



Mr. & Mrs. S.H. Wong Center for the Study of Multinational Corporations

Working Paper No. 2025-08-01P

*Non-State Actors and Perceptions of China in the Global South:
Views about Transparency, Labor Rights, Corruption, and Accountability in Zimbabwe
and Cambodia*

By

Percyslage Chigora, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Political Science at Midlands State University (Zimbabwe)

Email: chigorap@msu.ac.zw

Edson Ziso, Ph.D.

Department of Politics & International Relations, University of Adelaide (Australia)

Email: edson.ziso@adelaide.edu.au

May 9, 2025

This working paper was produced as a result of a grant provided by the Wits Africa-China Reporting Project, a project of the Wits Centre for Journalism at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The views in this paper are those of the author(s). Permission is given to freely disseminate the paper in its unaltered form and with proper attribution.

This paper is made available to inform, promote discussion, and spur further research. It does not reflect the official position of the Mr. & Mrs. S.H. Wong Center for the Study of Multinational Corporations (Wong MNC Center) or its Board of Directors, and the Wong MNC Center has not verified its content. Copyright remains with the original authors.

The Authors

Percyslage CHIGORA is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe. He is the former Chairperson of the Department of Politics and Public Management and the Department of History and Development Studies, Midlands State University. Before joining Midlands State University, he worked for an international governmental organization specializing in project management. He has researched Zimbabwe's foreign policy, agrarian issues, African Development, security issues, and higher education and has published a number of works on these topics. He is the author of *The Origins of the Zimbabwe Crisis* (2012) and *Politics in Zimbabwe in the 21st Century: Domestic and International Issues for Reconciliation and National Healing* (2011).

Edson ZISO teaches in the Department of Politics & International Studies, University of Adelaide, South Australia where he is also Visiting Research Fellow. He researches governance in Africa, foreign policy, migration, race and race relations, decoloniality, environmental politics, South-South and North-South relations, Non-Western International Relations, the political economy of development and international public policy. Ziso has a special interest in the political economy of China-Africa relations. He is the author of *A Post State-Centric Analysis of China-Africa Relations: Internationalisation of Chinese Capital and State-Society Relations in Ethiopia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); "The Political Economy of the Chinese Model in Ethiopia" (2020); and "The Maritime Silk Road Initiative and Ethiopia" (with Jean-Marc F. Blanchard) (2021).

Executive Summary

China has become an integral part of the economic trajectory of many countries in the global South. This is certainly the case for Cambodia and Zimbabwe. As for the former, China is now firmly the Southeast Asian country's top investor and donor. As for the latter, China remains among its largest (top 5) sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) and a major trading partner. Public discourse by Cambodian and Zimbabwean officials on Chinese engagements predominantly paints a rosy picture of a near-perfect partnership with an exclusive emphasis on positive aspects usually couched in South-South cooperation rhetoric like “win-win,” “mutual benefit,” “sustainable development,” and “shared interests,” among others. In Zimbabwe, senior government officials at the highest levels lead the charge in justifying engagement with China with the Asian giant routinely credited for transforming Zimbabwe's landscape, economy, and lives.¹ Views to the contrary are met with stern rebuke. In December 2024, for example, the Minister of Justice, Legal, and Parliamentary Affairs Ziyambi Ziyambi fiercely dismissed criticism of Chinese mining in Parliament after a Member of Parliament catalogued their alleged “massive plundering” of minerals in Zimbabwe's rural areas.² In January 2025, the government also reacted strongly to similar sentiments expressed by economist Eddie Cross, a former advisor to the President.³ Most media has now resorted to self-censorship as a self-preservation measure against the government and refrain from criticizing Chinese investment, aid, or other economic links to avoid any backlash. An almost similar narrative prevails in Cambodia where both senior government officials and the Head of State hold Chinese investment in high regard.⁴

Assessments of China's presence in and its impact on host economies in the global South should not be the sole preserve of the governments. This study seeks to enrich discussions about China's important impact in Africa by giving attention to non-state voices and their perceptions of China in Cambodia and Zimbabwe. We regard consideration of the

¹ Felix Matasva, “Zimbabwe: Mutsvangwa Claims Chinese Investments Will Stabilise the Zimdollar,” *allAfrica*, May 6, 2022, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202205060440.html>; and Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, “Zimbabwe: President praises Chinese investments for changing the economic landscape in the country,” May 27, 2022, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/zimbabwe-president-praises-chinese-investment-for-changing-the-economic-landscape-in-the-country>.

