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The Role of the Chinese Community in Sierra Leone's Development: Assessing Contributions, Challenges, and Future Prospects within the Framework of South-South Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese community in Sierra Leone has grown from a handful of technical assistance personnel in the early 1970s into a diverse population of contractors, miners, traders, medical professionals, and entrepreneurs whose activities now touch nearly every sector of the national economy. Yet scholarship on China in Africa has concentrated on large states such as Ethiopia, Zambia, and Angola, leaving small post-conflict economies underexamined. This article assesses the contributions, challenges, and future prospects of the Chinese community in Sierra Leone from the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1971 to the present, situating the analysis within the framework of South-South Cooperation. The study adopts a qualitative dominant, embedded mixed-methods design grounded in critical realism, combining documentary analysis of government, Chinese, and multilateral sources with secondary statistics, institutional analysis, thematic analysis, and eight enterprise case studies, benchmarked against six comparator African countries. The findings show substantial Chinese contributions to infrastructure delivery, mineral and fisheries investment, employment creation, health system support, scholarship provision, and crisis response during the Ebola and COVID-19 emergencies, alongside persistent problems of labour disputes, environmental damage, weak local linkages, tax compliance gaps, and thin technology transfer. The article's original contribution is a transmission-channel framework linking community-level Chinese economic activity to structural transformation through investment, employment, infrastructure, technology, human capital, trade, and institutional capacity, conditioned by governance quality and absorptive capacity. The policy implications centre on enforcing local content and environmental rules, converting enclave investment into linkage-rich investment, institutionalising dispute resolution, and using the Belt and Road Initiative, FOCAC, and the African Continental Free Trade Area to reposition Sierra Leone within Chinese value chains on more favourable terms.

Keywords: Chinese community; Sierra Leone; South-South Cooperation; foreign direct investment; diaspora entrepreneurship; infrastructure; Belt and Road Initiative; FOCAC; institutional development; inclusive growth

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone entered independence in 1961 with a small open economy built on iron ore, diamonds, and agricultural exports, and it has spent the six decades since attempting to convert mineral wealth into broad-based development under conditions of institutional fragility, civil war between 1991 and 2002, the Ebola epidemic of 2014 to 2016, and repeated commodity shocks (World Bank, 2024a; Zack-Williams, 1999). Gross domestic product per capita remains among the lowest in the world, the country ranked 184th of 193 on the 2023/24 Human Development Index, and domestic revenue mobilisation hovers below fifteen per cent of GDP, leaving the state dependent on external partners for capital, technology, and skills (UNDP, 2024; IMF, 2024). Within this constrained setting, the People's Republic of China has become one of Sierra Leone's most consequential external partners, and the Chinese community resident in the country has become one of the most visible foreign populations in Freetown and the provincial mining and fishing districts.

The bilateral relationship dates formally to 29 July 1971, when Siaka Stevens' government recognised the People's Republic and Freetown became an early African supporter of Beijing's seat at the United Nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MFA], 2021). What began as state-to-state cooperation, expressed in rice technical teams, the Youyi Building that still houses several government ministries, and the national stadium, has since layered on a commercial and community dimension. From the early 2000s, post-war reconstruction drew Chinese state-owned contractors; the iron ore boom after 2010 drew large mining investors; and alongside both came a steadily growing population of private traders, restaurateurs, clinic operators, fishing crews, and small manufacturers (Brautigam, 2009; Park, 2022). Estimates of the Chinese population in Sierra Leone are imprecise, ranging from roughly two to ten thousand depending on season, project cycles, and counting method, a data problem this article addresses directly (Park, 2022; Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017).

The significance of diaspora and migrant communities for host-country development is well established in the migration and development literature: such communities transmit capital, trade networks, technology, and business practice, and they can either integrate into local value chains or form enclaves with limited spillover (Mohan & Lampert, 2013; Mung, 2008; Haugen & Carling, 2005). Overseas Chinese communities in Africa exhibit both patterns. In Ghana and Senegal, Chinese traders have restructured retail markets and provoked competitive tension with local sellers; in Ethiopia, Chinese manufacturers have seeded industrial employment; in Zambia, mining labour relations have generated recurrent political conflict (Marfaing & Thiel, 2013; Sun, 2017; Sautman & Yan, 2014). Sierra Leone contains elements of all three patterns compressed into a small economy, which makes it an analytically valuable case despite, or precisely because of, its neglect in the literature.

Investment trends underline the point. China has been among Sierra Leone's largest sources of announced foreign direct investment and its largest single trading partner in most recent years, driven by iron ore exports from the Tonkolili and Marampa operations and imports of machinery, vehicles, and consumer goods (UNCTAD, 2024; Bank of Sierra Leone, 2024). Chinese contractors have delivered a large share of the country's road, bridge, energy, and public building stock, frequently financed through Chinese concessional loans, export credits, or grants (Ministry of Finance, 2023). Chinese medical teams have rotated through Sierra Leonean hospitals since 1973, and Chinese assistance was prominent in the Ebola and COVID-19 responses (Kickbusch et al., 2017; MFA, 2021). At the same time, civil society organisations, journalists, and parliamentary committees have raised persistent concerns about fisheries depletion, timber exports, labour standards, tax compliance, and the terms of resource-backed arrangements (Environmental Justice Foundation [EJF], 2022; Rights and Rice Foundation reports notwithstanding, local coverage has been extensive).

The rationale for this study follows from three gaps. First, an empirical gap: no comprehensive scholarly assessment exists of the Chinese community, as distinct from Chinese state engagement, in Sierra Leone's development across sectors and time. Second, a theoretical gap: the China-Africa literature oscillates between dependency-inflected critique and modernisation-inflected celebration, and rarely tests these frames against a small post-conflict state where both state and community channels operate simultaneously (Alden & Large, 2019; Taylor, 2014). Third, a policy gap: Sierra Leone's Medium-Term National Development Plan 2024-2030 and its transition from the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA) towards a National Investment Board both presume the ability to negotiate better terms with foreign investors, yet the evidence base on the largest such community is thin (Government of Sierra Leone [GoSL], 2024).

The problem statement can be put plainly. Sierra Leone hosts a substantial Chinese community whose investments, enterprises, and philanthropy demonstrably shape infrastructure, employment, trade, and services, yet the developmental value of this presence is contested, poorly measured, and weakly governed, and the country lacks an evidence-based framework for maximising benefit and managing risk within its South-South Cooperation commitments.

The research objectives are, first, to reconstruct the historical evolution of the Chinese community in Sierra Leone; second, to assess its sectoral contributions to growth, infrastructure, employment, entrepreneurship, education, health, agriculture, technology transfer, trade, and philanthropy; third, to evaluate its role in institutional development and in the practice of South-South Cooperation; fourth, to weigh criticisms and governance failures against achievements using comparative African evidence; and fifth, to derive actionable recommendations and future scenarios under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), FOCAC, the African

Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and the national development plan. Fifteen research questions, listed in the methodology section, operationalise these objectives.

