

# China's Evolving Role in Comoros: A Multifaceted Development Partnership

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## Abstract

*This study analyzes China's multifaceted development assistance to the Union of the Comoros, highlighting its strategic, multisectoral approach across infrastructure, education, health, and economic sectors. Over two decades, China has become the leading infrastructure partner, increasing its share from 5% in 2000 to an estimated 65% in 2025, with major projects improving connectivity and institutional capacity. In education, China's involvement grew to 21%, focusing on formal and vocational training as well as military exchanges. In health, Chinese contributions rose to about 40%, nearly matching France, through hospital construction, medical staff deployment, and public health campaigns like malaria control and COVID-19 aid. Economically, China supports fisheries, spice production, and trade, expanding influence in clothing and electronics markets. Cultural initiatives strengthen bilateral ties, enhancing China's soft power. Public approval of Chinese aid is high, reflecting its visibility and effectiveness. Overall, China combines large infrastructure projects with soft development efforts, establishing itself as a reliable partner fostering sustainable development in Comoros.*

**Keywords:** China, development assistance, the Union of the Comoros.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Union of the Comoros and China have maintained a strategic bilateral cooperation for several decades, representing a notable example of South-South development aid[1] (Kumar). This partnership, characterized by significant Chinese involvement in infrastructure, professional training, and economic transformation, stands out in the African context due to its scale and impact (Liu and Li, 2025). Currently, the development of China's relations with East Africa is progressing positively[2], and the Comoros occupies a strategic position in the Indian Ocean region where Chinese aid and investment have been crucial in public infrastructure, capacity building, and economic growth[3], [4] offers a detailed analysis of the geographical and economic distribution of Chinese aid in Africa. His study reveals that, following the "One China"

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principle, Chinese assistance balances support between distant countries based on economic ties and closer neighbors, fostering a mutually beneficial Sino-African partnership. This trend is evident across official development assistance and direct subsidies. Sectorally, aid for infrastructure industries targets economically proximate countries, while manufacturing investments tend toward economically distant nations. These investments enhance recipient countries' development potential, risk management, and foundational capacities, reflecting the dual normative and pragmatic nature of Chinese aid that promotes sustainable Sino-African coexistence[5].

Similarly, [6] find that Chinese aid significantly boosts economic growth in Africa, with infrastructure acting as a key mediator, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Liangmin (2023) highlights a paradigm shift in China's public health engagement, expanding from traditional medical teams to broader involvement in health infrastructure, malaria control, emergency response, and global health goods supply[7]. Despite this inclusive approach, challenges related to intercultural practices, local context, and multidisciplinary experience remain, calling for systematic strategies to address them.

Research focused on the Comoros further enriches this perspective. [8]provides a comprehensive historical and cultural overview of the Comoros, tracing its transition from colonization to a relatively stable development phase. A report by the International Exchange Service Center of the Ministry of Agriculture reviews agricultural systems and policies in the Comoros and neighboring countries, detailing challenges and recommending improvements in agricultural development and Sino-Comorian cooperation.

[9] Emphasizes the urgent need to enhance vocational education in the Comoros, given rapid population growth and limited economic development. He advocates for coordinated cooperation between governments, enterprises, and educational institutions to diversify training and cultivate versatile, applied talents, thus strengthening China's influence in the region.

Finally, [10] underlines the importance of port infrastructure and transportation capacity in Africa's growing economy. His analysis of the Comorian port's characteristics and development potential offers valuable insights for future investment and strategic planning.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to analyze the perceptions and impacts of international development partners in Comoros between 2000 and 2025. The methodology combines quantitative surveys, documentary analysis, and semi-structured interviews, allowing for a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of foreign involvement across multiple sectors.

The core of the research is based on a quantitative survey conducted among a representative sample of the Comorian population. Participants were stratified across various socio-economic groups to ensure diverse and balanced insights. Standardized questionnaires were administered to measure public perception, recognition of international projects, and overall satisfaction with the contributions of major partners. To complement the field data, a documentary review was carried out focusing on foreign investments, particularly from China, France, and Qatar. This included the identification of key infrastructure and social projects such as hospitals, roads, and public institutions and the estimation of their visibility and perceived impact. Public

and private investment indicators were used to approximate each country's market share in the infrastructure and development sectors.

The inclusion of a temporal dimension (2000–2025) allowed for the observation of long-term trends and turning points, notably the rise of China as a dominant actor and the gradual decline of Qatar's influence post-2015. The analysis also considered shifts in public opinion in relation to the nature and visibility of projects.

