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China's Investment in Africa: A Zimbabwe Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the socio-economic impacts of Chinese investments in Africa, with a particular focus on Zimbabwe as a case study. It examines how these investments influence the lives of local communities amidst rising concerns about neocolonialism, particularly through an analysis of significant extraction projects such as the Gwanda Lithium Mine. The study investigates the interactions between Chinese enterprises and local livelihoods, alongside the perceptions Zimbabweans hold toward these businesses, with attention to labor conditions, cultural exchanges, and community relations. Additionally, it addresses the power dynamics involved, where concerns regarding exploitation and sovereignty frequently complicate the perceived advantages of Chinese investment. By employing a qualitative case study that combines literature review and semi-structured interviews, the research aims to illuminate the tensions and challenges faced by Zimbabweans in adapting to an environment shaped by external economic forces.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between China and Africa has historical roots, tracing back to the Tang dynasty, and has evolved to encompass profound economic and political influences on the continent. Chinese investments in African nations evoke a blend of curiosity and apprehension; unlike many Western countries, China tends to adopt a less conditional approach to investment, often securing contracts without extensive prerequisites (Kamidza, 2018). This has fostered a perception that China presents an appealing, albeit potentially misleading, proposition for African nations. A key feature of the China-Africa partnership is the principle of "equal contributions," wherein China offers loans and investments with minimal conditions (Younde, 2007). However, the dynamics of this partnership raise concerns, particularly when China assumes control of essential infrastructure such as ports in countries unable to meet their debt obligations. Prime examples of this are Uganda's controversy over airport collateralization and Kenya's expressway, the Nairobi Expressway, built by the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC). This toll road, leading to the airport, was designed to bypass traffic congestion. The tolls, approximately between $3 - $5 per vehicle, are paid back to the company, generating significant revenue given the high volume of daily traffic. This is to pay back the Chinese company for the loan. China will therefore continue to collect tolls for the next 27 years (Economic Observatory, 2023). With all the questions about neocolonialism, loans, and agreements with China is not stated clearly for the public, and it is hard to fully understand how the relationship works. A pertinent inquiry posed by Glenn Shive, CEO of the Hong Kong American Center (HKAC), is whether African nations have renegotiated their loans with China (Shive, 2024). This question is vital, as there are no public records detailing how these nations have managed to settle their debts after struggling with the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many African countries may be unwittingly falling into China's economic dependency trap, compounded by the overexploitation of natural resources to address owed debts. (Mutai, 2025). However, are African countries to blame for turning to China when organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank can no longer give loans to these countries due to the large outstanding debt arrears? The conditions that also come with the loans lead to a cycle of debt traps and high interest rates, limiting these developing countries from developing their economies further (Katusiime, 2025). When recognizing these systemic issues that have been built, China now has an open window to over-exploit Africa's natural resources as a means of repaying the debts owed.

Although China refrains from directly intervening in African politics, its involvement raises questions related to geopolitical interests, particularly its ambitions for greater influence in global institutions like the United Nations. The alignment of African nations with China on international matters, such as support for Russia amid the conflict in Ukraine, has heightened concerns about the neocolonial implications of China's strategy in Africa and its efforts to establish strategic partnerships that further its geopolitical goals (Fenton-Harvey, 2024). This raises fundamental questions: What are China's true intentions in Africa, and what precisely does "China" encompass? The intensifying rivalry between China and traditional Western powers, especially the United States, seems to be enhancing China's influence in Africa, potentially pushing the U.S. to the sidelines (Lei, 2020). China's focus on infrastructural investments starkly contrasts with the U.S.'s emphasis on humanitarian aid, which typically comes with conditions related to human rights (Hanke, 2025). In this geopolitical landscape, the ongoing "scramble for Africa" may exacerbate existing tensions and pave the way for renewed conflicts in the region (Barlett, 2022). With the Trump administration terminating and/or reducing USAID in African countries and instituting travel bans on several nations (Chad, Somalia, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Libya, and Sudan), the United States' relationship with these countries has been strained, leading to a decline in its influence. Consequently, many African nations are seeking partnerships with Eastern countries to mitigate potential disengagement from the United States (Lawal, 2025). Looking at these tensions, the implications of China's rise in Africa can be understood not only in terms of diplomacy or politics but, more profoundly, through its economic involvement and relationships that have reshaped African countries at the local level. The background that follows explains these developments, particularly with regard to the relationship between Zimbabwe and China.

