triangular cooperation projects of China with partner countries. Traditional donors have deviating interpretations of triangular cooperation (UNDP China 2020), while China does not have a clear policy on it. With the establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), the modality has gained momentum in the Chinese discourse, but projects are decided on a case-by-case basis (CSD 2021).

In the following three approaches, China and facilitating partners have developed triangular cooperation together with the beneficiary countries as discussed. The distinction is made by looking at the roles China and the facilitating partner take regarding financial contribution, expert provision, and implementation responsibility for the projects. The approaches are analysed for their potential of delivering impacts in two impact dimensions: the programmatic-content dimension and the political-strategic dimension (Kaplan *et al.* 2020). Because of the small number of triangular cooperation projects and the specificity of the project approaches, examples are given rather than the accumulated data analysed.

#### **3.1 (a) Facilitating partner provides financial resources, pivotal partner provides expertise**

In this approach, the facilitating partner provides the financial resources for the triangular cooperation project. In large part, the facilitating partner also takes over the responsibility for overall project management. Steering is done jointly with all parties involved in the project, but project management capacity is provided in most part by the traditional donor. As the pivotal partner, the Chinese contribution is to provide expertise and in-kind support through Chinese participating institutions (UNDP China 2020). The comparative advantages of China are seen as being able to provide first-hand Chinese development experience for other developing countries which are facing similar challenges to those that China faced (Gu and Carey 2019). The advantages of the traditional donor are seen in their project implementation structures in the beneficiary country and their financing lines into the beneficiary countries and China.

In China, the projects financially support the provision of Chinese expertise for all expertise which cannot be provided through Chinese in-kind contributions. In the past, the approach was often utilised in triangular cooperation projects implemented between China, the UK, through the Department for International Development (DFID),<sup>7</sup> and beneficiary countries. Examples of the approach are the following projects: Agriculture Technology Transfer (AgriTT) in Malawi and Uganda, the Global Health

Support Programme in Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Tanzania, and the Community Based Disaster Management Programme in Bangladesh and Nepal (Keeley 2017). A review of the three projects showed that they generated impact through the sharing of lessons and experience from China with the beneficiary countries, although it was found that this was not a straightforward process, with lessons often being not easily transferable. At the same time, Chinese partners were provided with exposure to UK management expertise, development frameworks, and other modes of operation. It was concluded that a triangular governance model improved the quality and effectiveness of the interventions, but that various challenges in implementation gave rise to the view that the modality was too management intensive (*ibid.*).

With regard to the political-strategic dimension, the approach seems to have reaped benefits, as the evaluation emphasises that a platform was created for dialogue with China, and opportunities were created for the UK to learn more about China's development cooperation system. Chinese actors also learn from different modes of operations used by the UK in development cooperation (*ibid.*). However, Chinese expertise was utilised only in the provision of expertise, not in planning processes, thus limiting the exposure to project cycle management. In the programmatic-content dimension, the projects faced the issue of transferability of Chinese expertise, with language and cross-cultural communication being an issue. Financing, also of Chinese inputs, was solely done by the UK. The approach thus does not seem to be able to leverage additional financial resources from the UK perspective.

### **3.2 (b) Pivotal partner provides financial resources, facilitating partner implements the projects**

In this approach, China provides the financial resources necessary for project implementation. Traditional donor agencies within the UN system receive funding and implement the project on behalf of China for the benefit of the beneficiary country. Expertise and project management is organised by the UN agency, while Chinese contribution is focused on the provision of financial resources. The approach sees the comparative advantages in China's ability to mobilise financial capital to benefit sustainable development in other developing countries. The expertise as well as the project management capacity of traditional donors is used and with China's help, gaps in financing are bridged (UNDP China 2020).