Lastly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including diplomats, local government officials, and sector experts. These interviews enriched the quantitative findings by providing deeper insights into the strategic motivations, implementation challenges, and tangible outcomes associated with different types of development assistance.

By integrating these three methods, the study achieves a robust, multi-layered understanding of the evolving role of international actors in Comoros' development landscape.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 China in Comoros: Infrastructure, Human Development, and Soft Power

Table 1 highlights the multisectoral nature of China's development assistance to Comoros, reflecting a structured and results-driven approach. In the infrastructure sector, projects such as road construction in Mohéli, airport upgrades, and the building of the People's Palace illustrate China's focus on enhancing physical connectivity and institutional capacity. This approach aligns with China's broader South-South cooperation model, which emphasizes tangible, state-led development [11]. In the health sector, the deployment of 172 medical personnel since 1994, along with malaria eradication campaigns and COVID-19 support, has contributed to a significant reduction in disease burden and a strengthening of the national health system. The education and training sector through scholarships, technical training, and cultural exchanges demonstrates China's long-term commitment to human capital development, in line with pledges made under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) [12]. Support for the economy and agriculture particularly in fisheries and spice production reflects targeted efforts to diversify Comoros' economy and improve income generation [13]. This strategy is closely aligned with similar initiatives in Malawi, where collaboration with multiple stakeholders is also strengthening the spice value chain [14]. Finally, cultural and people-to-people exchanges, including performances, exhibitions, and Mandarin language instruction, reflect China's use of soft-power diplomacy to foster deeper Sino-Comorian relations. Overall, the table illustrates a comprehensive dual-track strategy that combines hard infrastructure investment with soft development sectors to promote broad-based and sustainable outcomes.

**Table 1: China's Multisectoral Development Assistance to Comoros: Key Interventions and Impacts by Sector**

Field of Intervention	Concrete Actions by China	Impact
Infrastructures	Roads (Mohéli), airport, broadcasting center, People's Palace	Improved transportation, connectivity, and institutional strengthening
Heath	Deployment of medical teams (172 people since 1994), anti-malaria project, COVID-19 aid	Drastic reduction in malaria, improved healthcare, strengthened health system
Education & Training	Scholarships, technical training, cultural exchanges	Strengthening of human capital, development of local skills
Economy & Agriculture	Support for fisheries, spice cultivation, cooperative project	Economic diversification, increased income
Culture & Human Exchange	Cultural activities, performances, exhibitions, Chinese language teaching	Strengthened Sino-Comorian ties, better cultural understanding

**3.2 From Roads to Hospitals: How China Became Comoros' Leading Development Partner**

Figure.1 illustrates China's rising prominence as Comoros' leading infrastructure partner over the past two decades, based on survey data collected from a diverse sample of the population. Approximately 58% of respondents acknowledge China's growing role, with its share in infrastructure projects increasing markedly from 5% in 2000 to an estimated 20% by 2025 a steady and significant progression. This trend aligns with broader patterns across Africa, where China has emerged as a dominant actor in the infrastructure sector [15]

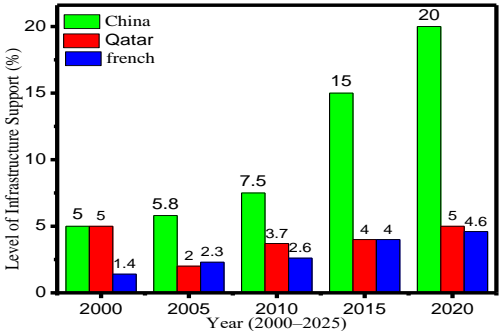
This upward trajectory is largely driven by Chinese investment in highly visible and strategic infrastructure projects. According to the Chinese diplomat accredited to the Union of Comoros, flagship initiatives include the construction of the ORTC television station, the Omnisport Stadium in Malouzini, the renovation of Prince Saïd Ibrahim International Airport, the new National Assembly building, and modern hospitals in Anjouan and Elmarouf. These achievements are not only symbolic but also tangible milestones. In the health sector, for example, China's cooperation has been instrumental in malaria control efforts, marked by close collaboration between Chinese experts and Comorian personnel, which has led to significant reductions in both morbidity and mortality.

Such projects have enhanced China's image as a reliable, committed, and long-term development partner. Public perception data reflect this growing approval: 65% of the Comorian population expresses a favorable view of China's involvement far surpassing France's 11% and approaching levels previously attributed to Qatar. In contrast, Qatar's influence, once notable at 8% in 2000, declined sharply to 3% after 2015, coinciding with a diplomatic rift around 2016. Meanwhile, France has maintained a modest but steady presence, with a 10-11% share focused primarily on school construction and rehabilitation. While France's contributions remain relevant, they are often less visible and less symbolically powerful in the eyes of the public.

