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Introduction

1 Existing literature has analysed how China-Zimbabwe trade relations are characterized by a trade deficit that favours China and how Chinese aid is hurting African economies, including Zimbabwe. Some scholars have studied increased Chinese investments in Zimbabwe and the implications for Western countries, while others explored China’s increased investments in Zimbabwe in relation to its deteriorating human rights record. Very few, however, have addressed the underlying socio-economic implications for society of these investments and development projects—an aspect which this paper will look at. In addition, the paper analyses the constraints faced by Zimbabwe when negotiating development funds with China. This will help us to understand how the specific challenges faced at the negotiating and implementation stage affect the eventual outcome of a project—not just its actual realisation, but also its mid-term consequences for Zimbabwean society, notably the increase of productivity, economic growth and poverty reduction. This paper also contributes to our understanding of how foreign players with different objectives and expectations might affect a nation’s political and economic landscape.

2 Developing countries depend on development financing in the form of direct loans, loan guarantees, and a variety of other products to support and enable infrastructure investments (Ingram and Mosbacher 2018). Development finance aims to establish proactive approaches that leverage public resources to solve the needs of businesses, industries, developers and investors (CDFA 2021). According to the China Africa Research Initiative at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced and International Studies (SAIS-CARI), China provided 1,141 loan items to African governments and their state-
owned enterprises between 2000 and 2019 (Usman 2021). Development finance institutions such as China Exim Bank—China’s state-owned bank that is its main financial arm in Africa—financed the expansion of Victoria Falls Airport at $150 million and Kariba South Hydropower Station at $533 million in 2016 and 2019, respectively (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China 2016; Norton Fulbright 2015). In 2018, Zimbabwe’s external and domestic debt totalled US$18 billion with the share between domestic and external debt almost equal and 34% of the external debt owed to China (AFRODAD 2018).

The paper firstly seeks to show what underlying constraints Zimbabwe faced when negotiating the terms of development financing with China, and vice versa. It then explores the underlying constraints that China and Zimbabwe faced at the implementation stage when Chinese contractors embarked on actualizing the construction of the infrastructure projects funded by China. Lastly, the analysis developed in this paper will provide an informed basis for economic policy review and reform with the aim of enhancing maximum mutual benefit from economic exchanges between China and Zimbabwe.

This study relies much on existing online-based secondary data including online books, journal articles and websites, and to a limited extent primary data from the hands-on experience the researcher had with selective key respondents during her PhD fieldwork in late 2019 and 2020. Literature was selected based on relevance and availability. The study utilizes findings on negotiations in China-Zimbabwe relations that helped secure development financing and on socio-economic implications of the implementation of funded projects, e.g., when Chinese contractors embarked on the construction projects in Zimbabwe. The article uses the outcomes of negotiations (e.g. for the upgrade of Victoria Falls Airport and Kariba South Hydropower Station) that yielded funding for projects as a basis to compare China’s and Zimbabwe’s respective positioning for the period 2000–2018 when President Mugabe ruled.

**Literature Review**

China has played a central role in driving and/or funding a significant proportion of Africa’s infrastructure projects. Over 65% of Chinese loans toward African countries are channelled into infrastructure sectors (Brautigam et al. 2020). Investments in infrastructure development on the continent have been spurred by the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), a continent-wide common framework adopted by the African Union (AU) in 2012 to address infrastructure deficits in the transport, cross-border water, energy, and telecommunication/ICT sectors (African Union 2021). The AU envisioned that PIDA would encourage African countries to develop regional infrastructure that would positively affect productivity, enhance economic growth and contribute to poverty reduction. Between 2000 and 2019, Chinese financiers had committed $153 billion to African public-sector borrowers towards economic development with the yearly lending commitments peaking in 2013 at the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (Usman 2020). In 2019, China committed $7 billion of loan financing to the continent (ibid.).