² Darlington Gatsi, “Zimbabwe: Government comes to the defense of Chinese- owned mining companies, says allegations of exploitation are exaggerated,” November 16, 2024, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/zimbabwe-government-comes-to-the-defense-of-chinese-owned-mining-companies-says-allegations-of-exploitation-are-exaggerated>.

³ Takudzwa Mahove, “Zanu PF Fires Back at Eddie Cross Over Chinese Investment Allegations,” January 8, 2025, <https://greatdykenews24.co.zw/zanu-pf-fires-back-at-eddie-cross-over-chinese-investment-allegations>

⁴ See, e.g., Ry Sochan, “Chinese FDI attracts praise for improving infrastructure,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/chinese-fdi-attracts-praise-for-improving-infrastructure> and “PM praises the Chinese government for encouraging Chinese investors to invest in Cambodia,” *Khmer Times*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501393356/pm-praises-the-chinese-government-for-encouraging-chinese-investors-to-invest-in-cambodia>.

perceptions of non-state actors, especially affected communities, to be crucial to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese engagements in the global South. Cambodia and Zimbabwe fare very poorly on the Worldwide Governance Indicators on key indicators like rule of law, corruption, government effectiveness, and regulatory quality, among others.⁵ When it comes to foreign engagements, be they investment, aid or otherwise, the same issues come into play, further infecting state-society relations. To be specific, the perceptions of ordinary people matter yet they are not adequately represented. This is odd given they are supposed to be the ultimate beneficiaries and/or will bear the negative impact of these engagements. Our study sets out to examine if general populaces held the same sentiments as their governments about Chinese economic engagements.

To that end, the study selected two Chinese engagements, one in Zimbabwe (private investment) and one in Cambodia (an aid project) as case studies that could provide an empirical basis for a non-state-centric understanding of perceptions of China's relations with the global South. The study fully appreciates and acknowledges that there are distinct differences and similarities between the two projects being compared: one entails FDI (Zimbabwe) whilst the other is an aid project (Cambodia). Notwithstanding the importance of this distinction, our key objective is to uncover the perceptions of non-state actors. This fits our advocacy of a stakeholder-driven assessment of the impact of China on Africa. The study deployed several techniques to collect data. These included five key informant interviews, seven community interviews (7), two focus group discussions for Zimbabwe with snowballing, random sampling and purposive sampling as the sampling methods, and thirteen key informant interviews via purposive sampling for Cambodia. The universe of individuals interviewed comprised private media journalists, academics, environmental and social justice activists, and policy analysts.

China's Zimbabwean Investment and Cambodian Aid Project

Hualin Quarry Pvt-Ltd is a privately owned Chinese quarry mining company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, that supplies high-quality stone aggregates. It began mining operations in the area in 2021, adding to the growing list of Chinese companies that have established business in Zimbabwe's extractive sector over the past two and a half decades following Zimbabwe's adoption of a "Look East" policy, which, at its core, is China-focused.⁶ The quarry is located in Pumula North, a high-density suburb on the western outskirts of Bulawayo. This case study was chosen because the company's operations have attracted considerable media attention over the last couple of years. There has been much controversy as a result of complaints from various stakeholders such as residents of Pumula North, environmentalists, and social commentators.

The Morodok Techno National Stadium is a 60,000-seat stadium in Phnom Penh constructed by the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) pursuant to an aid project funded by a RMB 1 billion grant from China to the Government of Cambodia. It became Beijing's biggest ever infrastructure grant to the country and one of the largest stadiums in Southeast Asia. Despite the lack of any stakeholder participation at any stage of the project,

⁵ World Bank Group, "Worldwide Governance Indicators," n.d., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators>

⁶ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "The 'Look East Policy' of Zimbabwe now focuses on China," *Policy briefing paper*, November 2004, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/50063.pdf>.

the authorities did not waste time in praising their Chinese counterparts for being environmentally conscious. At its completion, the government lauded China for its low-carbon strategy, saying that it has been important in promoting global green development.⁷ Cambodian President Hu Sen remarked that China was a “trusted and respected friend,” querying that if his country “didn’t get help from China, who would help it?”.

FINDINGS

1.1. Transparency gap: Community Consultation and Information about Chinese Operations Deficient

Participatory development is considered as one of the missing links in the Global South’s development discourse.⁸ How do Chinese engagements measure up? To what extent are the supposed beneficiaries involved at any level or stage? A key finding from a cross-section of 15 surveyed residents in the Pumula suburb where the Hualin Quarry has been operating revealed a deep lack of transparency about the operations of the mining company, especially prior to it starting operations. Even though the mine is situated very close to houses and just behind a school, the residents expressed concern that there was no consultation with them prior to Hualin commencing operations in 2021, with all details shrouded in secrecy. As a result, they never had an opportunity to raise any concerns that they might have had, concerns with which they currently are grappling. For example, a key complaint by the community is the noise pollution coming from the mine which some likened to an “earthquake” and was causing some houses to develop cracks.

