

Policy Briefing

China and Humanitarian Aid Cooperation

China's international humanitarian aid role is increasing. Widely welcomed by recipients, China's aid is also criticised on motivational and technical grounds and surrounded by intensifying political scrutiny. There is an urgent need to ensure that humanitarian cooperation with China is not derailed politically, weakening support for developing economies when they are most in need. Constructive international policy dialogue and knowledge exchange between China and the international community is crucial to re-evaluating and strengthening humanitarian coordination and effectiveness.

Key messages

- **There is a need for better international humanitarian aid (IHA) governance.** Covid-19 demonstrates the need for more effective IHA and emergency response mechanisms.
- **The IHA system is at a critical juncture.** Political scrutiny of China has intensified, threatening cooperation. Dialogue is urgently needed to keep politics out of, and China in, IHA reform.
- **China's IHA approach is different.** China's international humanitarian aid (CHA) policy is part of a holistic development approach.
- **Much of China's humanitarian aid is provided bilaterally.** Offered case-by-case, it attracts criticism that CHA is driven by strategic interests.
- **CHA policy governance has been reformed.** China's 'people-centred philosophy of development' and its new International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) aim to streamline policymaking and raise the status of international development policy. A step in the right direction, it will take time to bed-in and to assess its effectiveness.

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China's humanitarian aid

China has committed to multilateral agreements and processes of humanitarian governance and embraces the principles of humanitarian assistance, such as humanism, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Nonetheless, questions arise as to the extent of China's conformity to existing global norms and conventions. For some, China's approach to humanitarian aid risks undermining decades of effort in building international consensus. Others see the approach as a long overdue shake-up of the system: a 'positive disruption'.

This debate follows from the distinctive nature of China's humanitarian aid. CHA policies are situated within a 'holistic' portfolio of international sustainable economic growth and development, rather than a standalone policy pathway; humanitarian aid policy is more reactive and *ad hoc* than strategic; CHA expenditure varies year-to-year depending on the specific crisis in hand; and this reflects the case-by-case, pragmatic assessment rather than a systematic, comprehensive policy and forward response programme. The CHA year-by-year profile provision is, consequently, highly episodic. People-to-people relations play an increasingly prominent role in China's official discourse. Many of China's semi-civil organisations remain networked to long-established Chinese communities across developing countries. These networks were effectively leveraged at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to acquire urgently needed personal protective equipment (PPE)



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supplies, initially for China itself, and later to distribute CHA in developing countries. More broadly, future 'people-to-people' cooperation can be strengthened if concerns raised over the potential for a 'securitisation' of IHA knowledge-sharing relationships, including relations involving China and the international community, are addressed.

China's Covid-19 humanitarian aid

China's Covid-19 aid has included medical supplies, equipment, and personnel; financial assistance; and knowledge-sharing to over 150 countries and international organisations. In May 2020, President Xi's address to the World Health Assembly made five commitments on Covid-19 cooperation; namely, China would:

1. Provide US\$2bn for a two-year period to support the Covid-19 response and economic and social development in developing countries.
2. Cooperate with the United Nations (UN) to set up a global humanitarian response depot and hub based in China; ensure the operation of anti-epidemic supply chains; and foster 'green corridors' for fast-track transportation and customs clearance.
3. Increase capacity-building in Africa, by establishing a process for Chinese hospitals to partner and cooperate with 30 African hospitals, and by speeding-up construction of the China-funded US\$2m Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) headquarters to strengthen Africa's disease preparedness and control.
4. Ensure vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries by making Covid-19 vaccine development and deployment in China, when available, 'a global public good'.
5. Collaborate with other G20 members to implement the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) for the poorest countries.

Confirming these commitments and seeking to counter criticisms, the Chinese government issued a White Paper in June 2020. The paper sought to: (1) defend China's crisis response

against criticisms, (2) argue that the emergency system it implemented provides a model for other countries, and (3) detail its international cooperation and CHA. Despite these statements, the Chinese government faces questions over the origins of the pandemic, securitisation of the initial official response in Wuhan, transparency, and accountability.