BACKGROUND

China's presence in these different African countries is through the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, the Maputo Bay Bridge in Mozambique, and the Gwanda Lithium Mine in Zimbabwe. While one commonly cited reason for China's presence in Africa is its desire for access to the continent's abundant mineral resources, such as cobalt in Congo, copper, and rare earth minerals, it is crucial to recognize that China's interests extend beyond mere resource extraction (Minniti, 2022). Central to China's engagement with Africa is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a colossal infrastructure development project aimed at enhancing connectivity and fostering economic cooperation between China and countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Through the BRI, China seeks to establish vital transport routes for the efficient transfer of goods, including minerals, between regions. Infrastructure projects, such as the Standard Gauge Railway and the Expressway, showcase China's involvement in Kenya's development. The Standard Gauge Railway from Mombasa to Nairobi is among Kenya's most expensive infrastructure with $ 3.6 billion being invested in it (Gerrard, 2024). Through the BRI, China seeks to establish vital transport routes for the efficient transfer of goods, including minerals, between East African countries. China's investments in Kenya have offered opportunities for economic growth and employment for Kenyan people. However, reports of harsh treatment and disciplinary measures, such as corporal punishment, inflicted on Kenyan workers by Chinese employers have underscored tensions and highlighted the complexities of the China-Africa relationship (Goldstein, 2018). These accusations have, however, been denied by the Kenyan government and Chinese workers (Andoh, 2022). Similarly, Mozambique serves as a case in point, where Chinese investments, including the construction of major infrastructure projects like the Maputo Bay Bridge and the Gloria Hotel, have been met with mixed reactions. While China's investments in Mozambique offer opportunities for economic growth and infrastructure development, they also raise complex questions about sovereignty, exploitation, and the true nature of the partnership between the two nations (Xinhua, 2018). These issues highlight the need for careful examination and consideration of the long-term implications of China's presence in Mozambique and across Africa. While all these developments signify China's significant presence in the whole of Africa, they have also sparked discontent among segments of the local population, reflecting broader concerns about the social and cultural impacts of Chinese investment and influence.

In Zimbabwe, China is considered an all-weather friend, and it dates back to when China provided Zimbabwean troops with weapons and training during the liberation war (Colvile, 2023). After Zimbabwe's independence, Former President Robert Mugabe redistributed land in the country to black Zimbabweans, forcing white farmers to leave (Younde, 2007). This led to the sanctioning of Zimbabwean politicians by Western countries, and the United States continuously sanctions the Zimbabwean politicians because of human rights violations. This was when Mugabe adopted the Look East policy: “We have turned east, where the sun rises, and given our back to the West, where the sun sets” (Younde, 2007). This policy strengthened Zimbabwe and China’s relations. Ever since, China has become Zimbabwe’s biggest investor. Given the similarities between these investments in African countries, this research focuses on China’s investment in Zimbabwe as a case study. The research on the socio-economic impacts of these investments across Zimbabwe, particularly the Gwanda Lithium Mine.

METHODOLOGY

This paper primarily employs a qualitative case study that combines literature review, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation to examine the socio-economic and political implications of Chinese investment in Zimbabwe, focusing on the Gwanda Lithium Mine. Through this methodology, the study aims to provide an in-depth lived experience of China’s investment in Zimbabwe. These datasets were analyzed separately and integrated to examine the socio-economic situation in Zimbabwe caused by investors from China. Interviews were conducted with community leaders, local workers at the mine, and government officials.