The contribution of the paper is threefold. Empirically, it assembles the most complete account to date of Chinese community activity in Sierra Leone, including a timeline, sectoral mapping, and eight enterprise case studies. Theoretically, it develops and applies a transmission-channel conceptual framework that integrates thirteen theoretical traditions rather than adjudicating between two. Practically, it delivers a policy matrix and phased roadmap addressed to thirteen categories of stakeholder, from the Government of Sierra Leone and the Chinese Embassy to local councils and academic institutions. The remainder of the article proceeds through historical evolution, literature review, conceptual framework, methodology, sectoral contributions, institutional development, South-South Cooperation, challenges, comparative analysis, case studies, recommendations, future prospects, and conclusion.

Historical Evolution of the Chinese Community

Early Contact and the Diplomatic Foundation, 1961-1978

Chinese contact with Sierra Leone before independence was negligible; unlike coastal West African entrepôts such as Lagos or Dakar, Freetown attracted almost no Chinese migration during the colonial period, and the Lebanese community occupied the trading niche that overseas Chinese filled elsewhere (Mung, 2008; van der Laan, 1975). The decisive moment came on 29 July 1971, when the Stevens government established diplomatic relations with Beijing, and in October of the same year Sierra Leone co-sponsored and voted for United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, which restored the People's Republic's seat (MFA, 2021). Beijing rewarded early recognisers with visible cooperation, and Sierra Leone received an early and durable package: an agricultural technical cooperation agreement in 1972, the first Chinese medical team from Hunan Province in 1973, and rice cultivation stations at Mange, Rolako, and elsewhere designed to demonstrate paddy techniques (Brautigam, 1998; MFA, 2021). The Chinese presence in this period was official, small, rotational, and rural: agronomists, doctors, and engineers on fixed postings rather than settlers.

Prestige Projects and Consolidation, 1978-1991

The second phase centred on construction diplomacy. Chinese teams built the Youyi ("Friendship") Building at Brookfields, completed in the 1980s and still housing multiple ministries; the Siaka Stevens National Stadium, completed in 1979 for a reported grant-financed cost and long the largest stadium in the country; and hydro-agricultural and sugar complex works at Magbass in Tonkolili District (Brautigam, 1998; Ministry of Finance, 2023). Magbass, a sugar plantation and refinery managed under successive Chinese contracts from 1982, became the longest-running Chinese agro-industrial operation in the country and a recurring case in the aid-effectiveness literature because of its cycles of rehabilitation, community land disputes, and renegotiation (Brautigam, 2015). Through this period the resident community remained overwhelmingly project-tied, numbering at most a few hundred.

War, Withdrawal, and Post-War Re-entry, 1991-2007

The civil war reduced the Chinese presence to a diplomatic and skeletal project core, but the end of hostilities in 2002 opened the third and most consequential phase. Post-war reconstruction generated contracts that Chinese state-owned enterprises were structurally well placed to win: financed by Chinese policy banks, priced aggressively, and executed rapidly (Corkin, 2013; Foster et al., 2009). China Railway Seventh Group, Henan Guoji, and other contractors established permanent country offices. Behind the contractors came the first substantial wave of private migrants, typically from Fujian, Zhejiang, and Henan, opening import shops on Sani Abacha Street and Rawdon Street in central Freetown, guesthouses, casinos, and clinics (Park, 2022; Mohan et al., 2014). Hotel investment marked the period's close: the Bintumani Hotel was rehabilitated and operated under Chinese management, and Beijing financed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters at Tower Hill (MFA, 2021).

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The Resource Boom and Community Expansion, 2007-2014

The fourth phase transformed scale. Shandong Iron and Steel Group acquired a stake in the Tonkolili iron ore project in 2011 for approximately USD 1.5 billion, then full control in 2015, making a Chinese state firm the operator of one of the largest iron ore deposits in Africa (Reuters, 2015; UNCTAD, 2024). Chinese fishing companies expanded industrial trawling under Sierra Leonean licences; timber exporters, granite quarries, and cement traders multiplied; and China Kingho Energy Group signed wide-ranging memoranda covering mining and infrastructure (EJF, 2022; GoSL, 2013). The resident community during this boom plausibly peaked in the upper thousands when project rotations were at maximum, and community institutions matured: a Chinese business association, native-place networks, Chinese-language supplementary schooling, and the Confucius Institute at the University of Sierra Leone, opened in 2012 with Hanban support (Park, 2022; King, 2013).

Crisis Response and Strategic Elevation, 2014-Present

The Ebola epidemic marked a reputational watershed. China dispatched successive rounds of assistance worth over USD 120 million region-wide, built a biosafety laboratory and treatment centre at Jui outside Freetown, and deployed hundreds of medical and laboratory personnel, the largest Chinese health emergency operation abroad to that date (Kickbusch et al., 2017; Huang, 2017). The Jui facility persisted as the Sierra Leone-China Friendship Hospital and became a hub of the COVID-19 response, alongside Chinese vaccine donations from 2021 (MFA, 2021; WHO, 2022). Sierra Leone signed a Belt and Road Initiative memorandum in 2018, and in February 2024 the two governments elevated relations to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership during President Bio’s state visit to Beijing, with commitments spanning agriculture, fisheries harbour development, energy, and human resource cooperation (MFA, 2024). The cancellation in 2018 of the proposed Chinese-financed Mamamah airport by the incoming Bio administration, on debt-sustainability grounds, and its partial succession by other airport arrangements, demonstrated both the depth of the relationship and Freetown’s willingness to renegotiate within it (Financial Times, 2018; IMF, 2019).

Demography and Institutions of the Community

No census category captures the Chinese population precisely. The 2015 national census recorded only a small non-African foreign population, while embassy, association, and scholarly estimates for the resident Chinese community range between Three and eight thousand, fluctuating with mining employment and the trading season (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017; Park, 2022). The community is occupationally segmented: state-enterprise employees on rotation; long-stay private entrepreneurs in trade, hospitality, and services; fisheries crews; and a small professional stratum of doctors, teachers, and agronomists. Institutionally it is organised through the Chinese embassy’s economic and commercial counsellor’s office, a general chamber of commerce, provincial native-place associations, and informal credit and wholesale networks that link Freetown to Guangzhou and Yiwu (Mohan et al., 2014; Haugen, 2011). Table 1 summarises the milestones, and Figure 1 presents the timeline graphically.

