China Investing in Africa: Exploitation or Mutual Gain?

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Abstract

China's relationship with Africa has been strengthening despite considerable international scrutiny. While investments may be considered beneficial for the host country and/or region, China's FDIs have minimal benefits for the African countries. In this paper, I argue that China's investments in the African region are only a win-win for the former. First, China's investments in African are financially burdening over a long period of time because of the long repayment terms. Second, China's motives in developing Africa's infrastructure are fueled by the strategies to exploit the natural resources present in countries such as Angola and Zambia. Third, Chinese firms have been criticized for human rights violations in the African countries. I also consider the alternative arguments. These arguments include that Chinese FDIs have boosted economic growth and created employment opportunities for the African youth. Although these arguments have merit, I explain that African youth is often allowed to only perform menial jobs. I conclude my paper by recommending that African governments should introduce policies that help prioritize economic development as well as for international organizations to fight the human right violations in the African countries.

Keywords: China, Africa, infrastructure, natural resources, human rights, FDIs

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In this paper, I argue that China's investments in the African region have been exploitative. China's ties with Africa have a long history with initial partnerships being established in the 1950s. The trade relations between China and African countries increased by 1000% between the period 2000 to 2008 (Mlambo et al., 2016). However, China's increasing influence in Africa over the past two decades has attracted global attention (Mlambo et al., 2016). On the one hand, studies suggest that China's foreign direct investments (FDIs) in Africa are poised to benefit the latter in terms of economic development. According to Renard (2011), foreign direct investment is an investment that entails controlling ownership in a business in one country (such as an African country) by an entity in another country (such as China). On the other hand, it is argued that China is merely exploiting Africa's natural resources and sapping its manufacturing industries, while leaving insignificant benefits for Africa.

I support my position that China's relationship with Africa is based on exploitation and not mutual gain with the following three arguments. First, China's financial aid adds to the financial burden for the African countries through long repayment terms and low-interest rates. Massive Chinese loans and grants for the African countries such as Angola and Kenya have left them with severe financial burdens and debts (Asante & Debrah, 2017; Chen et al., 2018). Second, China's financial investments are a charming strategy to exploit Africa's resources. For instance, investments in the infrastructural projects in Nigeria and Zambia helped China gain access to oil and steel resources (Mlambo et al., 2016). Finally, China has been accused of violating human rights in Africa. Many Chinese managers offend local African workers verbally and African workers are exposed to unsafe working conditions (Asante & Debra, 2017). Thus, China's investments in Africa may be considered one-sided.

Despite worrying concerns about China's investments in Africa, I also consider the alternate claims that the relationship is mutually beneficial. In other words, Chinese investments in various sectors have helped the African countries benefit in terms of economic development, infrastructural development, and employment opportunities. For instance, per capita growth rate in Africa grew from 0.6% per annum during the 1990s to 2.8% during the 2000s (Chen et al., 2018). Additionally, China has invested heavily in infrastructural developments in African countries to aid local transportation of goods and services (Mlambo et al., 2016). Further, these projects employ local African workers, in turn improving their household incomes. Although Africa benefits from China's investments, I argue that these benefits are outweighed by the short- and long-term drawbacks. For example, Chinese nationals have access to top managerial positions during infrastructural developmental projects while Africans are left to handle labor intensive jobs and natural resources exploitation in Africa is widespread (Asante & Debra, 2017; Mlambo et al., 2016). Thus, to support my arguments, I will be presenting many examples for African countries where Chinese loans and FDIs have increased financial debts and resulted in the exploitation of natural resources as well as mistreatment of local African workers.

This paper is important because China's growing political and economic influence around the world has been a matter of global concern. The West has expressed particular interest in China's strategies, as the latter invests in Asian and African countries extensively. Since the topic is of global concern and the relationship between China and Africa has a long history, Were (2019) suggests that as opposed to the common understanding that Chinese investments help the African countries defeat poverty and promote economic growth, the situation is quite different. In addition, China's increasing investments in Africa have come under scrutiny for human rights violations and exploitation of natural resources. According to Asante and Debrah

(2017), China's investments in Angola resulted in the exploitation of oil in excess of 10,000 barrels of crude oil per day. Therefore, this paper argues that China's investments in Africa have left the latter in a compromised situation with financial debts, human rights abuses, and exploitation of natural resources.

China's Debt Policy, Debt Distress, and Economic Development

Over the past few decades, China has emerged as Africa's most prominent bilateral lender. China provides massive loans to fund large infrastructural developments in Africa. However, this debt policy is also a source of major concern, since these loans leave African countries with debt distress.

