

China seeks stronger ties with Uganda

Cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, among others, are key in strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries.

BY ELIZABETH KAMURUNGI

The Chinese Embassy in Uganda has declared 2026 the year of people-to-people exchange between the two countries, a move aimed at further strengthening bilateral relations by sharing experiences, culture, knowledge, and skills.

The Chinese Embassy Charge d' Affaires, Fan Xuecheng, said more Ugandans have an opportunity to engage with China in trade, education, cultural experiences, among others, a shift from the predominantly government-to-government engagements over the years.

"So in this year, 2026, we will have a series of activities in this theme, and we welcome the participation of everyone," he said during a China-Uganda Youth Exchange Reception at the Kampala Embassy last Thursday.

In January, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, along with African leaders, officially launched the 2026 China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges at the African Union Headquarters in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

Mr Fan said Ugandans have expanded opportunities to learn from China's development journey to become the second biggest economy in the world through innovation, technology, and a strong value system.

"Our economy has experienced a



Mr Fan Xuecheng, the charge d' affaires at Chinese Embassy (left), hands over prizes to some of the former students in China during the China-Uganda Youth People-to-People and Cultural Exchange programme at the Chinese Embassy in Kampala last week. PHOTO/ABUBAKER LUBOWA

transformation from an economy driven by investment and export to an economy driven by high-quality productive forces. That means driven by technology and innovation. China is also among the top 10 most innovative nations in whole world," he said.

Diplomats underscored the importance of cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and public diplomacy in strengthening the six decades of bilateral relations between the two countries.

Mr John Paul Rugaba, the president of Ugandan Students in China, welcomed the initiative.

"On people-to-people exchanges, education is the biggest thing because if you

want to build a country from scratch, human capital is vital. You can give someone money, but if they don't know how to use it to impact their community, then that money is wasted. I think the thing that China helped me most was exposure," Mr Rugaba said.

Mr Rugaba has been a student in China for eight years and is focused on selling African culture and stories to the diverse Chinese population.

"I went to study, but over time, I have developed a lot of skills and met a lot of people. I am a podcaster back in China, the one of the few African-oriented podcast in China. Trying to give African stories to a Chinese and diverse diaspora community. We are trying to tell them about Uganda, and promote our tourism," he said.

"Uganda and China should work on more slots in the education arrangement. Secondly is easing the visa processes. China has opened up visa-free

BILATERAL RELATIONS

In the past decade, China has increased its engagement with Uganda and African countries in trade, financing of infrastructure projects, and often positions itself as an alternative to Western powers. Kampala has often applauded China's approach to bilateral relations largely for its non-involvement in its internal politics.

travel for 30 days for many European and Western countries. That should be done to the African countries because, as is usually said, the win-win partnership," he added.

Annually, tens of Ugandan students secure scholarships, while hundreds of others, including students, professional and civil servants, benefit from short-term training opportunities offered by the Chinese government.

As China further expands its influence in Africa, a section of young Ugandans is positioning itself to tap into the available opportunities by learning the Chinese language and culture.

"We study their culture, language, and share experiences. There are many opportunities in learning about the culture because now, Uganda and indeed other countries are aligning with China for business. I think I am assured of a job," said Abu Kyeyune, a student at Lyanzi Institute of Technology, pursuing a diploma in Chinese Language and Culture.

Ms Angella Nahaabwe, another former student, said: "The Chinese economy is growing very fast, and if you adapt to their language, communication becomes easy, and so does trade and relations. This diploma not only gives me an edge, but it is also very interesting to learn about Chinese culture and get to know the people."

Dr Doreen Ankunda, the president of the China Alumni Association in Uganda, emphasised the importance of Uganda-China study opportunities.

"Studying in China changed my career tremendously. I managed to come back and I became a lecturer. While doing my master's, I noticed that I can actually do a PhD. So I did a PhD in public administration and management. I didn't have any plans of going into education or being a lecturer, but because I gained all that knowledge and experience, I managed to get where I am," she said.

China and Uganda boast of decades-long relations, starting in 1962.