In parallel, China has also provided technical expertise, training programs, and medical supplies, thereby strengthening Comoros' healthcare system. On the economic front, the bilateral relationship has deepened through a series of agreements in agriculture, fisheries, and infrastructure, which support local economic development, stimulate trade, and promote Chinese investment in Comoros. These efforts help solidify the foundations of a durable bilateral friendship.

In the sociocultural sphere, China actively promotes mutual understanding through exhibitions, performances, and other cultural exchange programs, further reinforcing people-to-people ties.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that China's aid strategy in Comoros has gone beyond sheer numbers to focus on large-scale, high-impact projects. These initiatives have improved living conditions, enhanced national capabilities, and positioned China as a strategic and trusted development partner. This approach stands in stark contrast to other international actors and helps explain the increasingly positive public perception of Chinese engagement.



**Figure1:** China's Growing Role in Comoros' Infrastructure Development (2000–2025): Public Perception and Project Share Evolution

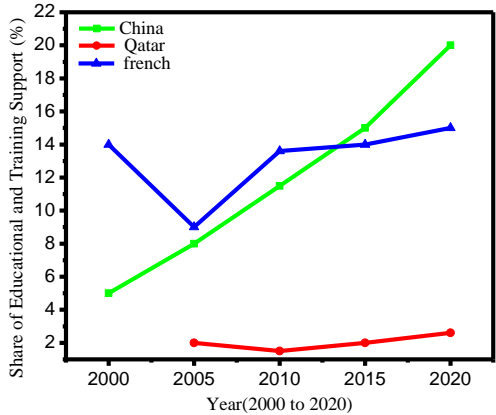
**3.3 Educating Influence: China's Expanding Role in Comorian Human Capital Development**

Figure 2: clearly illustrates the growing prominence of China in Comoros' education and capacity-building sectors over the past two decades. While France maintained a leading position with approximately 14% of educational aid in 2000 and a similar 15% share in 2020, China's share increased significantly, rising from 5% to 21% over the same period. Although France has recently begun to reassert its presence notably through the rehabilitation of school facilities its efforts remain challenged by high costs and limited enrollment growth, despite rising demand. In contrast, China awarded 21% of all scholarships in 2020, compared to France's 14%, marking a notable shift in educational support dynamics.

This growth reflects China's expanding role beyond economic assistance, encompassing a comprehensive development strategy that integrates academic education, vocational training, and institutional capacity building. Unlike France's stable but somewhat static contribution, China's approach is dynamic and holistic, targeting both formal and technical education as well as skills transfer and on-the-ground expertise. This is captured in the unified metric shown in Figure 2, which aggregates various forms of capacity-building support.

In addition, China's engagement includes annual military training exchanges, suggesting that its cooperation spans both civil and defense sectors, and reflects a broader commitment to national capacity enhancement. By comparison, Qatar's contribution has remained minimal and inconsistent, never exceeding 2%, while newer actors such as India and Turkey have recently entered the scene but continue to represent less than 0.5% of the total share. Overall, the data indicate that China is not only closing the gap with France but is positioning itself as a key partner in Comoros' human capital development. This integrated and strategic approach is aligned with

China's broader development agenda, emphasizing sustainable autonomy through knowledge transfer and skill enhancement.



**Figure2:** Evolution of Educational and Capacity-Building Support in Comoros (2000–2020): Comparative Contributions of China, France, and Other Partners

**3.4 China's Evolving Role in Comoros' Health Sector: From Marginal Actor to Strategic Partner**

Table 2 presents the evolving landscape of international contributions to Comoros' health sector from 2000 to 2021, highlighting the shifting roles of China, France, and Qatar. During the first decade (2000-2009), France dominated with an estimated 45% share, primarily supporting basic health infrastructure and medical equipment. At that time, China's contribution was relatively modest, accounting for 20%, mainly focused on initial hospital development projects, while Qatar's 10% share was largely comprised of equipment donations.

In contrast, the period from 2010 to 2019 reveals a notable increase in China's engagement, with its share rising to 35%, nearly matching France's 40%. This surge stems from China's broadened involvement in the sector, including hospital construction, medical personnel training, and the provision of modern healthcare equipment. These actions reflect China's wider health diplomacy agenda in Africa, where investment in health systems and capacity building strengthens bilateral relationships (Li & Zhang, 2019). While France has maintained a stable presence, its focus has shifted toward rural health services, suggesting a complementary rather than competitive dynamic with China. Qatar's contribution declined slightly to 8%, indicating continued but limited engagement.