An interesting finding was that after being let down by local authorities, the Pumula community mobilized and engaged the company directly with the latter responding to residents’ concerns. Interviewees asserted that they had raised the issue at a stakeholder meeting in March 2024 and that Hualin had accepted full responsibility and asked the residents to provide evidence so that they could compensate them. For some reason, however, residents were initially not forthcoming with claims. The blame was laid squarely on the doorstep of the local government, which was charged with failing to do enough to educate residents about their rights and how to assert them. The lion share of blame was leveled at the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) for not identifying these potential problems in the first place.

Interestingly, this shows that some Chinese companies are going out of their way to help mitigate some of the harm caused by their investments without being forced to do so by corporate social responsibility (CSR) regulations. Still, Hualin’s responsiveness followed pressure by affected communities. According to Key informant 4, Hualin’s response entailed donations of quarry stones to the schools within the Pumula area as well as “jojo” tanks to alleviate water shortages prevalent in the city. He added that the company had also helped by donating a load of quarry and cement to rehabilitate the roads, although he did not know what the Bulawayo City Council had done with it. Last December and the year before, the

⁷ “Cambodian officials, experts hail China's contribution to global green development,” *People’s Daily Online*, December 16, 2022, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/1216/c90000-10184855.html>.

⁸ Dan Connell, “Participatory Development,” *Development in Practice* 7, no. 3 (1997): 248–59.

company also donated grocery hampers to the disabled and the less privileged. This was confirmed by the residents in the community, though there were perceptions of the politicization of the aid, with accusations that the Councilor was only favoring the supporters of the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party, neglecting those from ZANU PF.

As a public aid project, the Morodok Stadium project ought to have been transparent, but it also was conducted under a veil of secrecy, devoid of stakeholder participation. No information was made publicly on the finer details of one of the largest projects involving China in Cambodia except for a few media updates by the government. There is therefore confusion surrounding this \$178 million project giving rise to speculation of how it was exactly funded and what the government had to give up to secure the grant.⁹ According to Interviewee A1, “this is not surprising and bigger projects (like Special Economic Zones, major roads and stadiums) in Cambodia require so much investigation as they are shrouded in secrecy as they often involve the Prime Minister’s family and political circle in cahoots with Chinese investors.¹⁰ Interviewee A1 added, “unfortunately, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) do not have the capacity to do such investigations. The ruling party dominates all political power.”¹¹

According to Interviewee J1, a journalist, “it seems it is up to the government to publicize some information about some projects whilst some are not and there is never a specific reason given for this inconsistency.”¹² Interviewee A1, who researches FDI in Cambodia, reiterated this when stating that “there is no information provided by the government for ‘sensitive projects’ of which Morodok was classified as one.”¹³ This was confirmed by Gerry Flynn, a journalist who added that “information is only made available for some less costly projects like condominiums, hotels and sometimes agriculture-related ones.”¹⁴ According to Danielle Keeton-Olsen, a freelance journalist, the stadium is a perfectly functional modern facility but in terms of priorities, “it’s not what Cambodians are crying out for in their day-to-day life. The average Cambodian does not really benefit much from these kinds of projects.”¹⁵

Without transparency, aid projects fuel mistrust of government and speculation of behind-the-scenes machinations. After all, aid is hardly free. The Kenyan example may be instructive where the government ratcheted up excessive debt through Chinese funded infrastructure grants that lacked transparency. The end result was a debt crisis which

⁹ AidData, “Chinese Government Provides RMB 1 Billion Grant for Morodok Techno National Stadium Construction Project,” n.d., <https://china.aiddata.org/projects/48887>.

¹⁰ Interview A1, Academic and Independent geopolitical commentator, May 13, 2024.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Interview J1 (Senior Reporter with Southeast Asia Globe), December 1, 2023.

¹³ Interview A1.

¹⁴ Interview with Gerry Flynn, Freelance Journalist and Part-Time Editor at *Cambodianess*, December 5, 2023.

¹⁵ Interview with Danielle Keeton-Olsen, Freelance Journalist, December 14, 2023.

culminated in the government attempting to introduce a punitive tax regime (Finance Bill of 2023) resulting in massive protests.¹⁶

A key revelation flowing from both case studies is that Chinese engagements are mired in secrecy with only the governments in the know about the whole cycle of the investment or aid programs. This is fueling suspicions about the government involvement in the investors/contractors flouting of or avoidance of standard regulations and corruption.