Most of China’s development financing towards African states has been founded on the deliberations and negotiations of the Forum on China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). At the 2006 inaugural Beijing FOCAC summit, China committed over $5 billion in
development financing followed by $10 billion, $20 billion, and $60 billion at the succeeding 2006, 2009, and 2015 summits, respectively (Calabrese and Tang 2020). FOCAC was founded in October 2000 as a platform for China’s cooperation with China-friendly African states. The aim was that FOCAC would be characterised by pragmatic cooperation and equality and mutual benefit. FOCAC’s agenda has been discreetly negotiated through dialogues at the head-of-state, ambassadorial, senior official, director-general, and ministerial levels, alternating between Chinese and African venues (Nantulya 2021). In 2018, 51 African presidents attended the Beijing FOCAC summit where commitments were made, bilateral agreements signed, and China pledged $60 billion over the succeeding three years (Calabrese and Tang 2020).

Sino-Africa negotiations have helped African countries secure development financing from China. Through natural resource-backed bilateral negotiations, Angola secured Chinese financing for post-war reconstruction initiatives from 2004 onwards, including a $3.5 billion satellite town of Kilamba Kiaxi on the outskirts of Luanda (Usman 2021). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) secured Chinese loans following negotiations in a memorandum of understanding outlining a deal worth over $9 billion to use mineral exports to finance infrastructure projects under the Sicomines deal (Landry 2018). Guinea’s bauxite-backed negotiations helped secure $507 million from China Exim Bank and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) in 2017 for the construction of two road projects (Acker and Brautigam 2021).

In Ghana, China Exim Bank financed part of the construction of the Bui Dam with a generating capacity of 400 MW, for $622 million, with China’s Sinohydro undertaking the construction work (Tang and Shen 2019). Although Ethiopia received $652 million in loan financing from China in 2017 alone, Ethiopia directly financed much of the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) for $4.5 billion with Chinese companies Voith Hydro Shanghai and China Gezhouba Group being awarded contracts worth $112 million and $40.1 million respectively to help with the implementation of the project through construction work (Millar 2020). China might not have directly participated in lending for the construction costs of GERD, but it provided $1.2 billion in 2013 to build Power Transmission lines connecting GERD to Ethiopia’s major towns and cities.

Yet recent publications (e.g. Hogwe & Banda [2017]; Maunganidze et al. [2013]) on Sino-Africa relations have portrayed African governments as the party that compromises the most at the negotiation table with China. Kenya’s example is telling in this regard. In 2017, Kenya flagged off operations of the Chinese-built standard gauge railway built from the port town of Mombasa to the capital Nairobi for $3.6 billion and a further $1.5 billion for the extension to Naivasha, an inland container depot town (Otieno 2021). The project was plagued by under-utilisation typified by ferrying 5.039 and 3.25 million tons of cargo in 2018 and January-September 2019, respectively, below its 22 million tons capacity (Otele 2020). Furthermore, Afristar (majority-owned by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC)) demanded that the Kenya Railways Corporation pay outstanding bills amounting to $329 million before an imminent May 2022 government takeover. The paper will go on to explore the Zimbabwe-China case of investment and development deals as examples of the controversial bilateral partnerships China and African governments are confronted with during negotiations for funding infrastructure projects, and the challenges that subsist at the implementation level.
China-Zimbabwe Relations

10 China-Zimbabwe economic negotiations merit attention because of the controversies that plagued Zimbabwe’s domestic politics at the turn of the 21st century following the international community’s reaction to its land reform policies and constitutional changes (Alao 2014). China had to delicately balance its relations with Zimbabwe in order to maintain friendly relations with other African countries that viewed Zimbabwe’s domestic politics less critically. To sustain China’s support, Zimbabwe also had to adjust its domestic political approach in the light of Beijing’s reputation with human rights groups.