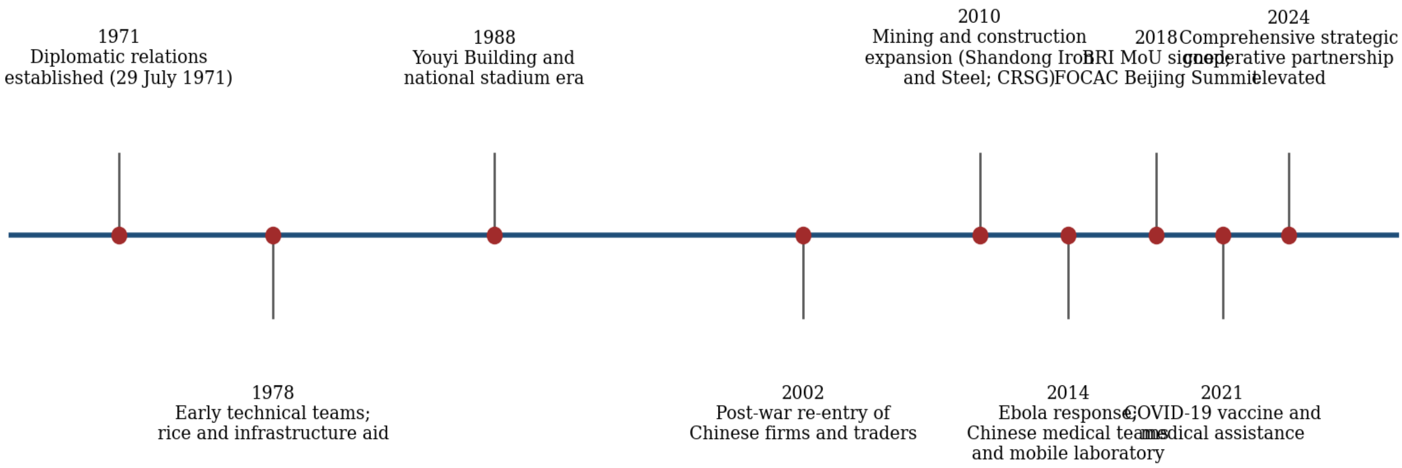
Table 1 Timeline of the Chinese community and China-Sierra Leone relations, 1971-2024

Period	Milestones	Character of Chinese presence
1971-1978	Diplomatic relations (29 July 1971); UNGA Resolution 2758 support; agro-technical agreement (1972); first medical team (1973); rice stations	Official, rotational, rural technical teams
1978-1991	Siaka Stevens Stadium (1979); Youyi Building; Magbass sugar complex (1982)	Project construction brigades; prestige diplomacy
1991-2002	Civil war; presence reduced to diplomatic core	Minimal; projects suspended
2002-2007	Reconstruction contracts; first private trader wave; Bintumani rehabilitation; MFA headquarters	SOE contractors plus emerging trader community
2007-2014	Tonkolili acquisition by Shandong Iron and Steel; fisheries and timber expansion; Confucius Institute (2012)	Boom-era expansion; community institutions form

2014-2018	Ebola response; Jui hospital and laboratory; BRI MoU (2018); Mamamah airport cancelled (2018)	Health diplomacy; renegotiation of terms
2018-2024	COVID-19 assistance; fisheries harbour agreement; comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership (2024)	Consolidated, diversified, strategically framed

Note. Compiled from MFA (2021, 2024), Brautigam (1998, 2015), Park (2022), and Sierra Leonean government sources. Dates of commercial events verified against contemporary reporting.

Milestones in China–Sierra Leone relations and Chinese community development, 1971–2024



LITERATURE REVIEW

The Chinese Diaspora and Overseas Chinese Communities

The study of overseas Chinese communities long centred on Southeast Asia, where scholarship established the analytical vocabulary of native-place networks, rotating credit associations, and middleman minorities (Wang, 1991; Mung, 2008). The African extension of this literature is comparatively young. Foundational contributions distinguished the “old” diasporas of South Africa, Madagascar, and Mauritius from the “new” post-1990 migration of traders, contractors, and independent entrepreneurs into the rest of the continent (Park, 2009; Mohan & Tan-Mullins, 2009). Estimates of the continental Chinese population converge on one to two million, distributed highly unevenly and characterised by circular rather than permanent migration (Park, 2022; French, 2014). Ethnographic work in Ghana, Senegal, Cape Verde, and Zambia documented recurring features directly relevant to Sierra Leone: chain migration from a few sending provinces, thin social integration, reliance on co-ethnic wholesale credit, and precarious legal status navigated through brokers (Marfaing & Thiel, 2013; Haugen & Carling, 2005; Giese & Thiel, 2014; Hairong & Sautman, 2013). Sierra Leone appears in this corpus only in passing, usually as a line in continental population tables.

Africa-China Relations and Development Cooperation

The macro literature on Africa-China relations progressed through three broad waves. The first, polemical wave framed China as either neo-colonial extractor or liberating alternative to Western conditionality (Taylor, 2006; Alden, 2007). The second, empirical wave, anchored by Brautigam’s (2009, 2015) reconstruction of Chinese aid and finance data and by the AidData and SAIS-CARI project-level datasets, disciplined the debate: Chinese official finance is large but frequently overstated, concentrated in infrastructure, and blends concessional and commercial logics (Dreher et al., 2022; Horn et al., 2021). The third wave disaggregates: firm-level studies of employment and localisation (Oya & Schaefer, 2021; Sun, 2017), geocoded studies of local economic effects (Isaksson & Kotsadam, 2018; Wegenast et al., 2019), and studies of debt and renegotiation (Brautigam & Gallagher, 2014; Acker et al., 2020). This article positions Sierra Leone within the third wave.

FDI, Growth, and Institutions

The FDI literature offers the theoretical spine. Dunning's (2001) ownership-location-internalisation paradigm explains why Chinese firms with construction and mining capabilities locate in resource-rich, infrastructure-poor economies; institutional theory explains how weak host institutions both attract certain investors and truncate spillovers (North, 1990; Peng et al., 2008); and the spillover literature shows that FDI benefits depend on absorptive capacity, linkages, and competition effects rather than arising automatically (Borensztein et al., 1998; Javorcik, 2004; Farole & Winkler, 2014). Studies of Chinese FDI specifically find weaker sensitivity to host governance quality than Western FDI, a market- and resource-seeking motive mix, and employment effects that are real but concentrated in low-skill categories (Chen et al., 2018; Kolstad & Wiig, 2011; Munemo, 2023).

Infrastructure, Employment, and Entrepreneurship

On infrastructure, the evidence is that Chinese contractors have reduced Africa's construction costs and delivery times while raising questions about quality assurance, debt structuring, and maintenance (Foster et al., 2009; Farrell, 2016; Wethal, 2019). On employment, systematic surveys contradict the popular claim that Chinese firms import all labour: localisation rates in surveyed Chinese firms typically exceed three quarters of the workforce, though supervisory localisation lags and casualisation is common (Oya & Schaefer, 2021; Sautman & Yan, 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2017). On entrepreneurship, Chinese traders are found to widen consumer choice and compress prices while displacing some local retailers and provoking regulatory backlash, with net welfare effects that vary by market structure (Marfaing & Thiel, 2013; Mohan et al., 2014).