China's deeper involvement is further underscored by its medical team deployments since 1994 and its targeted malaria control programs, which have yielded tangible public health improvements in Comoros (World Health Organization, 2020). These actions align closely with the FOCAC commitments to scale up health sector support across partner countries (FOCAC, 2018). Table 1 illustrates China's transformation from a secondary actor to a pivotal health partner in Comoros, with a focus on infrastructure, human resource development, and disease control. This trajectory showcases how health diplomacy has become a key element in China's soft power strategy and its pursuit of sustainable development cooperation in the Indian Ocean region.

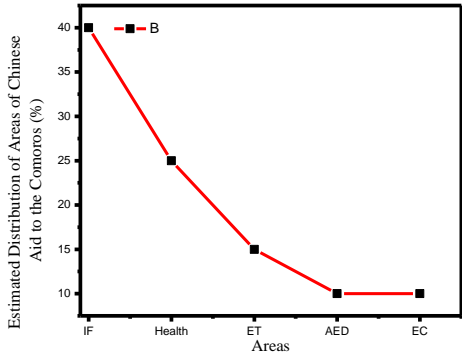
**Table 2: International Contributions to the Comorian Health Sector (2000–2021): Comparative Roles of China, France, and Qatar**

Period	China (Gov't + Private Sector)	France	Qatar	Main Areas of Support
2000–2009	20%	45%	10%	Basic health infrastructure, equipment (France); initial Chinese hospital projects
2010–2019	35%	40%	8%	Construction of hospitals, training of medical staff, supply of equipment (China); continued French support for rural health
2020–2021 (Covid)	65%	20%	5%	Covid-19 medical aid (PPE, ventilators, tests), Jack Ma Foundation donations, mobile health missions

**3.5 China’s Multifaceted Health Engagement in Comoros: Government and Private Sector Synergies**

Figure 3 illustre la place croissante de la Chine en tant qu’acteur central dans le développement du secteur de la santé aux Comores. Selon les données recueillies, la contribution chinoise est perçue à hauteur de 40 % par la population, en raison de son engagement visible et diversifié. Ce soutien s’est matérialisé par la construction d’hôpitaux modernes, l’envoi régulier de personnel médical qualifié, ainsi que l’appui à des campagnes de santé publique d’envergure, notamment dans la lutte contre le paludisme et la réponse à la pandémie de COVID-19.

Ces interventions, à la fois structurelles et opérationnelles, ont contribué à renforcer durablement le système de santé comorien et à améliorer les conditions sanitaires des populations. La perception positive de la Chine est également soutenue par l’implication du secteur privé, notamment à travers des dons et des initiatives de la Jack Ma Foundation et du groupe Alibaba [16]. Ensemble, ces actions consolident l’image de la Chine comme un partenaire stratégique, fiable et engagé dans le domaine de la santé aux Comores[16].



**Figure 3: Perceived Impact of International Actors in Comoros’ Health Sector: Contributions by China, IF: Infrastructures. Heath, ET: Education & Training, AED: Economy Developing & Agriculture, EC: Culture & Human Exchange**

**3.6 Trade Shares by Key Partners in Comoros: Product Categories and Market Presence**

Table.3 highlights the diversity of Comoros’ trade partners, illustrating both the nature and intensity of trade flows with key countries. France stands out as a dominant partner, particularly in the cosmetics and used car sectors, accounting for

approximately 60% and 50% of traded volumes, respectively. This dominance reflects enduring historical ties and strong consumer preference, further supported by high qualitative appreciation in these product segments.

By contrast, trade with Saudi Arabia remains limited, especially in traditional garments like boubous (5%), and nearly absent in the used car market, indicating weak commercial integration. Qatar and Turkey also maintain minimal shares in clothing trade, at 2% and 5%, respectively, pointing to marginal engagement.

The United Arab Emirates exhibits a mixed profile, with a significant share in used car trade (62%) but a smaller role in clothing (15%), indicating a specialization in automotive imports.

Pakistan dominates the rice market with 90% of trade in this category, highlighting its crucial role as a food supplier to Comoros.

China holds an important position in clothing (40%) and electronics (60%), reflecting its expanding market influence and product diversity, consistent with broader regional trends of growing Chinese economic presence.