11 The economic negotiations between China and Zimbabwe in the context of the Look East policy (LEP) have given Zimbabwe some alternative sources of development financing and investments (Chipaike and Bischoff 2019). China-Zimbabwe relations date from pre-independence negotiations when Robert Mugabe failed in 1979 to secure Soviet backing and turned to China, which provided his guerrilla fighters with weapons and training (Vines 2017; Nyabiage 2019). The help culminated in the two countries formally establishing diplomatic relations on Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980 and Robert Mugabe touring Beijing as prime minister the following year. Following Zimbabwe’s difficult political and economic trajectory at the turn of the 21st century, President Robert Mugabe adopted the Look East Policy (LEP) in 2003 to boost bilateral relations with China.

12 The relationship with China was revived to give Zimbabwe an alternative development and diplomatic partner following Zimbabwe’s isolation by the West due to its controversial Land Reform Policy of 2000. In re-adopting the LEP in 2003, President Robert Mugabe declared that “we have turned East where the sun rises and given our backs to the West where the sun sets” (Chun and Zhang 2014). Between 1994 and 2003, several Chinese companies invested in Zimbabwe. By 2008, there were over 35 Chinese economic development projects in Zimbabwe which were valued at $600 million (Sun 2016). As a result of the LEP, China-Zimbabwe bilateral relations grew exponentially with regard to economic ventures (Abegunrin and Manyeruke 2020). Between 2004 and 2009, Zimbabwe received $103 million in official Chinese development assistance through concessional loans, grants, the construction of a hospital and two schools, and contributions to the World Food Programme (Chipaike and Bischoff 2019).

13 Between 2009 and 2013, Chinese investments in Zimbabwe rose by over 5,000% (Kadzere 2014). Yearly, Chinese foreign direct investment increased from $11.2 million in 2009 to $602 million in 2013, eventually totalling over $1.3 billion over the period, with the Chinese investors largely focusing on agriculture, mining, and manufacturing (Chun and Zhang 2014). By 2013, China had invested $3.5 billion in Zimbabwe (AFRODAD 2018). In 2012, China-Zimbabwe bilateral negotiations helped secure a $150 million concessional loan for the expansion of Victoria Falls International Airport (Dreher et al 2017). The loan would have a 20-year maturity period with a 2% interest rate. China Jiangsu conducted airport upgrading projects between 2013 and 2016. In 2013, China lent Zimbabwe $319 million, at a 2% annual interest rate and a 20-year repayment period, to expand its Kariba South Hydropower Station to help ease electricity shortages (BBC 2013). Despite Zimbabwe’s challenged capacity to repay Chinese loans on time, China-Zimbabwe bilateral negotiations have sustained relations
with the signing and implementation of several development assistance agreements such as the expansion of Robert Mugabe International Airport in Harare for $153 million (Reuters 2017).

**The China-Zimbabwe Development Financing Negotiations**

**Pre-Look East Policy (LEP) Era**

China-Zimbabwe relations can be traced back to China’s opening of an embassy in Harare after Zimbabwe's independence from colonial rule in 1980 (Kambudzi 2013). Having grappled with underdevelopment for the better part of the 20th century, China embarked on socio-economic reforms that gave rise to its rapid economic growth and industrialization and boosted productivity following the adoption of the 1978 liberalisation policy (Kobayashi et al 1999). Increased industrialization and productivity boosted Chinese domestic consumption, which extended the nation’s role in international trade. China's rapid industrialization and economic renaissance have boosted its demand for energy and crude oil, metal products and minerals, and large quantities of raw materials (Camordy 2017). African countries, including Zimbabwe, became additional markets for China’s manufactured goods and major sources of industrial raw materials. With Zimbabwe being among the mineral-rich African countries, China came calling.