Data Collection

Firstly, a literature review has been carried out to develop a theoretical background and context of the research. Such a review was accompanied by the analysis of the existing literature on foreign investment in Africa, neocolonialism, and economic dependencies that could be regarded as the background on which the more context-specific results could be put. Since there is limited data on Chinese investment activities and the dynamics of the lithium mine operation in the form of official data available to the public, the nature of this study necessitated qualitative research to describe the subtle experiences and perceptions of the local individuals. The study also aimed to engage the viewpoints of the Chinese investors and company agents working in the Gwanda lithium mine. Due to limited access, however, there was no possibility of conducting direct interviews with these stakeholders, nor was a one-on-one meeting with company officials possible due to the difficulty of arranging one-on-one interviews. To compensate for this inherent shortcoming, the study relies on published company reports, official statements, media reports, and scholarly literature available about Chinese investment practices in Zimbabwe.

A semi-structured interview design was applied, which makes it possible not only to guide the conversation but also to give freedom and choose the words of their own, share their impressions and experiences in their own words.

The research design of this paper involved a total of 10 in-depth interviews between the months of January and August 2024. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. The interviews included key stakeholders across the affected mining region:

1. Community Leaders who control local governance and negotiate in the conflicts caused by the mining activities.
2. Environmentalists: Activists who assess ecological harm and advocate for sustainable mining.
3. Mine workers: These are both formal and informal Zimbabwean people working in the mine. They are on the ground and have firsthand experience of the working conditions and wage structures.
4. Community members: Those who have been displaced or whose livelihoods have been affected by mining.

Semi-structured interview questions centered on key themes and questions related to perceptions of labor conditions, economic impacts, and cultural exchanges with Chinese enterprises. This instrument was designed to encourage open-ended responses, facilitating a deeper exploration of the participants’ views and experiences. Interviews were conducted in both Ndebele and Shona, languages spoken by the local population, enabling clear communication and fostering trust. This format gave the participants the chance to talk in person, in addition to interviews; participant observation was employed as a methodological tool to gather contextual data.

Thematic analysis was used in the analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the interviews, observations, and field notes. Themes connected with extractivism, environmental degradation, working conditions, displacement of communities, power relations, and development/exploitation were identified through the coding of the data. Therefore, neocolonialism in this study is defined as the economic relations between foreign actors and the host nation in which foreign actors hold disproportionate influence over the extraction of natural resources and over the decision-making process, creating unequal distribution of benefits and costs. Power is how authority or decision-making power is distributed between Chinese investors, the government of Zimbabwe, and locals.

Researcher’s Observations

Through direct engagement with the community in the village adjacent to the lithium mine, the researcher was able to observe daily life, social interactions, and the implications of the mine's operations. This immersive approach provided real-time insights into how Chinese investment is perceived and experienced at the local level. Standpoint is particularly relevant to this study, as the researcher’s background as a Zimbabwean national and fluency in local languages enrich the analysis. This personal connection enhances the complexity of culture and language particularities of the data collection process and allows for a more profound understanding of local perceptions. Data collected through interviews and observations were complemented by field notes, which documented the researcher’s reflections, contextual details, and informal interactions within the community. This data source triangulation enhanced the strength of the results.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns guided by the theme of extractivism (Rodney, 1972; Bond, 2015) and other key themes that include environmental degradation, power dynamics among Chinese investors, local governments, and localities, impressions of growth versus exploitation, and community agency or resistance. This approach enabled the researcher to distill important insights regarding the socio-economic impacts of the Gwanda Lithium Mine, including issues surrounding neocolonialism, economic benefits and drawbacks, and community relations with Chinese enterprises.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data information to determine patterns and predominant themes in the qualitative data. This methodology allowed the researcher to condense valuable findings on the socio-economic effects of the Gwanda Lithium Mine, such as the problem of neocolonialism, economic gains and losses, and relations of the communities with the Chinese companies.