The distinction between the triangular cooperation approach and multilateral development cooperation is that the financial resources provided by China are bundled into special funds, either managed by a UN organisation or managed by China but implemented by a UN organisation. Examples of these kinds of funds are the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, managed by CIDCA and the China International Center for

Economic and Technical Exchanges (CICETE), which had implemented projects with 14 international organisations by the end of 2019 (SCIO 2021) or the China-IFAD South-South and Trilateral Cooperation Facility, established in 2018, with a contribution of US\$10m in supplementary funds from China to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD 2021). Other dedicated funds by China exist within the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), and United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

Within the programmatic-content dimension, the intervention's effectiveness is the same as interventions financed through conventional multilateral channels, as established implementation channels of UN agencies are used. Beneficiaries thus benefit from additional resources that create development impacts, with all else being equal. The approach provides an opportunity on the political-strategic dimension to further the integration of China into the multilateral landscape, although this is done in a donor-implementing agency relationship between facilitating and pivotal partner.

Partnerships between the resource-administrating bodies of the Chinese development cooperation system and the UN organisations are formed and learning can take place, especially on how fund management processes work. Mutual learning opportunities on development cooperation modalities, project set-up, implementation, standards, and so forth for Chinese implementing actors are not part of the approach, as the Chinese contribution is focused on funding.

### **3.3 (c) Both pivotal and facilitating partner provide comparable financial resources, and they jointly plan and implement the projects with the beneficiary**

In this approach, financial contributions, expertise provision, and project management are shared between China and the facilitating partner (traditional donor) on the request and for the benefit of the beneficiary (CSD 2021). Financial resources are provided in comparable volumes and along parallel financing lines either directly to the beneficiary country actors or to the respective development actors tasked with implementing the project from the Chinese and traditional donors' side. As there is no mixing of funds, no distinction is made between provision of finance and in-kind contributions of China and the traditional donor.

The projects are agreed upon between the three countries and each country tasks one or more of its implementing agencies with working together with the other two countries' implementing agencies to jointly draft the project outline and implement the agreed-upon interventions. The agencies are organised so as to bring their expertise and comparative advantage to the table.

A partnering up of the implementing agencies in the whole project cycle gives the opportunity to discuss and conceptualise projects in adherence to international standards. The approach is used by Germany when implementing its triangular cooperation projects with China, and special emphasis is put on comparability of contributions by China and Germany (*ibid.*). During implementation, agencies from all three countries provide expertise to reach the project goal and contribute to project management. At the time of writing, three triangular cooperation projects have been implemented in this fashion (see Section 4 and Section 5).

On the programmatic-content dimension, impacts of the interventions must be compared with the managerial task of coordination, which is extensive in this approach, as it needs all three parts of the triangle to come together during the whole project cycle. Mutual learning opportunities for implementing agencies, especially with regard to the standards, modalities, and concepts used by the other partners, as well as insights into their development cooperation systems are the most intense when compared to the other approaches. Regarding the political-strategic dimension, partnerships are strengthened on the political level, as well as on the implementation level.

#### **4 Triangular cooperation between beneficiaries, China, and Germany**

China and Germany have a long history of working successfully together on sustainable development, which goes back to the 1980s. Until 2010, the focus was put on German development cooperation for the benefit of China. This approach then changed with China's new position within the international development cooperation architecture (GIZ 2021). Germany started to engage in triangular cooperation in the late 2000s, seeing it as a bridge between South-South and North-South cooperation. The modality is utilised especially in Germany's cooperation with emerging countries (Langendorf *et al.* 2012). Germany's current political strategy on triangular cooperation defines it as a project which is jointly planned, financed, and implemented by a traditional donor, an emerging country, and a beneficiary country (BMZ 2013). For the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), China is a global partner. In the 2021 BMZ position paper on global partners, cooperation with China is focused on providing global public goods, exchange based on good donor conduct, and triangular cooperation (BMZ 2021b).