China-Zimbabwewean ties were subsequently reinforced through high-level official diplomatic trips. Pre-2000, China-Zimbabwe economic relations were less were more sporadic. In the 1980s, Zimbabwe invited China to construct hospitals and the National Sports Stadium which opened in 1987 (Chun 2014). A 1985 Robert Mugabe trip to China secured $55 million in loans (ibid.). Being among the African capitalist countries that sought sustainable development, Zimbabwe's robust economic relations with the West flourished during the 1980s and 1990s, making it a darling of the West. For instance, in the 1980s Zimbabwe received $417 million, $204 million, and $156 million respectively from the World Bank, the United States, and the European Economic Community (Sachikonye 2008).

In the early 2000s, Zimbabwe’s economic relations with China gained pace following controversies surrounding Zimbabwe’s land and constitutional reforms that attracted economic sanctions from the West (the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation member states). The land reforms between 1997 and 2000 saw sporadic repossession of white-owned farms in Zimbabwe. During the period between 1997 and 2000, China-Zimbabwe trade volumes rose from $56.35 million to $125.45 million (Chipaike and Bischoff 2019). The establishment of FOCAC in 2000 and Zimbabwe's adoption of the LEP in 2003 was a unique two-way momentum with a knock-on effect on the special bilateral relationship.

The LEP helped intensify China-Zimbabwe investments and trade engagements partnerships. Zimbabwe’s adoption of LEP was backed up by skilful and aggressive courting of China to seek extended goodwill for economic development financing (ibid.). President Mugabe would continue to label China as an “all-weather friend” and praise China for its non-interference policy and respect for Zimbabwe’s sovereignty.
Zimbabwe's public and private courting of China for economic development stimulus bore mixed results. On one hand, Zimbabwe's attempts to secure economic stimulus loans to seal treasury shortfalls received minimal Chinese response. President Mugabe, together with his ZANU-PF party officials and government ministers, made several trips to China to attempt to secure economic rescue packages that did not materialise on some visits (Thompson 2012). Economic rescue packages were intended to help the government meet its recurrent fiscal obligations such as paying salaries and wages for civil servants and national defence, schools, and healthcare. Zimbabwe's efforts to secure loans for capital expenditure to revive its economic sectors and launch development infrastructure finally achieved a positive response from China.

**Power Imbalance at the negotiation stage**

Navigating the power asymmetry due to disparities in economic advantage and their respective standing in the international community is a critical point to consider. Pfetsch (2011) posits that economies are profoundly unequal based on the power they wield and the influence they have in global affairs, yet equal in terms of their global rights and obligations before the law. However, in any bilateral negotiation and especially in economic negotiations, there is an inherent disadvantage when a developing economy negotiates for financial favours from a developed economy. In contrast to multilateral negotiations where members at the negotiation table are treated equally regardless of the size of the country’s economy, political structure and other distinguishing characteristics, bilateral negotiations are characterised by the dominant influence of the developed economy. According to Jones (2014), an economic commitment between a richer economy and a developing economy will almost always engender an agreement reflecting the interests of the richer economy.

As of 2000, China was a growing “stronger” economy with an 8.49% GDP growth rate that peaked at 14.23% in 2007, while Zimbabwe was a declining “weaker” nation with a -3.06% GDP growth rate that fell to an all-time post-independence low of -13.67% in 2008 (Kanyenze 2003; World Bank 2021). In 2000 and 2018, China’s GDP totalled $1.21 trillion and $13.89 trillion (the world’s second-largest) respectively (World Bank 2021). In 2000 and 2018, Zimbabwe’s GDP totalled $6.69 billion and $19.52 billion respectively. Following the “Land Reform Policy,” Zimbabwe’s agricultural production growth fell from 3% in 2000 to -3% in 2003; net FDI inflows fell from $435 million in 1998 to almost zero in 2001, with exports plunging from $2.1 billion to $1.3 billion (Mutenyo and Routman 2011). In 2003, Zimbabwe initiated LEP-inspired relations with China from a vulnerable standpoint in the wake of frosty relations with the West (Kanyenze 2003). As a result, it may not have been sufficiently assertive in negotiating with China. Pan-Africanist Professor P.L.O Lumumba describes African economies as “Mickey Mouse” economies that should not think of themselves as equal partners with Beijing during bilateral economic negotiations (Africa Update Agenda 2021). For instance, Lumumba cites Ghana’s economy as being one-third of the economy of the city of Beijing and proposes that Africa could only negotiate with China as bilateral equals as a united continental unit.