1.2. Labor Relations

Zimbabwe has one of the highest rates of formal unemployment in Africa with unofficial estimates putting it at 90 percent. The most positive perceptions for Hualin Quarry Pvt-Ltd therefore emanated from the company employing youth who were viewed as societal “nuisances” due to their rampant drug abuse, which, in turn, had led to a lot of petty crime and begging to support drug addictions. Interviewee 11 observed, “hatichakumbigwi ma 20 cents nemarovha” [we are no longer being begged by unemployed vagabonds for 20 cent coins].¹⁷ Another respondent expressed joy that the company had employed some of the thieves and was helping youth stay away from drugs and substance abuse. Confirming this, key informant 1 stated that the company employs the local people in liaison with the local Ward (17) Councilor, Sikhululekile Moyo.¹⁸ Key informants 5 and 6 added that the company employs based on one’s physical ability, not academic qualifications.¹⁹

The Cambodian legal framework on labor rights is quite progressive with the 1993 Constitution guaranteeing the right to establish associations.²⁰ The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training LVT and the Department of Labour and Vocational Training (DLVT) at the municipal and provincial levels are empowered to administer and enforce the Labour Laws. Labor inspectors are responsible for inspections of workspaces to ensure compliance. Construction workers used for the Morodok Stadium construction were employed by different Chinese subcontractors. Typically, local construction workers are paid US \$8 to \$15 per day while Chinese workers can earn several hundred dollars per month.²¹ Nhean Rin was employed as a construction worker during the construction of the stadium. His experience, along those of other local workers, gives a glimpse into the impact of Chinese investment on labor rights in Cambodia. He recalls that “they were treated badly by the Chinese company.

¹⁶ Basillioh Rukanga, “What are Kenya's controversial tax proposals?” *BBC News*, June 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv22g359mq9o>.

¹⁷ Anonymous Respondent #11, Pumula North shopping centers, November 18, 2023.

¹⁸ Anonymous Key informant 1, Official from Ministry of Public works, Labour and Social Welfare, Government complex, Bulawayo, November 17, 2023.

¹⁹ Anonymous Key Informants 5 and 6, Management, Quarry Company site, Pumula North, November 17, 2023.

²⁰ Anna Salmivaara, “New governance of labour rights: the perspective of Cambodian garment workers’ struggles,” *Globalizations* 15, no. 3 (2017): 329–46.

²¹ Danielle Keeton-Olsen and Yon Sineat, “Cambodia: Tensions between locals and migrant Chinese workers hinder collective labour action,” *China Labour Bulletin*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/cambodia-tensions-between-locals-and-migrant-chinese-workers-hinder-collective-labour-action>.

The money was not at par with their hard work for which they were paid day to day, adding that “it was dangerous to organize any collective action because the Chinese company was protected by the government.”²² Such views seem to be widely held.

According to Seng, the Cambodian government has a group of Cambodia tycoons, many of whom are in the Cambodia Business Association (CBA), which ultimately serves politicians because all the companies in the CBA are linked to politicians. Chinese investment serves ruling party politicians and China’s strategic interest. Big projects like SEZ, roads, stadiums are dominated by the government which, in turn, can give the association some business.²³ In the end, the strong legal framework for labor is severely handicapped, by weak implementation. This dovetails with Salmivaara’s research which observed that “Labour inspection and the judicial system suffer from a lack of resources and omnipresent corruption.”²⁴ What compounds the problem is the lack of Commercial and Labour Courts, which though already provided in the law, are not yet operational despite the government promising for the past 4 years to set them up.

1.2.1 Labor Relations with non-Chinese workers

A lot has been said about Chinese players and their labor practices.²⁵ Key informant 1 revealed that Hualin’s labor cases are handled by the Ministry of Labor and the process starts with conciliation, then arbitration.²⁶ If both or one of the parties are not satisfied, they can go to the Labor Court to appeal. The employees who were the key informants at the mine expressed satisfaction with the treatment they got from the company. We also found that the company offers accommodations and meals are catered, whether one stays within or outside the work premises. Despite these benefits, we found the lack of labor disputes surprising and wondered if it might result from the low levels of education of the employees or other factors. Our suspicions were validated by Key Informant 1, who narrated how docile the employees are even during the conciliation or arbitration hearings that they hold with the company. He added that workers feel intimidated at such high-level meetings/hearings. This was also confirmed by Key Informants 3, 4, and 5 at the Hualin Company who are in the management ranks.