China's Investments and Financial Debts for Africa

China's increased lending to Africa leaves the latter with a debt crisis and financial burdens. Africa's inclination for Chinese-based loans can be attributed to different reasons, most of which include attracting foreign direct investments (FDI) for infrastructural developments or for sustaining the economy (Renard, 2011). For instance, out of 53 African countries, 15 countries totalize 83% of China's loans, with Angola, an African country accounting for 29.89% of the total Chinese loans (Regissahui, 2019). In Kenya alone, Chinese debts constitute 66% of Kenya's total bilateral trade, where the country's total debt has risen from just $17 billion to nearly $50 billion in 2018 (Onjala, 2018). These Chinese-based debts in Africa raise serious financial concerns, since loans prevent Africa from improving its position on the international financial front.

Over the years, Africa's struggle with paying off the loans is a testament to its worsening international image. In the 1980s, African economies were unable to pay massive sovereign debts, and the position of the region continued to worsen. Consequently, during the 1900s, much of the African region was either blacklisted or frozen out of the international financial system (Were, 2018). The situation further worsened because of an attempt to address Africa's debt problem using structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). SAPs required lenders to write off indebted poor African countries. However, for a country such as Ghana, the debt problem persevered and the country's government could not borrow soft-term loans from traditional lenders such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Asante & Debrah, 2017). As such, Africa's excessive debts from China may see African countries being locked out of the global financial system.

Chinese debts also raise concerns over debt sustainability in Africa. In 2016, cumulatively, Africa's debt-to-GDP ratio peaked at 56% (Brautigam et al., 2020). As Africa continues to borrow heavily, African governments are burdened with servicing these debts. This situation is because Africa's main export commodities have been plummeting and much of the debt is used to finance infrastructure development projects. According to Were (2018), one key problem is that African governments are be forced to allocate much of their revenues towards servicing Chinese debts. For instance, in Kenya, of the total revenues earned between January to June 2018, 45% was used for servicing Chinese loans (Were, 2019). Similarly, in African countries with massive debts such as Ethiopia and Djibouti, China debt servicing from their annual revenues in 2019 accounted for 42% and 58% respectively (Brautigam et al., 2020). Therefore, major concern for African locals is the ability of their governments to generate dividends in terms of economic productivity, under pressure of paying back loans to China.

Another serious concern raised with regards to Africa's debt to China is the lack of transparency of the debt agreements. Onjala (2018) suggests that in Kenya, there are no disclosures of whether African governments are financing the right projects to service these debts. There are also no incentives that the debt will generate economic productivity. The lack of transparency of Chinese loans to Africa breeds the perception that corrupt African governments are enriching themselves and preparing their citizens for an economic and financial fallout. For instance, in 2017, a Transparency International's Annual Corruption Perception Index listed that sub-Saharan countries such as Sudan, Chad, and Somalia were among the 10 most corrupt nations globally (Were, 2018). Despite countries such as Somalia and South-Sudan receiving significant loans, these countries still account as one of the worst performing regions in Africa.

Transparency concerns were also highlighted in Kenya. In Kenya, with regards to the Chinese-financed Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), the country's debt accrued from this single project alone. The project reportedly cost $3.8 billion (Onjala, 2018), which compares unfavorably for the $1.92 billion electric railway to be constructed in Tanzania (Were, 2018). In fact, the Tanzanian railway is likely to have twice the speed and shall be slightly longer (by 50 km) as compared to Kenya's SGR. Thus, the lack of transparency in African governments efforts to repay Chinese loans result in financial burdens rather than economic prosperity for the local Africans.

China's Contribution to Africa's Development

China's lending to Africa has contributed significantly in boosting Africa's economic growth. This economic growth can be attributed to China's investment model in Africa. China's debts are primarily used to fund large infrastructural projects, which in turn attract FDI in Africa and contribute effectively in pushing the countries' economies forward. For example, in Angola, China through the China Export Import Bank, helped finance a $2 billion loan for infrastructural development in 2004 (Adisu et al., 2010). This project came into existence around the time when Angola was resurging from a 28-year civil war ending 2002, thereby helped the country to reconstruct its severely damaged infrastructure (Asante & Debrah, 2017). Further, Chen et al. (2018), in light of China's increased engagement with Africa claim that "Per Capita growth rate of the average African economy surged from 0.6% per annum in the 1990s to 2.8% in the 2000s" (p. 2). In fact, later in 2005, Africa recorded its highest ever economic growth in (5.8%), which is attributable to Chinese investments (Regissahui, 2019), increased demand for Africa's exports and rising prices of commodities that satisfy China's significant demand (Renard, 2011). African countries lack the financial and human resources necessary for bolstering both social and economic development. Therefore, Chinese loans to Africa are needed to overcome the foul socio-economic challenges that most African countries currently face.