Having been shunned by the West, Zimbabwe relied much on China, other African countries and other Asian partners for backing in the international community. For instance, China and Russia (permanent members of the United Nations Security
Council), vetoed a draft UN resolution in 2008 to ward off UN sanctions against Zimbabwe for its injurious domestic human rights record (Ren 2014). The veto decision, at the expense of China’s reputation before the West, would mean Zimbabwe reciprocating favourably in their bilateral relations. In 2006, Zimbabwe, in a bid to gain local and Chinese political and economic capital, cancelled a British company’s (Africa Consolidated Resources) Exclusive Prospecting Order at Marange Diamond mines, one of the world’s largest, with an annual revenue potential of $2 billion (Towris 2013). The power imbalance would render it difficult for Zimbabwe to negotiate on equal terms with China, given the comparatively smaller size of its population and economy, its financially needy status, the absence of traditional Western allies as foreign aid alternatives, and its technological resources limitations. To survive economically, Zimbabwe needed China and was obliged to compromise.

Another important aspect to factor in during the negotiation of funding projects is navigating the different preferences, needs and expectations of the parties. During negotiations, negotiating parties’ preferences can vary, creating a significant gap between what parties may have wanted and the outcome (Jones 2014). Furthermore, the negotiators may not be satisfied with the conclusions reached or could be uncomfortable or subjectively dissatisfied with the outcomes (Pfetsch 2011). In 2005, Zimbabwe’s attempt to strike a joint venture with China that would have resource-backed Chinese farmers partner with Harare to cultivate the land recovered from the Whites failed (ZimOnline 2005). Beijing withdrew from the pre-planned deal following concerns that Harare’s land laws and policies nationalised all agricultural land (Peta 2004; ZimOnline 2005).

In 2005, the Africa Agriculture Development Centre, a subsidiary of the Chinese government-owned China State Farms Agribusiness Corporation, was expected to partner with Zimbabwe’s Agricultural Rural Development Agency to restore food production that had declined by approximately 60% from 2000 (ZimOnline 2005). Zimbabwe’s reliance on China as an “all-weather friend” who could invest heavily in its domestic sectors to boost the country’s economy proved vain. Although by 2016 Zimbabwe ranked third among African countries with the largest count of Chinese investments (over 128 projects), China did not consent to every Zimbabwean request (Xinsong 2016). In 2014, Mugabe’s expected economic stimulus from China was steadily downgraded from $30 billion to $10 billion to $3 billion, and eventually, to $400 million following China’s refusal to play Santa Claus and to provide direct aid (Ncube 2014). The funds would have run the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZimAsset), a $27 billion plan for economic revival, despite exceeding Zimbabwe’s $4.5 billion entire annual budget (Ncube 2014).

Another key inhibitor of Zimbabwe’s negotiation power is its poor debt repayment history. On one hand, non-repaid mature credit weakened Zimbabwe’s bargaining power and made it vulnerable to using resources for capital alongside other contractual vulnerabilities. On the other hand, China withheld substantial direct financial aid. Pre-China, international funding agencies, and Western governments had been reluctant to provide financial assistance to the Mugabe regime following its chronic inability to repay external debts and the controversial economic policies (Will 2013). Although debt can be harnessed for economic good, failure to settle debt weakens a country’s negotiation standing (Benjamin and Wright 2019). Sovereign countries occasionally
default on their debts necessitating renegotiation with creditors that further affects their credit standing, but perennial default can be counterproductive.