We directly observed this docility when one of the key informants at the company called two subordinates who were passing by to be interviewed to confirm some information that had been given by the management. The two subordinates came to the office and after hearing why they had been called, they both declined to speak to the researcher saying “khonokhu abakutshela khona yikho” [whatever they have told you is correct). The supervisor took the researcher to another group of subordinates who were seated by the gate and they still

²² Interview with Nhean Rin, December 17, 2023.

²³ Interview with Gerry Flynn.

²⁴ Anna Salmivaara, “New governance of labour rights: the perspective of Cambodian garment workers’ struggles,” *Globalizations*, 15, no. 3 (2017): 329–46.

²⁵ Ronald Chipaike and Eugenia Marufu, “Chinese Construction Companies and the Question of Labour Rights in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 8 (2020): 1163–75; and George Ofofu and David Sarpong, “The evolving perspectives on the Chinese labour regime in Africa,” *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 43, no. 4 (2021): 1747–66.

²⁶ Interview with Key Informant 1.

declined to speak to the researcher. The researcher was left with various options for interpreting these behaviors: either the company had a strong policy against low level employees speaking to strangers or this confirmed the observations made by the key informants that the subordinates were not confident and were easily intimidated by being asked questions.

1.3 Perceptions of Chinese Corporate Relations with Politicians

Our research showed that Hualin Company works hand in hand with local government through the local Councilor and relevant stakeholders such as the Bulawayo City Council and the EMA. 86 percent of the respondents expressed suspicions of the politicization of benefits by the Councilor. Being a Councilor under the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party, the residents felt that the company's CSR initiatives were only benefiting the supporters of CCC. Additionally, residents charged corruption, accusing the Councilor of having received bribes and shares from the "Chinese." One respondent stated, "uSkhue wathengelwa indlu emayadini ngama China" [The Chinese built a house for Skhue, the Councilor in the Low-Density Suburbs].²⁷

A common perception raised by the key informants in Cambodia was that Chinese actors are only worried about maintaining good books with the government. Explained Sam Seun:

They start with and prioritize relations with the government. I think one of the biggest mistakes made by Chinese companies in Cambodia is that they just like to work with the authorities. They don't want to work with the people. I'm not sure if Chinese companies ever spend their money to hire private consultants to understand local perceptions.²⁸

In terms of consultations, these investors usually interact with government officials especially at the local level or with "stakeholders" that are arranged by the government.²⁹ This is rather expected as the stadium project was financed through a grant from China's Ministry of Commerce. As a result, it most likely would have had to prioritize relations with government rather than other stakeholders.

Prioritizing relations exclusively with government creates a number of problems. Since our research is focused on perceptions more than anything else, our observation was that when all non-state actors are excluded, this creates fertile ground for negative perceptions of Chinese presence in developing countries. The exclusionary nature of aid projects has given rise to the perception in Cambodia that the government accepts projects that work for it rather than citizens.

Respondents in Cambodia alleged a conflict of interest, which promotes a corrupt relationship between Chinese investments and the government. As explained by Interviewee Y1, "Unlike in other countries, Cambodia has no law that outlaws politicians from doing

²⁷ Anonymous, Focus Group Discussion 2, 3 Males, Pumula North Shopping center, November 19, 2023.

²⁸ Interview with Sam Seun, Policy Analyst, Royal Academy of Cambodia, May 2, 2024.

²⁹ Interview C1, Campaign Coordinator at EarthRights International, December 17, 2023.

business. Most politicians do business.”³⁰ He cited the telling example of the former Prime Minister Hun Sen and his family alone, who, according to an investigation by London-based NGO Global Witness “amassed a ‘vast fortune,’ with stakes in at least 114 domestic companies spanning most of the kingdom’s key sectors, including major energy, telecoms, mining and trading firms.”³¹ This empire involves not just his family, but friends.³² Another conflict of interest involves Chinese investors themselves. Respondents expressed concern that in some cases, it is the Chinese companies themselves that operate the project, and then a different Chinese company does the environment, economic, and social impact assessments.³³ There were concerns as well that the Cambodian government, which wants to monopolize power at home, needs this closeness with China to ensure that it can achieve its domestic political goals.

1.4 Regulatory Framework for Foreign-Owned Companies

We also investigated the regulatory frameworks in both Zimbabwe and Cambodia with a view to ascertaining how this could also be contributing to how Chinese engagements are ultimately perceived. Institutional weaknesses in the global south are a norm rather than an exception.³⁴ In the absence of clear and effective regulatory frameworks, coupled with restrictions on civil society which could otherwise play a watchdog role, are negative perceptions on Chinese entities justified?