Health, Education, and Soft Power

Chinese medical teams, deployed to Africa since 1963, constitute one of the longest-running South-South health programmes, with documented service delivery but debated system-strengthening effects (Li, 2011; Kickbusch et al., 2017). The Ebola response literature credits China with unprecedented operational deployment in Sierra Leone and Liberia while noting coordination frictions with the WHO-led architecture (Huang, 2017; Lu et al., 2016). Education scholarship tracks the expansion of Chinese government scholarships, now the largest single-country scholarship programme for African students, and the contested role of Confucius Institutes as instruments of soft power (King, 2013; Nye, 2004; Hartig, 2015). Sierra Leone-specific evidence in these literatures is sparse and largely descriptive.

Sierra Leone Scholarship

Sierra Leonean development scholarship has concentrated on war and peacebuilding, governance and decentralisation, the resource curse, and aid dependence (Zack-Williams, 1999; Fanthorpe, 2006; Conteh, 2017; Datzberger, 2015). Work touching the Chinese presence includes analyses of the Tonkolili and African Minerals collapse (Wilson, 2015), fisheries governance and the contested Black Johnson harbour project (EJF, 2022; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2022), and general surveys of bilateral relations (Kargbo, 2012; M'cormack-Hale & Beoku-Betts, 2015 address governance context). No study integrates the community dimension across sectors. That is the gap this article fills.

Research Gaps and Synthesis

Five gaps emerge. First, community-level analysis is missing for small post-conflict states; the unit of analysis in most work is the state or the megaproject. Second, sectoral coverage is uneven, with mining and infrastructure studied and services, retail, health commerce, and philanthropy neglected. Third, longitudinal perspective is rare; snapshots dominate. Fourth, comparative positioning of Sierra Leone against peer economies is absent. Fifth, the policy literature seldom connects findings to implementable institutional reform in the host state. Table 2 synthesises the strands.

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Table 2 Literature synthesis: strands, representative works, findings, and gaps relevant to Sierra Leone

Strand	Representative works	Core findings	Gap for Sierra Leone
Overseas Chinese in Africa	Park (2009, 2022); Mohan et al. (2014); Marfaing & Thiel (2013)	Circular migration; enclave networks; trader-local tension	No dedicated community study
Chinese aid and finance	Brautigam (2009, 2015); Dreher et al. (2022); Horn et al. (2021)	Infrastructure-heavy blended finance; scale often overstated	Project-level accounting incomplete
Chinese FDI and spillovers	Chen et al. (2018); Kolstad & Wiig (2011); Javorcik (2004)	Resource and market seeking; spillovers depend on absorptive capacity	Firm-level spillover evidence absent
Infrastructure delivery	Foster et al. (2009); Wethal (2019); Farrell (2016)	Cost and speed advantages; quality and debt concerns	No systematic project inventory
Employment and labour	Oya & Schaefer (2021); Sautman & Yan (2015)	High localisation, low-skill concentration, casualisation	No Sierra Leone labour survey of Chinese firms
Fisheries and environment	EJF (2022); Okafor-Yarwood et al. (2022); Belhabib et al. (2015)	IUU fishing pressure; weak monitoring; livelihood damage	Quantified stock and revenue effects thin
Health cooperation	Li (2011); Kickbusch et al. (2017); Huang (2017)	Long-run medical teams; Ebola surge capacity	System-strengthening effects unmeasured
Education and soft power	King (2013); Hartig (2015); Benabdallah (2020)	Scholarship expansion; contested Confucius Institutes	Graduate tracer evidence absent
Comparative country studies	Sun (2017); Corkin (2013); Lee (2017)	Outcomes vary with host bargaining and institutions	Sierra Leone missing from comparisons
Sierra Leone development	Zack-Williams (1999); Fanthorpe (2006); Conteh (2017)	Fragility, aid dependence, resource governance failures	China dimension unintegrated

Note. Author's synthesis. Representative works are illustrative, not exhaustive.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Thirteen Lenses, Critically Weighed

A single theory cannot carry a phenomenon that spans state finance, private migration, enterprise behaviour, and diplomacy. This section evaluates thirteen frameworks and retains from each what earns its place.

South-South Cooperation theory frames Chinese engagement as horizontal cooperation among developing countries governed by mutual benefit, non-conditionality, and demand-driven delivery (Gray & Gills, 2016; Mawdsley, 2019). Its strength is descriptive fidelity to how both governments narrate the relationship; its weakness is that principle and practice diverge, and asymmetry between the second-largest economy on earth and one of the smallest is horizontal only in rhetoric. It is retained as the framing discourse whose implementation this article tests.

Dependency theory predicts that peripheral economies exporting raw materials to a core will experience unequal exchange, enclave extraction, and blocked industrialisation (Frank, 1966; Amin, 1976; Taylor, 2014). Sierra Leone's export basket to China, dominated by unprocessed iron ore, rutile, timber, and fish, fits the prediction uncomfortably well, and the theory retains diagnostic power over trade structure. It fails, though, to explain variation: why Ethiopia extracted manufacturing investment from the same partner while Sierra Leone did not is a question dependency theory cannot answer from structure alone.

Modernisation theory and its contemporary descendant, **New Structural Economics**, supply the counter-frame. Lin's (2012) argument that latecomers grow by attracting industries matching their latent comparative advantage, with infrastructure gaps removed by targeted investment, is effectively the official theory of Chinese cooperation and of the flying-geese relocation narrative (Lin & Wang, 2017; Sun, 2017). Its relevance to Sierra Leone is aspirational: the infrastructure channel operates, the industrial relocation channel barely does, and the theory usefully directs attention to why.

Institutional theory holds that the returns to any external engagement are set by the quality of rules and their enforcement (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). It is the workhorse of this article: identical Chinese behaviour produces different outcomes under different regulatory regimes, and Sierra Leone's enforcement gaps, in fisheries observation, labour inspection, and revenue administration, are where value leaks.

Developmental state theory asks whether the host state possesses the embedded autonomy to discipline capital towards national goals (Evans, 1995; Mkandawire, 2001). Sierra Leone is not a developmental state, and the theory's contribution is precisely to specify what is missing: bureaucratic capability, negotiation capacity, and a coherent industrial vision that Chinese partners could be held to.

Social capital theory and **network theory** explain the internal architecture of the Chinese community: bounded solidarity, enforceable trust, rotating credit, and wholesale networks linking Freetown to Guangzhou lower transaction costs for insiders while raising entry barriers for outsiders (Portes, 1998; Granovetter, 1985; Mohan et al., 2014). They also explain why spillovers are thin, since network closure limits knowledge diffusion to local firms.