China Benefits From Loans to Africa

The terms of trade dictated by massive loans to Africa are designed to benefit China. For example, while Angola benefited from the $2 billion deal to boosts its infrastructure and develop its economy, the agreement saw China securing up to 10,000 barrels of Angola's crude oil per day (Asante & Debrah, 2017). Additionally, more than 70% of the contracts tied to the loan were awarded to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for construction and civil engineering tenders. Similarly, Ghana secured a Chinese loan to finance and build the Bui Dam. However, in the trade deal, Ghanaian cocoa marketing board (COCOBOD) was mandated to export cocoa to a Chinese-based buyer (Genertec Corporation) for five years. In fact, 85% of electricity sales from the dam also had to be deposited to escrow to service the loan (Mlambo et al., 2016). As such, despite China's loans contributing to Africa's development, these loans are designed to be more favorable for China, since Africa is trapped in a long cycle of financial debts.

China's Engagement with Africa: Exploiting Natural Resources

Africa is a region vastly gifted with natural resources. China's quest for resources to sustain it's billion plus population has been the major drive for the country's growing presence in Africa. This section analyzes how China siphons natural resources from Africa.

Exploitation of Natural Resources in Africa

Chinese investments in Africa are designed to exploit Africa's resources. The lucrative deal offers from China are a means of holding African states hostage while exploiting their natural resources. Loans from international organizations such as International Monetary Fund and the World Bank often include terms where the principal loan amount along with the interest rate should be paid within five years or more (Were, 2018). On the other hand, China offers interest-free loans – a lucrative terms of its FDI programmes across the world (Brautigam et al., 2020). Analysts believe that China's interest free loans are a strategy to lure African countries into collateralized lending. Collateralized lending is a form of financing projects where repayments are often secured in the form of future receivables such as oil, cocoa, tobacco and other export revenues (Brautigam et al., 2020). In the case of Angola's re-infrastructural development that was financed by Chinese loans, oil (10,000 barrels/day) signified a collateral. As such, Chinese investments are aimed at exploiting natural African resources in exchange for loans provided to the latter.

Numerous collateralized lending deals are a means of China siphoning resources from Africa. For example, Chinese-based firm, Guotai Iron and Steel invested more than $4 million in Zambia to obtain steel resources that would expand its steel making facilities in China (Mlambo et al., 2016). Similarly, in 2004, China was awarded a deal for farming more than a thousand square kilometers of land previously owned by white commercial farmers in Zimbabwe. In 2007, China brought farm machinery worth $25 million to work on the project. In return, Zimbabwe was obliged to deliver tobacco worth $30 million for a short period of time to reimburse the loan (Hoigwe & Banda, 2017). Although Chinese investments involves nearly zero investments rates, they are meant to lure in Africans to siphon their resources and are disguised behind loan repayment. Therefore, China's inroad into Africa is aimed at exploiting the numerous natural resources found in the African region.

In fact, the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) opposition government has been critical of the country's high-risk debt status from its relations with China. China has been criticized for exploiting DRC, which is vastly endowed with unexploited cobalt, copper, and diamond deposits. Similar to Angola, the country suffered catastrophic destruction and setbacks after the 1998-2003 civil war. To boost its economy, the country's government signed a $9 billion deal with Chinese-based, Export Import Bank for renewed economic and infrastructural development (Asante & Debrah, 2017). Roads, railways, hospitals, and housing projects vital for economic growth were constructed. At the same time, for three decades, China claimed rights of mining up to 620,000 tons of cobalt and 10.6 million tons of copper in DRC's Katanga. The country's opposition party, Mouvement de Libération du Congo (MLC) scrutinized the deal arguing that it handed China disproportionate revenues. In fact, nearly 150 DRC Members of Parliament went on strike until the deal was scaled back to $6 billion (Hellendorff, 2011). Therefore, the DRC opposition presents an example for the malicious intents behind increased investments by China in Africa's infrastructural projects.