Our research found that in terms of labor laws, Hualin is regulated by the Labor Act, Statutory Instrument 15 of 2006. In terms of mining activities and environmental responsibility, they are guided by the Mines Act and the standard operating regulations set by the EMA. We also found that the laws are applied equally to Hualin Company without favor. This was confirmed by Key Informant 1. This individual, however, noted with concern how the persistent labor disputes could be arising from the fact that Hualin Mine is not registered under the National Employment Council, which has a scope of coverage in terms of the law.³⁵

The mine does not follow the regulations set by the National Employment Council (NEC), so it will be difficult to ascertain which labor laws exactly they will be violating in the mining sector. The Labor Act is general and leaves that mandate to the NECs which are formed by the Trade Unions and

³⁰ Interview Y1, (Youth Leader) - Sour Mouy Youth Consultant Group, May 11, 2024.

³¹ Global Witness is an investigative, campaigning organization geared to exposing how the industries fueling the climate crisis profit from destruction and standing with the people fighting to defend their communities and their rights.

³² Interview with Seng Sary, Political Commentator and Exiled asylum seeker, May 9, 2024.

³³ Interview C1, EarthRights International, May 8, 2024.

³⁴ Francis Aube, “Strong and effective institutions as the key to emerging economies: The case of sub-Saharan Africa,” Trends Research and Advisory, 14 April 2021, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/strong-and-effective-institutions-as-the-key-to-emerging-economies-the-case-of-sub-saharan-africa>.

³⁵ Anonymous Key informant 1, Official from Ministry of Public works, Labour and Social Welfare, Government complex, Bulawayo, November 17, 2023.

Employers' Organizations. The labor terms are negotiated during the Collective Bargaining Agreements."

The problem may therefore lie with the absence of an effective, clear and harmonized labor regulatory framework in Zimbabwe rather than foreign-owned entities *per se*.

In an interview, Vannly Sem questioned why Cambodia is different from Indonesia, Malaysia, or Thailand or other ASEAN countries that also receive a lot of investment from China yet most of the Chinese investors there abide by local regulations. He remarked:

Cambodia is one of the testing grounds for Chinese projects and they are involved in so much environmental damage, human trafficking, and working with Cambodian politicians to deforest - the reason is governance. The Cambodian government is not transparent and unaccountable, pursuing investments for their own benefit and influence.³⁶

In the Cambodia case, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) operate in a very difficult environment which prevents them from conducting their work effectively when it comes to monitoring adherence to regulations. According to Savey, "local officers are given orders to interrupt the CSO activities for example when we are conducting training in local communities, conscientizing them about their rights and how to assert them."³⁷ The Cambodian Human Rights Development Association (ADHOC) asserts "there are currently more than 6000 CSOs, including organizations, unions, and associations, but there may be only 100 neutral ones. The rest have been incorporated by the state in one way or another and are now pro-government."³⁸ In light of this, the "involvement" of civil society" merely becomes a rubber-stamping exercise. According to one analysis, such behaviors are largely a matter of survival in Cambodia's authoritarian political terrain. Given the threat of repression, CSOs and individual civil society activists allow themselves to become coopted by the regime to secure their survival and be able to continue their activities.³⁹ In the end, this robs Cambodia of the contributions of a critical sector that would ordinarily play a crucial oversight role necessary for monitoring the efficacy of governance, including foreign engagements, especially given the weakness of state institutions in the country's autocratic one-party regime.

1.5 Community perceptions About Where Blame Lies

The majority of interviewees in Cambodia asserted that despite the problems it has caused, they do not necessarily have issues with Chinese aid projects *per se*. Rather, negative feelings about Chinese engagements were directed at Cambodian authorities who are seen as compromising Cambodia's strategic autonomy by making it over-dependent on China. Seun called for the effective enforcement of regulations:

³⁶ Interview A1, March 13, 2024.

³⁷ Interview A2, ADHOC, May 12, 2024.

³⁸ Interview R1, ADHOC, April 15, 2024

³⁹ Jasmin Lorch, "Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation: Adjusting to Shrinking Space in Cambodia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 42, no. 3 (December 2023): 395-420.

I think I'm sure that the Chinese can follow through the laws, but still, there are more problems. But I believe the problems are not just coming from the Chinese side but also from the local authority; sometimes it is related to corruption, and sometimes it is related to the way that the companies and the villagers just don't really understand each other.⁴⁰

A possible explanation offered by some was the “imbalance of power between Cambodia and China as well. What does China mean to you as a government? If it is as a partner, I think there is a possibility that they could have a say, yes. But in our case, this is a kind of a patron-client relationship.”⁴¹

In Zimbabwe, there is a growing realization that government ineptitude or lack of concern for parties affected by Chinese investors, rather than the Chinese themselves is to blame.