In 2016, the BMZ and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM) agreed to deepen their exchange on sustainable development, including identifying possibilities for triangular cooperation opportunities for the benefit of other developing countries (BMZ 2021a). The principles agreed upon were that the triangular cooperation projects would have to

be requested and led by the beneficiary countries. As a joint initiative, the BMZ and MOFCOM established the Sino-German Center for Sustainable Development (CSD) in 2017. The mission of the CSD is to act as a catalyst and coordination mechanism between China, Germany, and partners in other developing countries to initiate, support, and evaluate triangular cooperation projects (CSD 2020a).

The CSD is politically steered by the BMZ and MOFCOM, while the triangular cooperation projects it houses are politically steered by the BMZ, MOFCOM, and the respective ministries in the beneficiary countries in Africa and Asia, with the mandate for development cooperation or the particular topic of the triangular cooperation project. At the implementation level within the CSD, the German side is represented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (German Agency for International Cooperation), while on the Chinese side, different partners contribute to the Centre's activities. For the individual triangular cooperation projects, implementing partners are approved by the political partners (ministries in each country) of the projects, with each project including at least one implementation partner from each of the three countries in the triangle.

Through a jointly developed operation plan, roles are divided amongst the implementers, so each contributes to the project's impact in accordance with their expertise and comparative advantage. Experiences from the initiation and implementation of triangular cooperation projects are then fed into the dialogue on development cooperation between Germany and China as well as international fora. Currently, three triangular cooperation projects are being implemented, with the partner countries of China and Germany being Ethiopia (Sustainable Textile Investment and Operation), Laos (Sino-German technical vocational education and training (TVET) for rural jobs in Laos), and Namibia and Zambia (Fair and Effective Protected Area Management for Sustainable Development – Working Together for Global Standards).<sup>8</sup>

With the founding of CIDCA in 2018, the landscape for cooperation partners within the triangular cooperation modality in China has widened. With the mandate to coordinate China's international development cooperation, while most of the implementation work still lies with MOFCOM, CIDCA has become an exchange partner of the BMZ, also on the topic of triangular cooperation. Building on exchanges for mutual learning in 2019 (CSD 2019) during the Sino-German government consultations in 2021, CIDCA and the BMZ held a high-level exchange which included discussing potential triangular cooperation projects (CIDCA 2021) and signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on strengthening the exchange on international development cooperation, also referring to triangular cooperation modalities (Die Bundesregierung 2021).

### **5 A case study: sustainable textile production in Ethiopia**

The triangular cooperation projects between China, Germany, and Ethiopia in the textile sector is an example of approach (c). As requested by Ethiopia, China and Germany have combined their efforts to support sustainable textile production in Ethiopia, with financial contributions, expertise provision, and project management tasks being shared between China and Germany in cooperation with their Ethiopian partners.

Ethiopia experienced a rapid growth in its textile and garment industry, with a number of domestic and international firms investing in the country. Chinese enterprises started moving their textile manufacturing operations overseas, with Ethiopia becoming an attractive destination. In 2019, China was the largest investor in Ethiopia, accounting for 60 per cent of newly approved foreign direct investment projects (UNCTAD 2020: 34). Germany's development cooperation has focused on the textile and garment sector in Ethiopia and other African and Asian countries as a catalyst for job creation and sustainable development (BMZ 2019).

After the request by Ethiopia, the CSD brought together the partners of the three countries to work together with the aim of improving the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standard of Ethiopia's textile sector through capacity development and awareness raising for Chinese investors/factory managers and their Ethiopian business partners. MOFCOM named the China National Textile and Apparel Council (CNTAC) as the Chinese implementing partner. The BMZ named GIZ. The Ministry of Trade and Industry of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia named the Ethiopian Textile Industry Development Institute (ETIDI).

To ease the transition towards working together in the triangular modality, UNIDO was brought in through Chinese funding as an implementing partner (CSD 2020b). Building on cooperation formats that CNTAC and GIZ had successfully implemented together in Southeast Asia, a locally grounded approach in Ethiopia based on international standards was developed. Working from the baseline of how Chinese textile business investments in Ethiopia perform with regard to ESG standards, capacity development measures are being designed to improve the performance of Chinese-invested and Ethiopian-owned textile businesses. These development measures may include occupational skills training for local workers and the development of sustainability action plans for the factories.