Infrastructural Development in Africa

Chinese investments in Africa have contributed substantially in terms of infrastructural development in African countries. China's debt policy in Africa is stimulated by the financing of over 3,000 mega infrastructural projects (Were, 2018). For instance, in Kenya, China is responsible for the controversial 800 km SGR, road networks, and an ongoing port in Mombasa-second largest city in Kenya (Onjala, 2018). Likewise, in Zimbabwe, China is responsible for addressing the country's energy challenges by expanding the Hwange power plant with two production units of 3000MW each (Hongwe & Banada, 2017). In other African countries such as Ethiopia, China's Communications Construction Company entered into a $1.5 billion deal with Ethiopian Railways Corporation (ERC). The deal entailed the construction of a railway line that runs between Ethiopia and the Tadjourah seaport in the neighboring country, Djibouti (Mlambo et al., 2016). Indeed, infrastructural development is important for the economic and social well-being of any country. For most countries in Africa that lack quality infrastructure, these Chinese-based development projects will be beneficial to boost the economic and social image of African countries.

Chinese-Based Infrastructural Development and Natural Resources

The dominant theme behind Chinese-funded infrastructural projects in African countries is that China must obtain access to African raw materials. For example, in 2013, China pledged $300 million to construct a convention center for Zimbabwe's 2013 UN World Tourism Organization General Assembly. According to Mlambo et al. (2016), as part of the deal, "China only funded the project on condition that Chinese companies be awarded construction tenders" (p. 263). Such malicious intention becomes vivid as the trade relations between China and Africa are examined. Melber (2008) suggests that oil and natural gas account for 62% of all Africa's exports to China followed by metals (13%). Despite Africa's vast resources, the continents' imports from China are re-dominated by manufactured goods (45%). This import-export deficit solidifies the fact that China-Africa relationship is largely one-sided, with China primarily focused on acquiring raw materials.

Human Rights Violations Disguised Under Employment Opportunities

Despite China being touted as a benevolent financier in Africa, its growing economic influence has been at the expense of human right violations in Africa. Human rights abuses perpetrated by China include subjecting workers to poor working conditions, torture, labor exploitation, and aiding oppressive regimes in exercising their malicious acts. This section examines China's human rights abuses in Africa, which often go unpunished.

Human Rights Violations

China's FDI in Africa also raises serious human rights concerns. For instance, China supported the Sudanese regime despite the country's government participating in serious human rights abuses (Osundu-Oti, 2016). Ezekiel Lul Gatkuoth, the country's Minister of Petroleum, cited in 2018 that South Sudan's main reason for preferring to establish strong relations with China is that the latter does not interfere with the country's politics (Were, 2018). At the same time, China was responsible for weapon sales to Sudan and Zimbabwe, which is believed to have contributed to the Darfur genocide and Zimbabwean government crackdown on its residents during elections respectively (Osondu-Oti, 2016). Further, in Sudan, China sold $100 million worth of weapons, military aircrafts, and small arms to Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, which were used to repress civilians. Chinese investments in Sudan's oil industry proliferated during the same period, indicating that China's interests are strictly to sustain its economic development.

Chinese-based firms located in Africa expose the local African workers to hazardous working conditions. For instance, in DRC, workers work with no safety gears on Chinese-run copper and cobalt mines (Asante & Debrah, 2017). In Zambia, when China Non-Ferrous Metals Corporation (CNMC) bought 85% of the crippled Chambishi Copper Mine, the project was lauded for creating jobs and bringing new technologies to Africa. Later in 2005, a devastating explosion at the mine claimed 51 Zambian workers lives because of poor or non-existent safety standards (Asante & Debra, 2017). Despite creating tens of thousands of employment opportunities for the Zambian population, exposure to poor working conditions by the Chinese firm constitutes as a violation of human rights.

In addition to poor safety standards, China's violation of human rights is evidenced in the torture and prejudice against African laborers. For example, in Kenya, Chinese managers have been criticized for racial abuses against Kenyans, where name calling and torturing has been rampant. In several videos released online, Chinese managers have been observed to be referring to Kenyans as black people or monkeys (Baptise, 2018). In fact, in Namibia, South Africa, and Zambia, Chinese managers repeatedly torture workers by beating them when the workers fail to meet certain requirements (Asante & Debra, 2017). In another scenario, during a labor demonstration where Zambian workers protested the banning of the union and underpayments of up to $67 per month, six of them were shot dead by a Chinese supervisor (Asante & Debra, 2017). This incident suggests that Chinese officials lack regard for human dignity or human lives. In most instances, several of these offenses often go unpunished because there are no regulations in place for the African government to protect the public from mistreatment by Chinese organizations. Therefore, while Chinese investments are being touted as a contributing factor towards economic growth, this surging economic influence is generating troubling human rights-based concerns.