In 2014, in response to the hardening Chinese stance expecting borrowers to be accountable, Zimbabwe was forced to repay $180 million in mature Chinese loans or risk losing its credit line (Dzirutwe 2014). Quoting Finance Minister Patrick Chinamasa, “In the first six months of this year we have had to cough up $180 million, which was not in the budget, just to make ourselves look good,” (Dzirutwe 2014). In 2015, Zimbabwe sought and obtained China’s forfeiture of about $40 million of Zimbabwe’s debt due to mature that year (Reuters 2015). Besides struggling to repay debt, the country’s economic decline during the period from 2000 to 2008 was typified by hyperinflation due to the excessive printing of currency (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe 2008). As of 2015, Zimbabwe contemplated using the Chinese Yuan due to its devalued currency (Reuters 2015).

As of 2016, Zimbabwe was nearly $11 billion in debt, much of which was unpaid credit to international financial institutions (Moss 2016). As a result, in 2016, the US and the UK opted against giving directly to the government of Zimbabwe and respectively gave $232 million and $136 million to Zimbabwean local communities because of the government’s reputation for misappropriation of funds. As of 2018, 34% of Zimbabwe’s external debt stock was owed to China (Sun 2016). As of 2019, it was widely acknowledged that China had pulled the plug on $1.3 billion of financing for infrastructure projects in Zimbabwe (Nyabiage 2019). Concerns included bad debt and the lack of return on previous investments. As of 2019, Zimbabwe had defaulted on $2.2 billion in Chinese loans advanced between 2000 and 2017 (Nyabiage 2019). Zimbabwe’s debt has allowed China to benefit from the credit with its companies being involved in the construction of roads, airports, power stations, dams and other projects, thereby securing the much-needed energy resources and precious minerals to continue fuelling its economic boom in exchange for its loans.

China’s reputation in Zimbabwe has been impacted by accusations of exploitation and neo-colonisation. The view that China is a “predatory” financier in the continent, attempting to recolonise Africa, is ubiquitous in academia, media narratives and foreign policy circles (Alves 2013). For instance, media reports of land grabbing suggested that between 2000 and 2014, China possessed land totalling 5.6 million hectares in Africa for agricultural purposes (Brautigam 2015). However, Brautigam (2015) reported that 5 of 20 surveyed cases showed 89,000 hectares of cultivated land, far short of the alleged 5.6 million. It was claimed that Chinese loans were an aspect of Beijing’s soft power domination of Africa (Mano 2016). China sought to attain its interests in Zimbabwe while ignoring local human rights abuses provided Chinese interests were guaranteed (Liang 2012). Nantulya (2018) notes that China’s soft power push in Africa had been advancing through aid since the establishment of FOCAC in 2000. Brautigam and Xiaoyang (2012) posit that China’s state-backed economic diplomacy in developing economies aims at reinforcing resource security, strengthening political relationships and soft power, and advancing commercial opportunities for national firms.
The socio-economic implications of implementing China-sponsored projects

The Zimbabwean government has reacted to the power imbalance with China and China’s predatory approach by introducing new laws and measures aimed to preserve national interests. In 2016, it implemented a 2008 indigenisation law that required all foreign-owned companies with assets exceeding $500,000 to cede a 51% stake to Zimbabwean nationals or the National Economic Empowerment Board (Sun 2016). In December 2016, it closed the Chinese-run diamond mining companies Jinan and Anjin in an attempt to implement the indigenisation law (Xinsong 2016). With China being the largest foreign investor in Zimbabwe, the indigenisation plan would affect over 10,000 Chinese nationals living in Zimbabwe (Sun 2016). Xinsong (2016) and Melber and Southall (2021) reported that China retaliated by briefly ignoring a large wave of street protests in 2016 against President Mugabe for his unwillingness to resign. Instead, China was preparing for a post-Mugabe government. Sun (2016) reported that the Chinese government responded to the indigenisation plan through protests in media interviews and public statements. The Chinese ambassador to Zimbabwe and Chinese vice-foreign minister raised the issue with the Zimbabwean government officials appealing for adherence to bilateral agreements on reciprocal safeguarding of Chinese investments in Zimbabwe (Sun 2016). In the end, the Zimbabwean government exempted Chinese firms.