Stakeholder theory reframes Chinese firms as accountable not only to owners but to workers, communities, and regulators, providing the normative basis for the corporate social responsibility analysis in Section 5 (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). **International business theory** and **FDI theory**, principally the OLI paradigm and internalisation economics, explain entry-mode choices, from wholly owned mining subsidiaries to family trading firms (Dunning, 2001; Buckley et al., 2007). Buckley et al.'s (2007) findings on Chinese outward FDI, including tolerance of political risk and responsiveness to state encouragement, fit the Sierra Leone pattern closely.

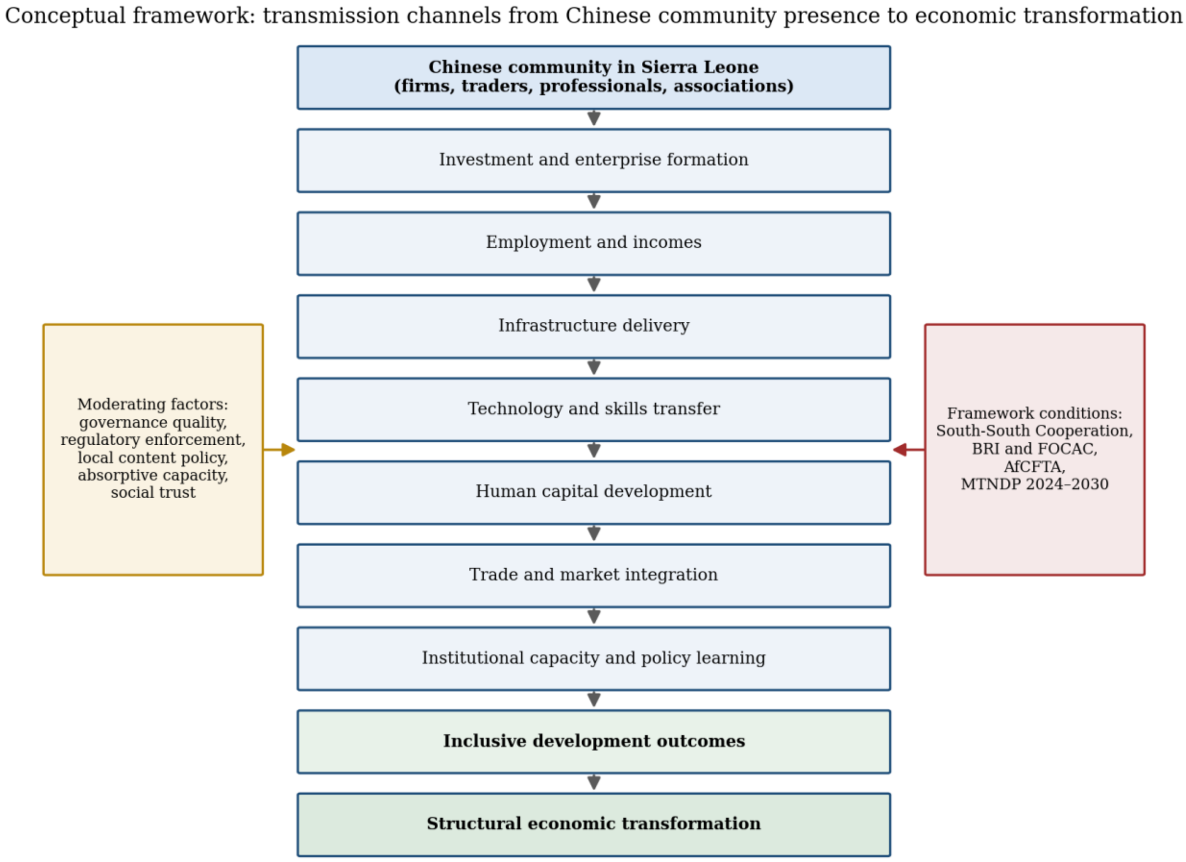
Soft power theory interprets medical teams, scholarships, stadiums, and the Confucius Institute as investments in attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004; Benabdallah, 2020). Afrobarometer evidence that a majority of Sierra Leoneans view Chinese influence positively suggests the investment yields returns, though attitudes towards Chinese employers are more critical than attitudes towards China (Afrobarometer, 2021; Sanny & Selormey, 2021). **Sustainable development theory**, operationalised through the SDGs, supplies the evaluative yardstick, insisting that contributions be weighed against environmental and intergenerational costs, which matters acutely for fisheries and forests (Sachs, 2015).

The critical judgement is this: dependency and institutional theory best explain current outcomes; new structural economics and developmental state theory best specify the path not yet taken; social capital and network theory best explain community behaviour; and South-South Cooperation supplies the discourse within which all bargaining occurs.

The Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 integrates these lenses into a transmission-channel framework. The Chinese community, comprising firms, traders, professionals, and associations, generates investment and enterprise formation; these produce employment and incomes, infrastructure delivery, and technology and skills transfer; those in turn build human capital, deepen trade and market integration, and, through interaction with the state, develop institutional capacity; the accumulated effects yield inclusive development and, ultimately, structural economic transformation. Two conditioning blocks moderate every link. Governance quality, regulatory enforcement, local content policy, absorptive capacity, and social trust determine how much value each channel actually transmits, which is the institutionalist insight. The framework conditions of South-South Cooperation, BRI, FOCAC, AfCFTA, and the Medium-Term National Development Plan set the external terms, which is the SSC insight. The framework is falsifiable at each link: where the article finds a channel blocked, as with technology transfer, it identifies which moderating factor is binding.

Applied prospectively, the framework also generates the article's central policy proposition. If outcomes vary with the moderating block rather than with the volume of Chinese activity, then reform effort should concentrate on enforcement capability, absorptive capacity, and negotiation strength, and the marginal return to such reform exceeds the marginal return to attracting additional undifferentiated investment. This proposition distinguishes the framework from both dependency pessimism, which counsels disengagement that a small open economy cannot afford, and from investment-promotion optimism, which counsels volume that weak institutions cannot convert. The comparative analysis in Section 10 supplies the test: countries in the sample differ far more in their moderating conditions than in the character of the Chinese engagement they receive, and their outcomes differ accordingly.



METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy and Design

The study adopts critical realism. The phenomena of interest, spillovers, institutional capacity, dependency, exist as real causal mechanisms that are only imperfectly captured in observable data, and the analytical task is retroduction: inferring which mechanisms best explain the observed pattern of outcomes (Bhaskar, 2008; Fletcher, 2017). This philosophy suits a setting where official statistics are incomplete and where competing narratives, celebratory and critical, must be adjudicated against evidence rather than assumed.