Political scrutiny of China is creating international tensions. Potentially, these tensions can spillover adversely into IHA governance. China plays an increasingly important role in the multilateral system. However, cooperation with, and cooperation by, China may be compromised by political disputes over trade, Hong Kong, Huawei 5G, WeChat, the World Health Organization (WHO), and calls by some Western politicians for a post-crisis 'reckoning' with China and international investigation into the pandemic's origins. Substantial political work and responsible leadership are needed on all sides through meaningful dialogue to minimise adverse spillover into IHA cooperation.

A note on China's humanitarian aid to Africa

China has a long history of providing humanitarian aid to Africa. In recent years, it has contributed: US\$3m in 2018 to assist those displaced in Cameroon's civil war; rice food aid to Yemen through 2019; and US\$800,000 to Zimbabwe's 2019 Cyclone Idai disaster relief. It is reactive, *ad hoc*, and case-by-case, and would be strengthened by a clear, systemic statement and strategy on its humanitarian aid policy to Africa, building on and contextualising its Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and building on its Covid-19 commitments as well as its evolving Africa Policy.

- **CHA to Africa increasingly leverages 'people-to-people' civil society organisations.** Chinese charities, long-established Chinese diasporas, and community networks have been utilised to an unprecedented degree during Covid-19. 'Philanthropic' foundations, such as the Jack Ma Foundation, provided substantial trenches of PPE to African states.



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- **China's aid to Africa is channelled bilaterally but framed multilaterally.** China works through the FOCAC, the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa], the Belt and Road Initiative, the African Union, and Multilateral Development Banks.
- **Debt relief.** China prefers to provide loans rather than grants. New loan data gathered by SAIS-CARI indicates that China accounted for 22 per cent of Africa's public debt stock in 2018 and 29 per cent of debt service in low-income African economies in 2020. The findings show that China is a small lender in over half of the 22 African countries that are facing debt distress. In seven of these countries, China accounts for 25 per cent or more of all public and publicly guaranteed debt. Given this, China's debt relief is relatively small, whilst expectations are high. Under the G20 DSSI, China agreed to suspend Chinese zero-interest loan repayments from May 2020. Some 38 African economies are eligible for DSSI and, pressed by African leaders for stronger action, China announced in June 2020 that it would cancel zero-interest loans due to mature by the end of 2020 for 'relevant' African economies. This was criticised for 'fuelling Africa's debt'. However, SAIS-CARI notes that it targets only a small fraction of China's loans between 2000 and 2018 – around 5 per cent. Given that around half of China's loans are concessional or commercial, any restructuring negotiations are likely to be tough and protracted.

Policy recommendations

- **Strengthen international dialogue and development cooperation.** The pressing policy need is for focused international dialogue to minimise spillover from wider political tensions and to strengthen future humanitarian aid cooperation. The G20, with its more flexible policy space and its multi-sector participation, should take a lead in facilitating this dialogue.
- **Humanitarian aid dialogue must tackle political issues constructively.** Dealing with issues specifically relevant to humanitarian aid cooperation is critical. This will be tough going: the politics of IHA remain. Major issues are not easily separable from the wider context; for example, US–China differences over WHO are interwoven with domestic election politics in the US and leadership

standing in China, whilst humanitarian debt relief is embedded in issues of global and regional political economy and strategic interests.

- **Improve data-sharing and transparency.** Dialogue and coordination would be strengthened further by all parties contributing full data on their global humanitarian aid. This should build on: the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Financial Tracking Service; commitments made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit; the International Aid Transparency Initiative common standard for publishing data on humanitarian funding; and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development–Development Assistance Committee (OECD–DAC) Creditor Reporting System. ■

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Further reading

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Krebs, H. (2014) **'The "Chinese Way"? The Evolution of Chinese Humanitarianism'**, *Policy Brief 62*, London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute

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