Major concerns often arise regarding the quality of Chinese-built infrastructure. Several cases suggested that Chinese-built and/or financed infrastructure was of low quality. Cases in point were the US$98 million National Defence College (NDC) and Long Cheng Plaza in Belvedere whose workmanship, according to local engineers, was substandard (The Independent 2013). The Plaza reportedly developed cracks due to poor workmanship and failure to adhere to local environmental laws. The NDC was considered structurally unsound due to flouted procedures and poor workmanship on the buildings (Chivara 2013). In 2020, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) barred the Zimbabwe National Sports Stadium, 10 years after Chinese renovation at $10 million, from hosting high-profile tournaments after falling short of minimum requirements (Chingoma 2020; Xinhua 2010). The stadium developed cracks necessitating a two-year refurbishment undertaking.

In Zimbabwe, there are instances of hostile public reception and perception of the Chinese as exploitative and oppressive, and of Chinese workers and entrepreneurs as opportunity poachers (Musanga 2017). Excuses for hiring Chinese rather than local expertise in technical aspects of the projects were explained by language and cultural barriers (Alves 2013; Cooper 2019). Surveys by Sautman and Hairong (2015) and Wang and Zadek (2016) reported that Chinese projects employed over 70% of African labourers temporarily with Chinese companies being awarded contracts to run and maintain the infrastructure facilities for a certain number of years. Oya and Schaeffer (2019) attribute skill shortages to lower employment of locals in expert areas. The employment of non-expert locals comes with minimal advanced training and minimal skills transfer. Furthermore, locals allegedly gave the Chinese a cold reception due to unaddressed labour grievances and the perception that Chinese infrastructure projects employed less local expertise (Chipaikwe and Marufu 2020). Furthermore, Chinese companies operated businesses from downtown restaurants in Harare to billion-dollar
mining ventures. Recently, in 2022, villagers adjacent to the Chinese-owned Nyamakope mines reported cracks on their Chinese-built houses constructed as compensation, blast debris everywhere, and a Chinese mining company issued a vacation notice to the villagers without compensation (Chingono 2022). The villagers decried the Chinese company’s disrespect for communities and claimed a right to prevent the Chinese miners from entering their community.

In addition, cases of employee maltreatment led to Chinese contractors being faced with recurrent allegations of ill-treatment, exploitation, underpayment and physical abuse (Fisher 2011). During the construction of the NDC in 2012, Chinese managers were accused of using physical punishment on local workers (Chivara 2013). In 2021, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions accused Sunny Yi Feng of forced labour, exploiting local employees, and subjecting employees to unsafe working and living conditions. Chipaike and Marufu (2020) established that Chinese businesses took advantage of the country’s high rates of unemployment and Zimbabwe’s vulnerability as an internationally isolated state. In Mutare, employees took to the Labour Court Sogecoa Zimbabwe Pvt, a sister company to Anjin, for violating their rights and exploiting them by paying them $4 a day after long hours of labour (Mambondiyani 2011). In 2011, the National Employment Council rates for construction workers varied between US$1.06 and $1.51 per hour, with a 44-hour week. A contractor along Borrowdale Road in Harare had employees work without shift change from 4 A.M. to 12 midnight (Mambondiyani 2011). In Harare, Shanxi Corporation employees took issue with the company for charging them exorbitant rental rates for inferior company accommodation (ibid.). In Zvishavane, employees at the Ngezi Mine accused the Chinese employers of underpayment and ill-treatment (Mambondiyani, ibid.). Union movements blamed the government’s inaction for encouraging unscrupulous Chinese firms to continue ill-treating employees with impunity (ibid.).