The design is qualitative dominant with an embedded quantitative strand, in Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) terms an embedded mixed-methods design. The qualitative core comprises documentary, institutional, historical, thematic, and content analysis together with comparative case study methodology (Yin, 2018; George & Bennett, 2005). The embedded quantitative strand assembles secondary statistics on trade, investment, aid, and social indicators to bound magnitudes and test claims of scale.

The fifteen research questions guiding the inquiry are: (1) What has been the historical evolution of the Chinese community in Sierra Leone? (2) Which sectors have benefited most from Chinese community participation? (3)

How has the community contributed to economic growth? (4) What role has it played in entrepreneurship and private sector development? (5) How has it contributed to infrastructure development? (6) How has it influenced employment creation and skills development? (7) What has been the contribution of Chinese businesses to government revenue? (8) How has the community promoted technology transfer? (9) What role has it played in education and scholarships? (10) How has it contributed to healthcare? (11) How has it strengthened China-Sierra Leone diplomatic relations? (12) How does it support South-South Cooperation? (13) What are the major criticisms of Chinese investments and businesses? (14) What governance reforms could improve mutual benefits? (15) What future opportunities exist under the BRI, FOCAC, AfCFTA, and the Medium-Term National Development Plan? Questions 1 and 2 are answered in Sections 2 and 6; questions 3 to 10 in Section 6; question 11 across Sections 2 and 8; question 12 in Section 8; question 13 in Sections 9 and 11; question 14 in Section 12; and question 15 in Section 13.

Data Sources and Sampling

Documentary sources were purposively sampled across four provenance classes to force triangulation across interested parties: Sierra Leonean official sources (Statistics Sierra Leone; Bank of Sierra Leone annual reports; Ministry of Finance debt bulletins and development cooperation reports; National Revenue Authority; SLIEPA and National Investment Board materials; the Medium-Term National Development Plan 2024-2030; Environment Protection Agency and Ministry of Fisheries documents); Chinese official sources (MOFCOM statistical bulletins of outward FDI; MFA country statements; FOCAC action plans; Chinese Embassy in Freetown releases; National Bureau of Statistics of China trade data); multilateral sources (World Bank World Development Indicators and country diagnostics; IMF Article IV reports; UNCTAD World Investment Reports; UNDP Human Development Reports; African Development Bank outlooks; WTO trade profiles; OECD-DAC statistics for comparison); and independent sources (peer-reviewed literature 2018-2026 alongside seminal earlier studies; AidData and SAIS-CARI project datasets; Afrobarometer Round 8 and 9 microdata summaries; investigative reporting by the Environmental Justice Foundation and Sierra Leonean media).

Case study sampling followed a maximum-variation logic (Patton, 2015): eight Chinese enterprises or organisations were selected to span mining, construction, fisheries, agriculture, health, telecommunications-adjacent services, retail, and education, and to include state-owned, private, successful, and failed ventures. Comparator countries, Ghana, Zambia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria, were selected because each hosts a large Chinese presence, has been intensively studied, and represents a distinct engagement model against which Sierra Leone can be benchmarked.

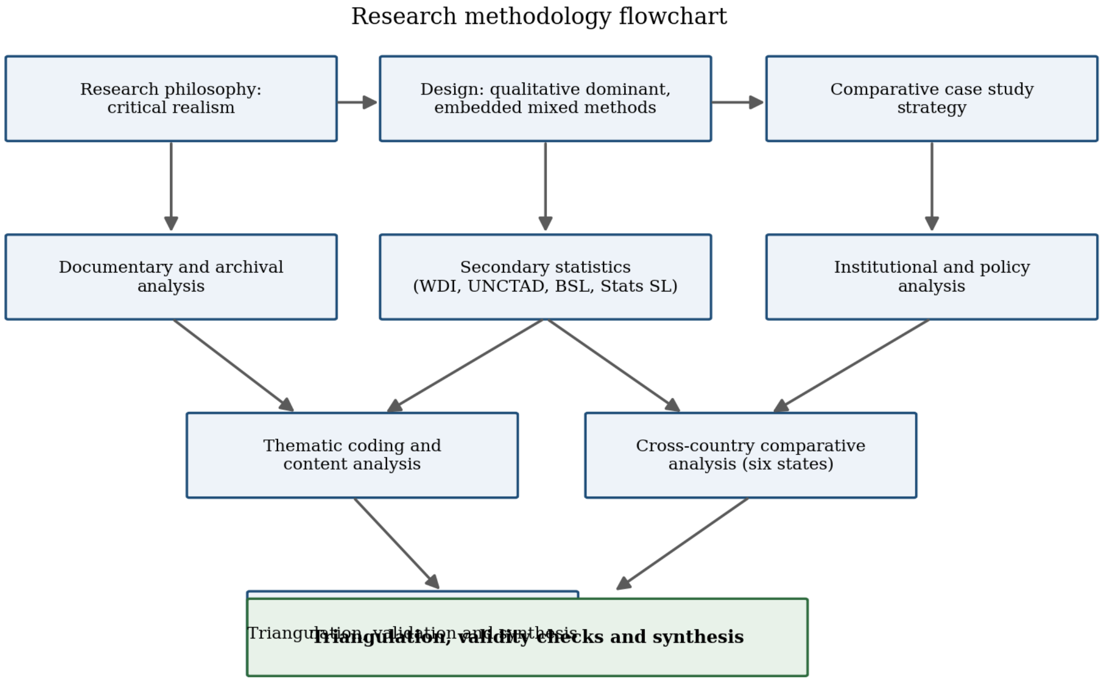
Analytical Methods

Historical analysis established periodisation (Section 2). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases, coding documents against the fifteen research questions and allowing inductive themes, such as enforcement failure and philanthropic signalling, to emerge. Content analysis quantified coverage patterns in policy documents. Institutional analysis mapped the formal rules governing investment, fisheries, labour, and revenue against documented practice, the gap between the two being the central explanatory variable. Comparative policy analysis applied a structured, focused comparison across the six comparators (George & Bennett, 2005). Case studies were built to a common protocol covering investment size, employment, local sourcing, corporate social responsibility, development impact, challenges, and lessons.

Validity, Reliability, Ethics, and Limitations

Validity was pursued through source triangulation across the four provenance classes, through explicit confidence grading of contested figures, and through negative-case analysis, deliberately seeking evidence against emerging interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reliability rests on an audit trail linking every empirical claim to a cited source and on a transparent coding frame. Ethically, the study uses only public documents and published data, names firms only in relation to publicly reported matters, and avoids identifying private individuals; no human subjects were engaged, so institutional review was not required, though the analysis observes the do-no-harm principle in discussing a resident minority community that has occasionally faced hostility.

