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Beijing: Chinese entrepreneurs doing business with Africa have committed to a Declaration of Social Responsibility to guide their conduct on the continent. The code of conduct was agreed to at a meeting here of entrepreneurs from China and more than 50 African countries on the sidelines of the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the main framework for China-Africa relations.

The declaration seemed designed to address reports of various complaints about Chinese companies in Africa, ranging from the abuse of workers, through dumping poor quality goods on the continent, to focusing too much on extracting raw materials and not adding value to them before export.

Yu Ping, the vice chairperson of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade told journalists that the Declaration of Social Responsibility was one of the main outcomes of the entrepreneurs conference. He said the declaration called upon Chinese entrepreneurs to consolidate a new type of relations with Africa, based on the principles of equality and the long-term development of Africa.

They agreed to respect African customs, improve the quality of their products sold in Africa, add value to their products, upgrade local industry, transfer technology to locals and provide social services such as medical care.

In general, the declaration committed the Chinese companies to follow the guidelines of FOCAC, which completed a two-day meeting at ministerial level of Friday, and the declaration would be implemented under the guidance of the Chinese government, Yu said.

At the opening of the ministerial on Thursday, Chinese President Hu Jintao had committed China to greater support for Africa's economic objectives, including adding value to products and boosting cross-border infrastructure to promote regional integration.

Yu was asked why the Chinese companies had decided to establish a Declaration of Social Responsibility, would it be compulsory and would there be any sanctions for companies which flouted it.

He said in general corporate responsibility "was a matter of ethics rather than law so the best way to strengthen social responsibility through education and guidance".

Yu alluded to reports that some Africa workers and customers had complained of abuse by Chinese business managers, and of poor Chinese products. He said much of the western reporting about abuses by Chinese companies was misleading and that Chinese companies were generally doing well in Africa.

The government was encouraging them to be more active in explaining the good work they did.

A note to readers: this article, written by Peter Fabricius, was posted in the print edition of Business Report in the Sunday Independent's edition, 22 July 2012, Page 1.