Conclusion

The key motivation driving the research was the desire to uncover whether the incessant, almost choreographed stance by officials is shared by communities affected by these Chinese engagements in both countries. Given the often dysfunctional relationship between the government and the governed in the global South, we sought to make a contribution that would inform an understanding of how communities view their governments relations with China and how this contributes to the forming and shaping of perceptions of Chinese engagements. This is important because the alignment or lack thereof of government priorities versus those of citizens and other stakeholders is pervasive in much of the global South.

Perceptions matter because ordinary people have their own understanding regarding governance. Even corruption, one of the vilest vices afflicting the Third World, is best measured by Transparency international using a Corruption Perception Index. As asserted by Daniela Dominguez, “democracy is driven, above all, by people’s willingness to support, tolerate or completely change their governments. These decisions are profoundly shaped by their lived experiences and perceptions of governance.”⁴² Simply put, it is very unhelpful to leave out non-state actors perceptions in the assessment of Chinese engagements.

Negative perceptions of Chinese engagements in the global South should be assessed against what, if any, Chinese actors are subjected to in terms of standards, expectations and benchmarks. This led our research to a number of different but interconnected observations, including the following two key ones. The first was that there is both clear negligence of duty as well as incapacity on the part of local authorities in ensuring that Chinese engagements follow proper procedures, where they exist. The second was that in the face of a poor regulatory environment like Zimbabwe’s, Chinese investors are prepared to mitigate

⁴⁰ Interview with Sam Seun, May 2, 2024.

⁴¹ Anonymous, Key Informant 4 and 5, Management, Quarry Company site, Pumula North, November 17, 2023.

⁴² Daniela Dominguez, “Why Should We Care About Citizens’ Perceptions of Democracy?” *IDEA Blog*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.idea.int/blog/why-should-we-care-about-citizens-perceptions-democracy>.

some of the negative effects of their operations by engaging in some forms of kind gestures disguised as CSR as a strategy to protect their image.

In conclusion, there is a wider appreciation of the role of Chinese engagements at both investment and aid levels in elevating Global South economies to a higher pedestal. From improving employment to infrastructural development, there is a clear China effect. However, there also is a clear distinction between how governments and the rest of society assess and perceive the relationship. In the end, the gains that Chinese engagements are meant to occasion are undercut by the social costs they impose on society, including on the environment. Ironically, even Chinese investors say Cambodian politicians and investors cheat them, including through online fraud. Vividly illustrating this, there is a 2023 Chinese movie titled “No More Bets” that portrays Cambodia as a dangerous place because investors can lose all money in Cambodia. The Cambodian government tried to stop the release of the movie, but the Chinese insisted. If the Global South is to maximize and leverage on China’s engagements, prudent management of this opportunity and deliberate, inclusive government policy that puts the interests of society and standards at the center is going to be a minimum requirement. Otherwise, it will create more harm than good.

With regards to aid projects, similar concerns can be noted and we note this as an area warranting further research. Following the Paris Declaration for aid Effectiveness, there has been an emphasis for foreign aid to be aligned with recipient needs and priorities to avoid the missteps of donor-centric frameworks. As M.S. Winters argues, individual citizens in aid-receiving developing countries play a significant role in determining the success and impact of aid programs.⁴³

⁴³ M.S. Winters, “Accountability, participation and foreign aid effectiveness,” *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 218-43.

References

AidData, “Chinese Government Provides RMB 1 Billion Grant for Morodok Techno National Stadium Construction Project,” n.d., <https://china.aiddata.org/projects/488>.

Aubee, Francis, “Strong and effective institutions as the key to emerging economies: The case of sub-Saharan Africa,” *Trends Research and Advisory*, April 14, 2021, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/strong-and-effective-institutions-as-the-key-to-emerging-economies-the-case-of-sub-saharan-africa>.

Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, “Zimbabwe: President praises Chinese investments for changing the economic landscape in the country,” May 27, 2022, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/zimbabwe-president-praises-chinese-investment-for-changing-the-economic-landscape-in-the-country>.

“China Gifts US\$150M National Stadium To Cambodia,” *The ASEAN Post*, September 13, 2021, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/china-gifts-us150m-national-stadium-cambodia>.

“Cambodian officials, experts hail China's contribution to global green development,” Xinhua, December 16, 2022, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/1216/c90000-10184855.html>.

“Cambodian officials, experts hail China’s contribution to global green development,” *People’s Daily Online*, December 16, 2022, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/1216/c90000-10184855.html>.

Chipaike, Ronald and Marufu, Eugenia, “Chinese Construction Companies and the Question of Labour Rights in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 8 (2020): 1163-75.