Four limitations bound the claims. First, the absence of firm-level survey data for Sierra Leone means employment and localisation figures are estimates triangulated from project reports and regional benchmarks. Second, Chinese population figures are inherently uncertain. Third, secondary trade and FDI statistics for Sierra Leone contain known inconsistencies between national and partner-reported data. Fourth, documentary methods cannot capture informal practices, especially in fisheries and small-scale mining, except as reported by investigators. These limitations are flagged where they bite, and all statistics presented should be verified against primary sources before citation onward. Figure 3 summarises the methodological architecture.



Contributions to Sierra Leone's Development

Figure 4 maps the four channels, state-to-state, commercial, community, and institutional, through which Chinese engagement reaches Sierra Leonean outcomes. This section works through the sectors.

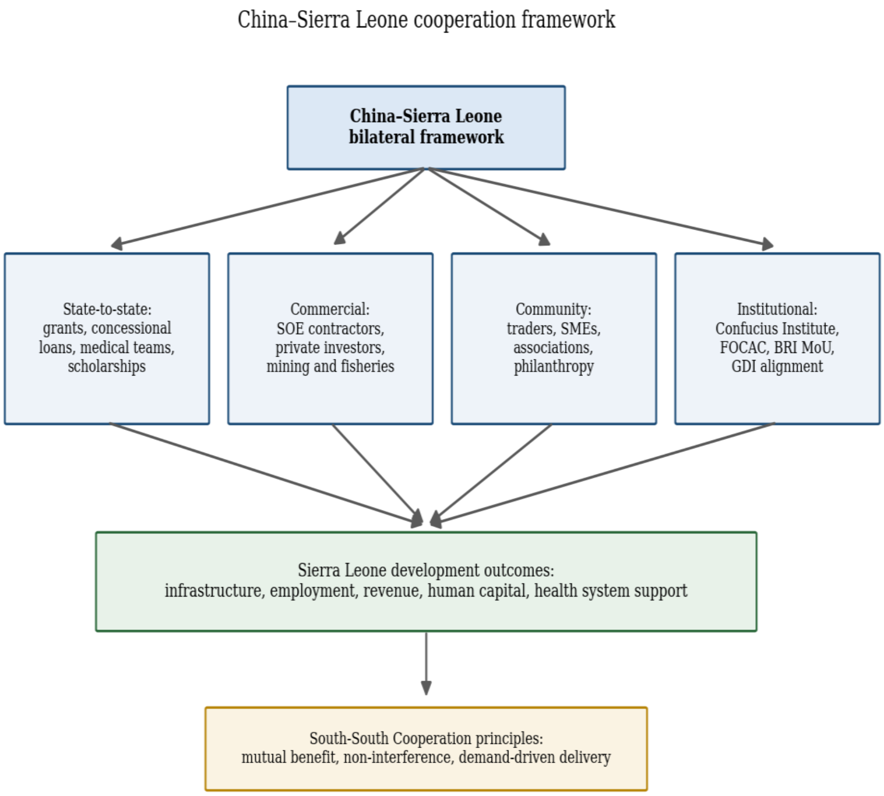


Figure 4. China-Sierra Leone cooperation framework.

Economic Growth, Investment, and Revenue

China has been Sierra Leone's largest merchandise trading partner in most years since the mid-2010s, absorbing well over half of exports in peak iron ore years, and among the largest announced sources of FDI (Bank of Sierra Leone, 2024; UNCTAD, 2024; WTO, 2024). The growth contribution runs through three channels. The first is mining. The Tonkolili operation under Shandong Iron and Steel, and since 2021 the Kingho-linked Leone Rock Metal Group, together with Chinese offtake of Marampa ore, tie a large share of export earnings, mining royalties, and leone liquidity to Chinese demand; iron ore alone has accounted for the majority of goods exports in recent years, and mining contributes roughly a fifth of measured GDP in boom conditions (IMF, 2024; Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [SLEITI], 2023). The second channel is construction, where Chinese contractors dominate the order book for roads and public buildings, injecting demand for local labour, aggregates, and haulage. The third is trade and services, where several hundred Chinese-run shops, restaurants, guesthouses, clinics, and casinos widen consumer choice, compress import prices, and pay trading licences, import duties, and the goods and services tax (Mohan et al., 2014; National Revenue Authority [NRA], 2023).

The macroeconomic record makes the point with unusual force. When Tonkolili reached full production in 2012 and 2013, Sierra Leone recorded real GDP growth above 15 and 20 per cent respectively, among the fastest rates in the world, driven almost entirely by iron ore volumes destined for Chinese mills; when the ore price collapsed and Ebola struck in 2014 and 2015, output contracted by roughly a fifth, the sharpest peacetime reversal in the country's history (World Bank, 2024a; IMF, 2024). No other bilateral relationship moves Sierra Leone's national accounts on that scale. The restart of ore exports under Leone Rock from 2021 restored export earnings and foreign exchange inflows at a moment when the leone was under severe depreciation pressure, and Bank of Sierra Leone (2024) data show mineral receipts, overwhelmingly China-bound, as the principal stabilising item on the current account. The dependence, and therefore the exposure, is the analytical constant.

Revenue contribution is real but leaky. SLEITI (2023) reconciliations show Chinese-linked mining firms among the largest payers of royalties and surface rents, while the NRA and the Audit Service have repeatedly flagged under-declaration in fisheries licensing, timber export, and small-trader turnover (Audit Service Sierra Leone, 2022). The net fiscal picture, substantial gross payments minus exemptions negotiated in mining and infrastructure agreements minus evasion at the small end, has never been consolidated in public documents, itself a governance finding.

Table 3 Estimated Chinese-linked investment and activity by sector, circa 2024

Sector	Principal actors	Indicative scale	Confidence
Iron ore mining	Leone Rock Metal Group (Kingho); Shandong-era Tonkolili assets	USD 1.5-3.0 bn cumulative investment; largest export earner	Medium
Construction	CRSG, Henan Guoji, CSCEC and others	Majority share of major road and public building contracts	High
Fisheries	Multiple industrial trawler operators under local licences	Dozens of Chinese-owned or -crewed vessels	Medium
Wholesale and retail	Several hundred family firms, Freetown and provincial towns	Import turnover in the tens of USD millions annually	Low-Medium
Agriculture	Magbass sugar complex; rice demonstration ventures	Longest-running agro-industrial concession	High
Health services	Private clinics and pharmacies; Friendship Hospital support	Approximately 20-40 private facilities	Low
Hospitality	Bintumani operation legacy; hotels, restaurants, casinos	30-60 establishments	Low

Note. Author's compilation from SLEITI (2023), UNCTAD (2024), MOFCOM (2023), EJF (2022), and press records. Figures are indicative and require primary verification. Figure 5 visualises the distribution.