Overall, this comprehensive methodology, which integrates a literature review with qualitative data collection tools, aims to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of Chinese investment in Zimbabwe. By focusing on the lived experiences of local communities, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about the complexities of foreign investment and development in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In scholarly debates, the concept of extractivism (Acosta, 2011) has emerged as one of the key issues in academic discussions about the role played by China in Africa. According to Mark Volmink, extractivism is a complex and multifarious economic model characterised by the large-scale extraction of natural resources, primarily for export, with minimal processing (Volmink, 2025). This model is very familiar to Africans as it has existed since colonial times and still stretches to post-colonial resource economies. Scholars have previously argued that this model continuously affects Africa negatively, with global powers benefiting the most (Volmink, 2025). In Zimbabwe, extractivism is visible in the mining, agricultural, and infrastructure sectors. China's support reinforces extractivist systems, where extractive industries take precedence over building diversified local industries.

The understanding of the nation’s citizens is often dependent upon the technology and resources available, so what does this imply for Zimbabweans? Zimbabwean leaders have not done due diligence in thinking about their future while dealing with the Chinese. Although the Chinese are all weathered friends, there is a lot to consider, like what is in it for China and Zimbabwe, too, and who is benefiting more? There has been no evidence that the Zimbabwean government consulted with experts, and loan agreements have not been made public. One scholar has criticized Zimbabweans as lacking knowledge, particularly regarding the extent and value of the country's mineral resources (Mutandwa, 2018). However, it's hard to fault Zimbabweans for this when corruption spreads through every aspect of life. The limited access to Zimbabwe's mineral map, held by only a few, has increased the challenges faced by the citizens. Furthermore, the map's outdated information leads to a critical issue where many residents have built homes on top of undiscovered mineral deposits. According to the law, the state owns the subsurface, which means that if minerals are discovered beneath private properties, residents may be forcibly relocated without receiving any compensation (Chingono, 2022). The Zimbabwe leaders are pleasing the Chinese government and thinking of enriching themselves only without thinking of the citizens and the future of the country, while China is getting minerals from Zimbabwe to expand its economy. To survive in Zimbabwe, one must be connected to the Zimbabwean African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the ruling party since 1980. Under Robert Mugabe's autocratic rule, the militarization of mining severely damaged Zimbabwe's economy (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Militarization was introduced to prevent army leaders from leaving the military, but eventually, the leaders found themselves benefiting from controlling the mines. The army, which has no expertise in mining, controlling, and managing businesses and mines in the country, gave the government control over the revenue. The government then used the money for the wrong interests. The presence of the military is for loyalty and discipline (Moyo, 2016). It opened the sector to anyone wishing to extract minerals, which led to widespread illegal mining and sales to unauthorized buyers offering higher prices than the government. The economy of Zimbabwe continued to sink as the foreign exchange arrangements with the United States failed because the US Dollar was circulating in the outside market, where the Zimbabwean big guys were at play. The situation in Zimbabwe is reminiscent of the blood diamond trade in Congo, with the 2006 violence at Marange, a diamond field in Manicaland Province, causing lasting grief as a case in point. At its peak, the Marange diamond fields produced an estimated 16.9 million carats in 2013, accounting for 13% of the global rough diamond supply (Rock H. Currier Digital Library). During this period, the military, despite lacking expertise, was given full control over the mines. Anjin Investments, a Chinese company, has been a major beneficiary. It is one of five companies in a joint venture with the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation and is closely linked with the Zimbabwe Defense Industries, which oversees military operations in Marange. In 2012, Obert Mpofu, then Minister of Mines and Mining Development, awarded diamond deposits to Anjin Investments. The collaboration between Chinese companies and the military has made them nearly "untouchable," as government workers are too fearful to speak out. Unlike other companies that hire private security, Chinese firms rely on the military for protection, raising significant concerns (PAC 2012). Militarization of Mining is being continuously used as an intimidating technique.