Finally, human rights and environmental activists accused Chinese extractive firms of paying little attention to environmental damage (Chingono 2022; Shinn 2016). Additionally, residents living near granite mines have accused the Chinese companies of leaving open pits uncovered, failing to restore the land after extraction, and endangering children and wildlife (Chingono 2022). In 2020, Zhongxin Coal Mining Group and Afrochine Smelting were awarded concessions to clear land at Hwange National Park, home to elephants, cheetahs and rhinos, a source of eco-tourism foreign exchange, and a vital source of income for local people (Watts 2020). Tawiah et al. (2020) found that China’s construction activities in Africa negatively affect the environment. In 2021, nearly 400 families had to relocate from the Hwange area due to substantial air pollution from Hwange Power Station, expanded by the Chinese, due to methane, sulphur dioxide, carbon dioxide and ground-level ozone and particulate matter pollution (Gong & Van Staden 2021).

**Conclusion**

The close interactions between China and Zimbabwe, under the Mugabe regime, indeed caused various issues and controversies within Zimbabwean society. It has been highlighted how various responses to the installation of Chinese-led infrastructure in Zimbabwe reveal widespread hostility among the populace. Although bilateral negotiations featuring power and hierarchy imbalances can be unfavourable for
developing countries, developing countries such as Zimbabwe can fall back on the advantage of their natural resources to up the stakes.

This article concludes that although power imbalances greatly affect the negotiation and implementation of infrastructural projects funded by China in Zimbabwe, the latter is still a repository of political and social accountability. To effectively negotiate for agreements that will allow it to pursue its own national goals and achieve sustainable development, Zimbabwe needs to reassess its foreign policy structures.

The present article takes into account that the nexus between foreign loans and economic development has become even more complex than a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Without proper management systems, accountability and policy-informed resource channelling, foreign development funding may not automatically stimulate economic development. The reason is that there is a plethora of challenges—brought to light in this paper—that are involved in the negotiation and implementation stages. The loan-seeking African countries, Zimbabwe included, should increase their bargaining power, free themselves from debt trap/bad debt, and address negotiation-level and implementation-level hurdles.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. Conspicuous African examples included Angola’s hospital that had to be closed due to cracks (Corkin 2013), inferior quality roads in Zambia and Ethiopia (Balamaras 2014), Botswana’s shoddily constructed power stations (Ndlovu 2014), Uganda’s two poorly constructed dams (Matsiko 2016), a bridge in Kenya that collapsed in 2017 (Duggan 2017), and Kenya’s lower quality $3.2 billion diesel standard gauge railway that is said to have been built at three times the market value (Patey 2018), and South Sudan’s suspension of the construction of the 392 km Juba-Rumbek highway to Uganda due to quality concerns (Olander 2020).

ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to flag the reality of the socio-economic impact of power imbalance in the negotiation and implementation of infrastructural projects constructed in Zimbabwe and funded by China Exim Bank, China’s main financial arm in Africa. Reviewing the China-Zimbabwe financial deals concluded during President Mugabe’s regime from 2000 to 2018, I use existing credible online-available data and draw on analysis conducted in the framework of a PhD study carried out between 2019 and 2020. I argue that China had an overriding negotiating upper hand in these deals, which limited the economic and social gains that Zimbabwe could expect—and could obtain—from the bilateral relations. The mobilization of financial resources and popular disapproval of Chinese-led projects constitute the biggest obstacles to the efficient implementation of infrastructure development in the country. The paper underlines that the Zimbabwean population has borne the brunt, on one hand, of the predatory attitude of Chinese contractors, and on the other, of the irresponsibility of the Zimbabwean government, unable so far to formulate policies that enhance debt sustainability or to take action on citizen grievances, such as underpayment and maltreatment at the hands of the Chinese contractors. The discussion highlights how much, in the case of China-Africa relations, the ideal goal of mutual benefit for each State involved in bilateral investment agreements falls short of expectations.

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