An awareness of the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact (United Nations Global Compact n.d.) will be raised through these measures, which will include digital technology to strengthen transparency and traceability, the support of market development, and the provision of policy review to help promote the textile sector. The insights gained from this project will then

inform the dialogue on further cooperation structures, as well as opening up the possibility of scaling up the approach into other African countries, as per their request (CSD 2020b).

Though the project implementation has been delayed due to the travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the first milestone, the baseline survey, was completed and compiled into a baseline report which will inform the design of capacity-building measures, to be implemented in 2021. As such, the project is still ongoing, with the final evaluation of the development impacts for the target group and improvements in cooperation and partnership between all three partner countries (and UNIDO) still to follow upon completion of the project.

The preparation phase, the setting up of the political as well as the implementation infrastructure, has already proven to show mutual learning effects, regarding the respective development cooperation approaches of the parties involved. Especially during the preparation phase, the effects on the political-strategic impact dimension of triangular cooperation can be seen. Through the joint exercise of project designing, political approval processes, and funding procedures, insights have been gained into Chinese and German approaches towards development cooperation and their standards, while at the same time the inclusion of UNIDO and the UN Global Compact principles have provided all participating actors with a chance to exchange on them. At the same time, partnerships between the three countries have been strengthened and networks built up (also into the UN system), which will be utilised during the course of implementation of the project activities, and potentially further cooperation projects in other sectors.

## **6 Conclusion**

Within the changing landscape of international development cooperation and the emergence of non-DAC donors and shifts in the traditional role of donor-recipient relationships, triangular cooperation, as a modality to utilise comparative strengths of traditional and emerging donors, has gained momentum. The absence of a clear and universally accepted definition of triangular cooperation has led to many different interpretations on how triangular cooperation projects are set up in practice. This is evident by the multitude of different approaches within the triangular cooperation modality implemented between China, traditional donors, and beneficiary countries. When analysed against the two impact dimensions inherent to triangular cooperation, the programmatic-content dimension and the political-strategic dimension, the approaches reveal different strengths and weaknesses. The approach used mostly by Germany in its triangular cooperation with China is distinguished by the joint financing, designing, and implementing of triangular cooperation interventions. In the political-strategic dimension, the approach gives the most opportunity for the deep collaboration

of partners, not only on the project level, but also on the level of the development cooperation system.

This provides all actors with intensive opportunities for mutual learning, especially with regard to the modalities, concepts, and international standards the other actors adhere to. Compared to the UK or the UN system, both of which have been active with China in the triangular cooperation modality for over a decade (although the UK currently does not have any triangular cooperation projects with China), Germany is relatively new to triangular cooperation with China, starting the process in earnest in 2017.

Through the creation of the Sino-German Center for Sustainable Development, the modality was institutionalised within the partnership between China and Germany on sustainable development. As such, the political-strategic dimension of improving partnerships through triangular cooperation is already on display. Opportunities have been created to share international standards, discuss modalities, and learn more about others' development cooperation systems. With the first triangular cooperation projects set to complete in 2022, their effectiveness in impact delivery in the programmatic-content dimension will be able to be assessed.

### Notes

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- 3 The forums, held respectively in 2003 in Rome, in 2005 in Paris, in 2008 in Accra, and in 2011 in Busan, were the most important and influential international development assistance conferences.
- 4 The forum was held in Ghana in 2008 to deepen the implementation of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. See **Accra Agenda for Action**.
- 5 **Bogota Statement: Towards Effective and Inclusive Development Partnerships**, Steering Committee for the High-Level Event on South-South Cooperation and Capacity Development, 25 March 2010.



- 6 National Statistics Bureau of the People's Republic of China statistical database, annual data.
- 7 DFID was replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) in 2020.
- 8 For details, see CSD (2021).

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