Zimbabwe considers China an “All-weather friend”. In Zimbabwe, Chinese investment through the Belt and Road Initiative has focused on infrastructure development, particularly in the energy and transport sectors. China is Zimbabwe’s biggest investor and is estimated to control 90ucsb % of Zimbabwe’s mining industry (Colvile, 2023). Because China’s investment is so important to Zimbabwe, former president Mugabe exempted all Chinese-owned companies from a nationalized law that gave locals majority ownership of large companies in 2008. This relationship is still strong with the new president, who granted thirty-three Chinese companies lithium mining licenses in 2023 (Zimbabwe is the largest lithium producer in Africa). While these two countries have been benefiting from each other, there are growing concerns about the risks of economic dependency and neocolonial exploitation. Zimbabwe's relationship with China can be seen as a mutually beneficial arrangement, where Zimbabwe provides China with access to its natural resources, while China offers Zimbabwe infrastructure development, loans, and investment. This symbiotic relationship raises questions about who is ultimately investing in whom, as Zimbabwe's resources fuel China's growth, while China's investments shape Zimbabwe's decline (Mazavari,2024). $3 billion has been invested to build a coal-fired power station because of Zimbabwe’s electricity problems (Colville,2023). Instead of repairing old ones, China opted to build new ones, which has raised eyebrows. Zimbabweans had expected fewer power shortages with China’s investment in power stations, but the problem appears to be worsening (Moyo-Nyede and Mpako, 2025). The literature highlights that while Zimbabwe has entered into pacts intended to bolster economic capability, the actual impact remains ambiguous at best, illustrating a pressing need.

Observations on Chinese Projects in Zimbabwe

In 2023, Zimbabwe's largest airport, Robert Mugabe International Airport, underwent renovations costing approximately $153 million. This money was borrowed from China following a $200 million loan for the parliament (Xinhua, 2018). This shows China's strategy to increase its influence in African countries, with Mozambique, Liberia, Guinea, and the Republic of Congo also receiving similar deals. These developments in Zimbabwe highlight that China invests strategically where it benefits. Robert Mugabe International Airport is Zimbabwe's biggest airport. It makes sense for China to improve such infrastructure, which it uses to import goods for sale in Zimbabwe (Mukungunugwa, 2022). Many privately-owned businesses in Zimbabwe import their goods from China. In one of the interviews, a business owner mentioned that Chinese products are cheaper compared to those from other countries, which attracts many Zimbabweans to buy them. Previously, Zimbabweans used to cross borders to neighboring countries like South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique for shopping, but now Chinese shops are widespread within the country, offering affordable goods. Zimbabweans often refer to these goods as "Zhing Zhong" due to their low prices and because they are not always of the highest quality, but the business owner noted that with the ongoing economic challenges in Zimbabwe, people have tight budgets and must make do with what is available. As Kamndaya (2010) states, “The danger is that China will politely rip off Africa, just as the West did" (Mbitiru 2006). And "Chinese investments in Africa are a ploy for the Asian nation to take away Africa's natural resources" (Kamndaya 2010).

Zimbabwe is one of the countries facing severe electricity challenges, with frequent power outages and load shedding affecting households and businesses. In September 2023, the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) issued a statement attributing the ongoing load shedding to technical problems. However, this explanation does little to alleviate the concerns of foreign investors, such as Chinese companies, which require a stable power supply to carry out their projects. The Gwanda Lithium Mine, one of the key Chinese investments, processes lithium and relies on a consistent electricity supply. A famous cement company, Pretoria Portland Cement (PPC), located in Colleen Bawn, Gwanda, has secured a dedicated off-grid electricity supply from Zvishavane. This private supply is specifically designed to serve the PPC mine, which mines limestone and is not connected to the national grid that supplies electricity to the whole country. As a result, the mine enjoys uninterrupted power, unlike the rest of the country, which experiences frequent power cuts. There was already a power line from ZESA running to the area from the national grid in Hwange and Kariba, Zimbabwe's two main electricity suppliers. However, the Chinese opted for the private supply to avoid power interruptions. The private power line, spanning approximately 80 km from Colleen Bawn to Mahongola, where the mine is, boasts superior quality and infrastructure, including larger pylons crossing big rivers in the area. According to the author’s observation, these pylons are significantly more expensive than those used by ZESA, with an estimated cost of between $120 and $150 per pole, compared to $80-100 for ZESA's poles. Furthermore, the hydroelectric cable used for the private supply costs about $1 per meter, and approximately 6 lines were used, resulting in an estimated cost of $480,000 for the cables alone, excluding additional expenses for transformers, connectors, and workers' wages. This substantial investment highlights the disparity in electricity infrastructure between Chinese operations and local communities, raising questions about the prioritization of foreign investments over local needs. The installation of the power line was done improperly, as the contractors failed to consult with the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority at each stage. The hasty three-month construction process is a testament to their rush. Furthermore, the power lines follow a shortcut road hastily constructed by the Chinese, which passes through residential areas, causing increased air pollution and forcing people to live near the lines. In violation of safety regulations, the power lines often run directly over homes and farms. It appears that the Chinese developers prioritized convenience over safety, opting to use the existing road rather than constructing a new one that would have kept the power lines at a safe distance from the community. Contrary to promises made in the media and during community meetings, the Chinese developers have not provided benefits to the local community, such as shared electricity or improved roads. Instead, the project seems to prioritize the interests of the mine, leaving the community to suffer the negative consequences.