Job Opportunities

China's FDI in Africa provide numerous job opportunities for Africans, which in turn improves their household incomes. A significant portion of China's investments are aimed at providing basic infrastructure: railways, roads, power plants, and dams amongst many others (Asante & Debrah, 2017). These projects are labor-intensive – many of which employ local Africans. In a survey by HKUST Institute for Emerging Markets that analyzed the composition of workers in Chinese projects in Africa, it was found that more than three-quarters of workers were local Africans (Ochiel, 2018). In eight countries mentioned in the survey, including Angola and Zambia among others where China had infrastructural projects in, six of the countries employed an estimated 80% of local Africans while the remaining two employed 50 and 70% (Ochiel, 2018). Such statistics suggest that Africans receive several job opportunities because of Chinese funded projects in the region.

Chinese-funded projects support the livelihood of African youth, that otherwise may could have been unemployed. To illustrate, in Nigeria, the China Great Wall industry corporation helped build Nigeria's communication satellite that provided employment opportunities for more than 150,000 Nigerian youth – nearly 90% of all the total work force (Mlambo et al., 2016). Unemployment is a fundamental issue in Africa, and it contributes to vicious cycles of poverty in most African communities. Therefore, these employment opportunities are an essential source of income that can effectively cater for a myriad of life necessities.

Although China has created job opportunities in Africa, China's investments have limited the scope for local African investors and only created low-skilled jobs for the African laborers. Indeed, China ranks first based on job creation, such that a job is created for every $49,000 invested by any Chinese company in Africa, which outweighs the $817,000 for British companies and $337,000 for US companies (Hogwe & Banda, 2017). However, studies suggest that China still lags behind in terms of involving local investors. For instance, in South Africa, local investors and top engineers in Chinese-based infrastructural projects account for only 5% (Hogwe & Banda, 2017). In this light, it can be argued that the bulk of employment opportunities afforded to African are only menial jobs, despite African countries having a substantial amount of an educated workforce in recent years.

The problem is further compounded when taking into account that Chinese construction companies are known to ship in many Chinese workers instead of hiring local Africans. For example, in Ghana, there was public outcry in 2014 when a gold mining project saw the responsible Chinese organization ship in more than 50,000 Chinese laborers (Ochiel, 2018). Furthermore, the employment opportunities afforded to Africans are not sustainable. As Van Dijk (2009) argues, the job opportunities cease to exist once the infrastructural projects are completed. Thus, Chinese investments in Africa not only limit the scope for local investors but limit the growth opportunities for African workers because of menial jobs.

Conclusion

China's relationship with African countries has been met with intense scrutiny, despite a long history. In fact, over the past decade, several African governments have embraced China's investment model. The China-Africa relationship will endure, considering that both parties benefit to some degree. However, given the massive Chinese-based loans to African countries, there is scrutiny over the real intentions of China. China's investments in Africa do not only leave the latter with financial burdens, but also have been criticized for exploiting the natural resources and violating human rights.

There are many reasons for examining China's real intentions behind its investments in China. First, China's debt policy in Africa is threatening to cripple most African economies by leaving them as countries with significant debt burdens. Essentially, China's investments in Africa are one-sided since massive loans have left African countries in a debt-trap, with low interest rates but long repay terms. In addition, through investment in infrastructural development, China's has been criticized for the exploitation of Africa's resources such as oil and steel. Another criticism is that Chinese firms are associated with human rights violations in the African region. Indeed, not only are Africans subjected to poor working standards and menial jobs, but the Chinese government involvement with oppressive regimes has led to the escalation of human rights abuses in countries such as Sudan and Zimbabwe.

Opponents argue that Chinese loans have positive implications for Africa. For instance, infrastructural developments in Africa help boost the economy of the latter region, alongside improving the employment opportunities for the local workers. Despite advocates of China's inroad in Africa having merit, African countries do not equally benefit from the relationship, especially considering that China benefits substantially from the loan repayments, access to natural resources, and that Africans are only left to enjoy menial and unsustainable jobs.

China's relationship with Africa is likely to remain, but it should be regulated to ensure that both parties mutually benefit. Therefore, African governments need to strategize their development paths, as opposed to blindly taking loans from China. Africa should make growth its priority, and further implement reforms that mitigate the imbalances in its relations with China. Lastly, in order to ensure that Chinese loans in Africa are mutually beneficial, the international human rights organizations should intervene to ensure China provides safe working conditions and sustainable jobs for the Africa laborers and that Africa’s debt to China is sustainable.

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