

China In Africa

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Clip transcript:

Giles Mohan:

These cranes show the importance of infrastructure to our globalised economy. Flourishing economies need infrastructure to maintain growth and – like London – China’s cities are expanding rapidly.

To feed this growth, China pulls in raw materials from all over the world, especially Africa. Much of this is oil, but also metals like copper and iron. Critics claim that China is ripping Africa off, and using its financial and political muscle to secure one-sided deals. But how true is this claim, and who is really benefitting?

Research that I carried out in The Open University’s Maths, Computing & Technology Faculty shows that China does get a lot out of its dealings with Africa, but also that some Africans do pretty well out of this relationship too.

From the sale of raw materials, some African countries are among the world’s fastest-growing economies, with growth rates at – or even above – 10% per year. But unlike China, Africa lacks the infrastructure for further growth. And this is where China can help. In exchange for raw materials, the Chinese offer African governments cheap infrastructure loans. It’s mutually-beneficial trade. This infrastructure can be anything from new roads, power stations or telecommunications networks.

African cities are dotted with cranes, as new projects get under way. And ordinary Africans are gaining from things like more reliable electricity supply and easier access to the internet. But this new infrastructure is not evenly-distributed, and the focus on cities means that very little investment goes to rural areas, where most Africans still secure a living through farming – so not everybody benefits.

One group that does benefit is the African leaders, who claim credit for the infrastructure – which may keep them in power for longer. But how far their citizens can hold them to account is an African problem that long predates China’s arrival.