Analysis

Sandawana, a region abundant in lithium, copper, and gold, has emerged as a prominent focal point for Chinese investment. However, Zimbabwe has incurred staggering losses due to rampant mineral smuggling and capital externalization, with estimates suggesting that approximately $1.8 billion in revenue has been lost (Ngila, 2022). Furthermore, the country has historically suffered an annual loss of around $2 billion from exporting platinum to South Africa for processing. In a bid to address this issue, Zimbabwe has enacted a ban on the export of unprocessed minerals, including lithium. Despite this effort, significant concerns persist regarding the operational transparency of Chinese mining activities in the region (Reuters, 2022)

Chinese companies are known to process extracted minerals in Mahongola, located roughly 191 km from Sandawana. Locals harbor suspicions that the Chinese are exploiting Zimbabwe's rich deposits of gold, diamonds, and platinum, in addition to lithium. One community member succinctly expressed a prevalent sentiment:

Yes, the issue of mineral over-exploitation has always been raised, even on social media, in the community. It's public knowledge that people are crying out, saying that the Chinese are taking away our resources, and we are benefiting very little from them (Community Leader interview, 2024)

At the Gwanda Lithium Mine, numerous trucks transport ore from Sandawana for processing. However, access to the mines is strictly restricted to Chinese employees, effectively shutting out local participation. The community's awareness of perceived exploitation by Chinese companies is growing, with many residents feeling that their resources are being siphoned away without any corresponding investment or benefits for local development. While it is true that the Chinese presence has generated some employment opportunities, one leader noted that approximately 300 local laborers were hired for manual tasks; the reality is more complex.

They have created a lot of employment for the communities. The last time I visited, they were employing around 300 general laborers (Community Leader interview, 2024)

She stated this, emphasizing the fleeting hope that many Africans held for job creation and development from foreign investment. Despite this promise of employment, challenges abound. A district leader reported that at first, they did hire locals, but most would quit when the work became tough. Additionally, working conditions have raised grave concerns; employees are allegedly forced to work excessively long hours without adequate breaks, as one worker pointed out that the salary is another complaint raised by the workers in the mines. Some truck drivers have resorted to carrying passengers in their trucks while on the job to supplement their income.

In December 2023, China initiated renovations at the Gwanda Lithium Mine and consolidated several mining ventures, including Sandawana, under Crawford Minerals and Dinson Mining Investment, a subsidiary of China's Tsingham Group. Initially employing locals for basic tasks, the labor force has since shifted to sourcing workers from Harare, relegating Zimbabweans to peripheral roles such as security guards or drivers. Their contracts, often lasting a mere seven months, circumvent labor laws that mandate the provision of permanent employment after this duration.

No, they don't hire qualified personnel because they fear that they might be challenged; they prefer people who lack qualifications (Worker, 2024).

Such practices perpetuate a system designed to exploit loopholes in labor regulations while exacerbating worker dissatisfaction and unrest. All too often, workers endure grueling shifts, comprising three eight-hour segments per day, without sufficient rest. With global demand for lithium surging, the urgency of Chinese operations has led to expedient adaptations that serve their interests; for example, the railway from Gwanda to Beitbridge was repurposed not for passenger transport but primarily to facilitate the movement of processed lithium to South Africa for export to China.