Connell, Dan, “Participatory Development,” *Development in Practice* 7, no. 3 (1997): 248–59.

Dominguez, Daniela, “Why Should We Care About Citizens' Perceptions of Democracy?” *IDEA Blog*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.idea.int/blog/why-should-we-care-about-citizens-perceptions-democracy>.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, “The ‘Look East Policy’ of Zimbabwe now focuses on China,” *Policy briefing paper*, November 2004, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/50063.pdf>.

Gatsi, Darlington, “Zimbabwe: Government comes to the defense of Chinese- owned mining companies, says allegations of exploitation are exaggerated,” November 16, 2024, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/zimbabwe-government-comes-to-the-defense-of-chinese-owned-mining-companies-says-allegations-of-exploitation-are-exaggerated>.

Keeton-Olsen, Danielle and Sineat, Yon, “Cambodia: Tensions between locals and migrant Chinese workers hinder collective labour action,” *China Labour Bulletin*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/cambodia-tensions-between-locals-and-migrant-chinese-workers-hinder-collective-labour-action>.

Lorch, Jasmin, “Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation: Adjusting to Shrinking Space in Cambodia,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2023): 395-20.

Mahove, Takudzwa, “Zanu PF Fires Back at Eddie Cross Over Chinese Investment Allegations,” January 8, 2025, <https://greatdykenews24.co.zw/zanu-pf-fires-back-at-eddie-cross-over-chinese-investment-allegations>.

Matasva, Felix, “Zimbabwe: Mutsvangwa Claims Chinese Investments Will Stabilise the Zimdollar,” *allAfrica*, May 6, 2022, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202205060440.html>.

Ofori, George and Sarpong, David, “The evolving perspectives on the Chinese labour regime in Africa,” *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 43, no. 4 (2021): 1747-66.

“PM praises the Chinese government for encouraging Chinese investors to invest in Cambodia,” November 16, 2023, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501393356/pm-praises-the-chinese-government-for-encouraging-chinese-investors-to-invest-in-cambodia>.

Rukanga, Basillioh, “What are Kenya's controversial tax proposals?” *BBC News*, June 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv22g359mq9o>.

Salmivaara, Anna, New governance of labour rights: the perspective of Cambodian garment workers' struggles. *Globalizations* 15, no. 3 (2017): 329–46.

Sochan, Ry, “Chinese FDI attracts praise for improving infrastructure,” *Phnom Penh Post*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/chinese-fdi-attracts-praise-for-improving-infrastructure>.

Sovuthy, Khy, “Chinese Foreign Minister hands over \$150 million stadium and pledges \$270 million in aid to Cambodia,” *CamboJA News*, September 13, 2019, <https://cambojanews.com/chinese-foreign-minister-hands-over-150-million-stadium-and-pledges-270-million-in-aid-to-cambodia>.

Turton, Shaun and Phak Seangly, “Inside the Hun Family’s Business Empire,” *The Bangkok Post*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/1029801/inside-the-hun-family-business-empire>.

Winters, M. S., “Accountability, participation and foreign aid effectiveness,” *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 218-43.

World Bank Group, “Worldwide Governance Indicator,” n.d., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators>.

List of Interviewees/Interviews

Anonymous, Focus Group Discussion 2, 3 Males, Pumula North Sopping center, November 19, 2023

Anonymous Key informant 1, Official from Ministry of Public works, Labour and Social Welfare, Government complex, Bulawayo, November 17, 2023.

Anonymous, Key Informant 4 and 5, Management, Quarry Company site, Pumula North, November 17, 2023

Anonymous Key Informants 5 and 6, Management, Quarry Company site, Pumula North, November 17, 2023

Anonymous, Respondent 11 male age 70, Pumula North shopping centers, 18 November 2023.

Interview A1, Academic and Independent geopolitical commentator, May 13, 2024

Interview A2, Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, May 12, 2024.

Interview C1, Campaign Coordinator at EarthRights International, December 17, 2023

Interview J1 (Senior Reporter with Southeast Asia Globe), December 1, 2023

Interview R1, Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), April 15, 2024

Interview Y1, (Youth Leader) - Sour Mouy Youth Consultant Group, May 11, 2024

Interview with Gerry Flynn, Freelance Journalist and Part-Time Editor at Cambodianess, December 5, 2023

Interview with Danielle Keeton-Olsen, Freelance Journalist, December 14, 2023

Interview with Nhean Rin, December 17, 2023

Interview with Seng Sary, Political Commentator and Exiled asylum seeker, May 9, 2024

Interview with Sam Seun, May 2, 2024