Regional African partners, such as Madagascar (35%) and Tanzania (15%), mainly supply vegetables and cereals, albeit with moderate to low appreciation levels. Mauritius maintains a limited presence, primarily via Agricultural Reciprocity Rights (DRA), while Nairobi shows no significant commercial participation.

Overall, Table 3 reveals a trade landscape largely dominated by France and China, with select Gulf and South Asian countries playing modest yet targeted roles. Trade with neighboring African nations remains limited, highlighting potential avenues for deeper regional economic integration and development.

**Table 3: Commercial Trade Exchanges and Contributions of Key Partners to Comoros**

Country	Commercial Exchanges	Quantities	Appreciations
France	- Cosmetics - Used cars	- High	- 60% for cosmetics - 50% for used cars
Saudi Arabia	- Boubou - Used cars	- Very Low	- 5% for boubou - 0% for used cars
Qatar	- Clothing	- Very Low	- 2%
United Arab Emirates	- Used cars - Clothing	- Medium Low	- 62% for used cars - 15% for clothing
Turkey	- Clothing	- Very Low	- 5%
Pakistan	- Rice	- Very High	- 90%
China	- Clothing - Electronic devices	- Very High	- 40% for clothing - 60% for electronic devices
Madagascar	- Vegetables and cereals	- Moderately High	- 35%
Tanzania	- Vegetables and cereals	- Low	- 15%
Mauritius	- DRA (Agricultural Reciprocity Rights)	- Low	- 10%
Nairobi	-	- None	- 0%

**3.7 Evolution and Impact of Chinese Development Assistance in Comoros**

Since the 1960s, China’s aid to Comoros has evolved through three major phases, reflecting a gradual adaptation to the country’s needs. Initially, from 1960 to 1980, the focus was on essential infrastructure projects such as the Nioumakélé water supply system and government buildings, laying the foundation for local development [17]. Between 1980 and 1990, Chinese aid diversified to include education and health



through scholarships, medical teams, and agricultural support, deepening bilateral ties [18, 19]. Since 1990, cooperation has prioritized sustainable development, combining large-scale infrastructure modernization, healthcare system strengthening with training and equipment, and economic agreements in key sectors[20]. . Simultaneously, cultural initiatives such as exchanges and Mandarin instruction have enhanced China's soft power and mutual understanding [21].This progression reflects China's integrated, strategic, and sustainable approach, establishing it as a pivotal partner in Comoros' socio-economic development.

This article examines the evolution and impact of China's development assistance to the Union of Comoros, which has gradually become a key strategic partner across multiple sectors. Since the 1960s, Sino-Comorian cooperation has evolved from a focus on physical infrastructure to an integrated, multisectoral approach encompassing education, health, the economy, and culture. In infrastructure, China has significantly enhanced national connectivity through major projects such as airport renovations, road construction, and institutional buildings, becoming the leading partner in this area. In education and capacity building, China has surpassed France's contributions through increased engagement in scholarships, vocational training, and military exchanges. In health, China's involvement has grown with hospital construction, medical personnel training, and public health initiatives, notably malaria control and COVID-19 response, positioning China as a major player alongside France.

Economically, China has provided targeted support in agriculture, fisheries, and spice value chains, promoting local development and diversification. Cultural initiatives and human exchanges have further strengthened bilateral ties, enhancing China's soft power. Public perception surveys show high approval of Chinese aid, viewed as effective, visible, and sustainable. Overall, China's strategy combines large-scale infrastructure investments with human development efforts, promoting balanced and sustainable socio-economic growth, and exemplifying a coherent economic and cultural diplomacy tailored to Comoros' needs.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

China's development assistance to the Union of Comoros has evolved into a multifaceted and strategic partnership that addresses both immediate needs and long-term sustainable growth. From its early focus on infrastructure and basic humanitarian aid to its current comprehensive approach covering education, health, economy, and culture, China has played a pivotal role in shaping Comoros' socio-economic landscape. The combination of large-scale infrastructure projects, targeted economic support, human capital development, and cultural exchanges has strengthened bilateral ties and enhanced Comoros' resilience in the face of various challenges.

China's approach, based on long-term commitments and adaptable strategies, contrasts with that of other international actors, offering a balanced model of development that prioritizes both state-led investments and human development. The visible success of these initiatives, reflected in the high public approval of Chinese aid, underscores the effectiveness of this integrated partnership. As Comoros continues its development trajectory, China remains an essential partner, helping to shape a future based on mutual benefit, shared growth, and sustainable progress.

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