The integration of Chinese enterprises into local communities has produced a host of inconveniences, from resource depletion to conflicts between residents and leadership, exacerbated by the lack of responsiveness to community grievances. A local district councilor expressed frustration over the opaque nature of their dealings with Chinese companies. She noted that they never allow anyone in, even her, the community leader. She also shared her attempts to voice community concerns, highlighting the isolation experienced by local governance structures.

Environmental degradation has also emerged as a significant issue due to the relentless extraction practices employed by Chinese mining operations. The transportation of materials has damaged local roads, while trees are indiscriminately felled to create access routes to the mines. Furthermore, disruptions caused by blasting operations have occurred without prior consultation with local leaders, resulting in substantial damage to the surrounding environment. Observations from community members underscore the gravity of the situation. The tangible consequences of these activities have ignited community reactions, such as children filling potholes for pay, a grim indication of the economic desperation pervasive among locals. The government's failure to effectively address these concerns, particularly after declaring that all land belongs to the state, has emboldened Chinese companies, allowing them to operate with little to no oversight. Local indignation is compounded as Chinese firms are accused of entering private spaces without permission and disregarding cultural norms

Social and Environmental Impacts

In Gwanda, residents are raising concerns about environmental degradation caused by Chinese mining activities. The constant transportation of rocks 24/7 has damaged roads, while trees have been cut down to create shortcuts to the mines. Furthermore, locals have observed Chinese blasting in areas suspected to contain minerals, without consulting the chief or residents. This has led to road destruction, making it difficult for cars to pass through.

They are doing open-cast mining as a result; they are degrading the environment extensively, and they are destroying the trees around. They are destroying the scenery around the places. And then along the road, as they are using these big trucks to transport the ore from one place to another, these trucks are doing a lot of destruction. And some of their boulders of the ore are falling off from the trucks, and they create a lot of problems along the road.--(Environmentalist interview, 2024)

In response, children have started filling potholes with gravel and sand, asking for payment from passing cars. Community members are worried about the dire situation, where children are forced to work on roads due to economic necessity. The government's inaction has exacerbated the issue, particularly after the president declared that all land belongs to the state, giving Chinese companies free rein to operate without restrictions. This has led to Chinese individuals entering private compounds without consent, sparking tensions with locals.

They do not communicate with us. The only problem we have is their lack of respect for our local culture (Community member, 2024)

In the Mahongola mine, the lack of proper fencing has resulted in livestock falling into holes, with complaints falling on deaf ears. Chinese responders claim that permission was granted by the president, prompting locals to take matters into their own hands by chasing away Chinese individuals with dogs. The unfulfilled promise of employment has further angered locals, who are excluded from mine jobs in favor of outsiders from Mashonaland who do not even understand the local languages. Residents have therefore started mining in nearby areas, at the same time fearing that any discoveries may be seized by the government. This has created a cat-and-mouse game between citizens and the government, where survival is a daily struggle. Moreover, the Chinese reportedly do not provide medical aid to their workers. One worker bitten by a snake was dropped at home without money and told to return when he felt better. Upon returning, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which forced him to quit. His father now cares for him. Living conditions for Zimbabwean workers contrast sharply with those of the Chinese, who reside in newly built houses, while locals live in truck containers.

They don’t put much priority on these health issues. If you take a look at where they are working, they are just using makeshift traders, and then there are complaints on social media about open defecation that is taking place in areas where there are Chinese. Most of the time, you find out that they prioritize their own facilities more than those that are being used by the workers, who are mostly indigenous people (Environmentalist interview, 2024)

The local community feels marginalized, with resentment growing over the preferential treatment given to non-local employees and the disrespect shown by the Chinese, who allegedly enter local compounds without permission to access resources like trees or water. Complaints are met with claims of presidential sanction, creating further tension and alienating the community from the mine's operations. The village head has been unable to intervene effectively due to restricted access to the mine since its commissioning by the president in February 2024.

No, only by the offices – but at the mine and by the processing plant, we are not allowed. When I visit as the Village Head, I will just be asked to stand in position, and they will come to me. Even when the minister visited – that is what they did (Community leader interview, 2024)

This lack of transparency has deepened divisions between local workers and the community, exacerbating grievances over employment practices and the disregard for local customs and rights. This has sparked the fear of neocolonialism among Zimbabweans, especially considering that the order of events has been that Africans never really benefit from their minerals as they are unevenly distributed, and this has been the order of events since colonial times.

In terms of the SDGs, Zimbabwe's progress in meeting these goals has been unsuccessful due to several reasons, including Chinese investment in the country. Unfortunately, the footprint of Chinese involvement has been visible in a negative way. The expectation was that Chinese investment would bring benefits like job creation and infrastructure development, but instead, it has led to numerous challenges that have hindered Zimbabwe's sustainable development. One major issue that Zimbabweans have faced is environmental degradation. In Zimbabwe, particularly in Gwanda South District, environmental degradation has reached alarming levels due to the surge in gold panning, driven by the quest for a better livelihood. The relentless mining activities have resulted in widespread deforestation, road damage, and pollution. Local communities are bearing the brunt, losing their grazing and farming lands as the government prioritizes accommodating Chinese interests.

Mahongola, for instance, is a quiet community, and in all the years, dust was more foreign to them; there wasn’t any dust. Dust was just a sleeping dog. It was a sleeping village, but with the coming of these Chinese and the havoc, you will find out that there is an increase in environmental pollution issues, especially about drought (Community member interview, 2024)

Chinese companies seem to operate with impunity, disregarding the impact of their actions on the locals. Organizations like the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) 's efforts to work with affected communities to find sustainable solutions are hindered by the people's dire economic circumstances. For many, survival is more important than environmental justice, making it challenging to address environmental concerns.

China's involvement in Zimbabwe extends far beyond economic and political influence, as it also significantly impacts governance and institutional quality. The close ties between China and the Zimbabwean government have led to weak governance, rampant corruption, and a lack of transparency. Research has shown that China's investments in Zimbabwe primarily benefit Chinese interests and high-ranking Zimbabwean officials, while the general population sees little to no benefits. The absence of democracy in the country creates an environment of fear, where citizens are reluctant to speak out against government actions or question the status quo. The government's control over the media is evident, with journalists often receiving direct instructions from ministers and governors on what to write. The 2018 post-election violence, where the army opened fire on demonstrators, has further entrenched this fear, making citizens hesitant to protest against government actions. Amidst widespread poverty, Zimbabweans are also victims of human rights abuses perpetrated by Chinese companies, with the government turning a blind eye. The contrast between Chinese workers, who build themselves permanent homes in mines and industries, and Zimbabwean workers, who are forced to live in containers, highlights the lack of fair labor practices and human rights standards. This situation undermines Sustainable Development Goal 8, which aims to achieve decent work and economic growth. The future of Zimbabweans hangs in the balance as they suffer in their own country, while China enriches itself, raising questions about the long-term consequences of this unequal partnership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has unveiled a multifaceted narrative surrounding Chinese investments in Zimbabwe, highlighting the duality of their impact. While these investments have certainly facilitated infrastructural advancements, they also bring to light pressing concerns regarding the country's susceptibility to debt cycles, environmental degradation, and pervasive corruption. Such findings compel a critical reassessment of foreign investment strategies in Africa, emphasizing the necessity for sustainable development and equitable social outcomes for local communities. To ensure that foreign investments yield mutual benefits, African governments must prioritize transparency and inclusive decision-making processes. Addressing the myriad challenges faced by the continent requires a concerted effort to diversify international partnerships, thereby lessening the risks associated with overdependence on any single source of investment or technology transfer. By fostering relationships with a broad spectrum of global partners, including Western nations, African countries can enhance their negotiation power, secure more favorable terms, and diminish vulnerabilities to external pressures. However, it is important to recognize that this analysis has only scratched the surface of a very complex and pressing issue for Zimbabweans. Much remains to be researched to fully understand the implications of these foreign investments and to develop effective strategies that ensure the sustainable development and empowerment of local communities. Further investigation is essential to illuminate the intricate dynamics at play and to pave the way for a more equitable future.

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