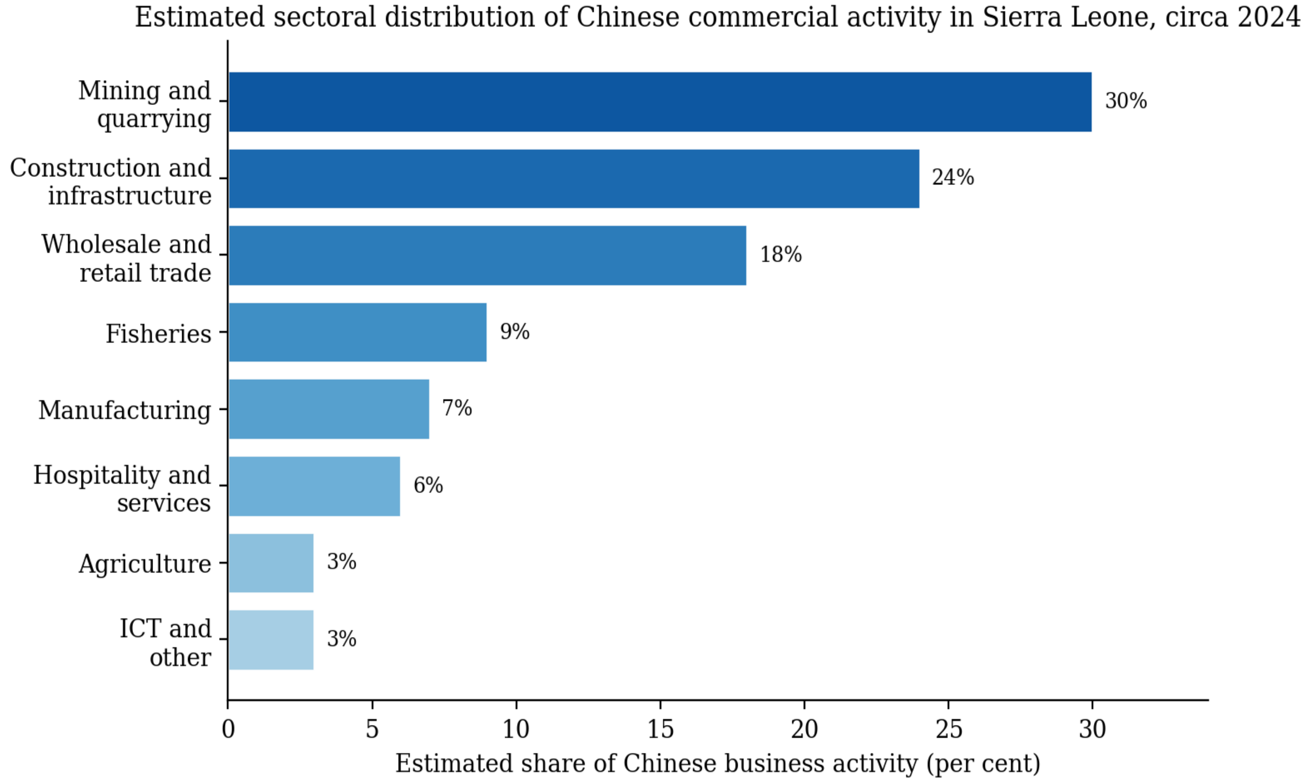


Figure 5. Estimated sectoral distribution of Chinese commercial activity in Sierra Leone, circa 2024.

Infrastructure

Chinese-built infrastructure is the most visible legacy. The inventory includes the national stadium (1979, with a Chinese-funded rehabilitation completed in the 2020s), the Youyi Building, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters, the Jui hospital and laboratory complex, major trunk roads including sections of the Freetown-Makeni and provincial corridors, the Hillside Bypass roads easing Freetown's congestion, bridges, markets, and the Regent-Grafton and other peninsular works (Ministry of Finance, 2023; MFA, 2021). Financing has blended grants, interest-free loans, and Export-Import Bank of China concessional credit; Sierra Leone's disclosed public debt to Chinese creditors has remained modest relative to peers such as Zambia, roughly in the low hundreds of USD millions, partly because the largest proposal, the USD 300-400 million Mamamah airport, was cancelled in 2018 on debt-sustainability advice (IMF, 2019; Horn et al., 2021). Project examples cut both ways. The Jui complex demonstrably anchored epidemic response capacity; the rehabilitated stadium restored an international-standard venue; but the Orugu water and several road projects have drawn criticism over cost benchmarking, supervision, and maintenance handover, echoing the continental pattern in which delivery speed outruns lifecycle planning (Foster et al., 2009; Wethal, 2019).

Table 4 Selected Chinese-financed or Chinese-built infrastructure projects

Project	Period	Type of finance	Status and remarks
Siaka Stevens National Stadium	1979; rehab 2022-2023	Grant	Delivered; rehabilitated under grant aid
Youyi Building	1980s	Grant	In service; houses ministries
Magbass sugar complex	1982-	Aid then commercial	Operating; recurrent land disputes
MFA headquarters, Tower Hill	2000s	Grant	Delivered
Jui Friendship Hospital and P3 laboratory	2014-2016	Grant	Ebola and COVID-19 hub
Hillside Bypass and Freetown roads	2010s-2020s	Concessional loan	Phased delivery

Mamamah international airport	Cancelled 2018	Proposed EximBank loan	Cancelled on debt grounds
Fisheries harbour, Black Johnson	Agreed 2021-	Grant-linked	Contested on environmental grounds

Note. Compiled from Ministry of Finance (2023), MFA (2021), IMF (2019), and EJF (2022).

Employment and Skills

Direct employment attributable to Chinese operations spans mine labour at Tonkolili and associated rail and port operations, historically several thousand positions at full production; construction crews on road and building sites; fisheries crews; and shop, hotel, and clinic staff. Triangulating project disclosures against regional localisation benchmarks of 74-90 per cent local workforce in surveyed Chinese firms (Oya & Schaefer, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2017; Sautman & Yan, 2015) suggests total direct Sierra Leonean employment in Chinese-linked enterprises plausibly in the range of eight to fifteen thousand at boom conditions, with multiples more in indirect and induced employment through suppliers, transport, catering, security, and the spending of wages. Figure 7 models the channels. Youth employment benefits from construction's low entry barriers; women's employment concentrates in retail, hospitality, and fish processing, sectors with documented decent-work deficits. Skills formation occurs mainly on the job, in equipment operation, masonry, welding, and site management, supplemented by structured schemes: Chinese government training programmes and seminars have taken thousands of Sierra Leonean officials and technicians to China under FOCAC human resource commitments, and vocational cooperation features in the 2024 partnership documents (MFA, 2024; King, 2013). Managerial localisation remains the weak link: supervisory and financial-control positions in most Chinese firms stay expatriate, limiting the deepest form of skills transfer (Oya & Schaefer, 2021).

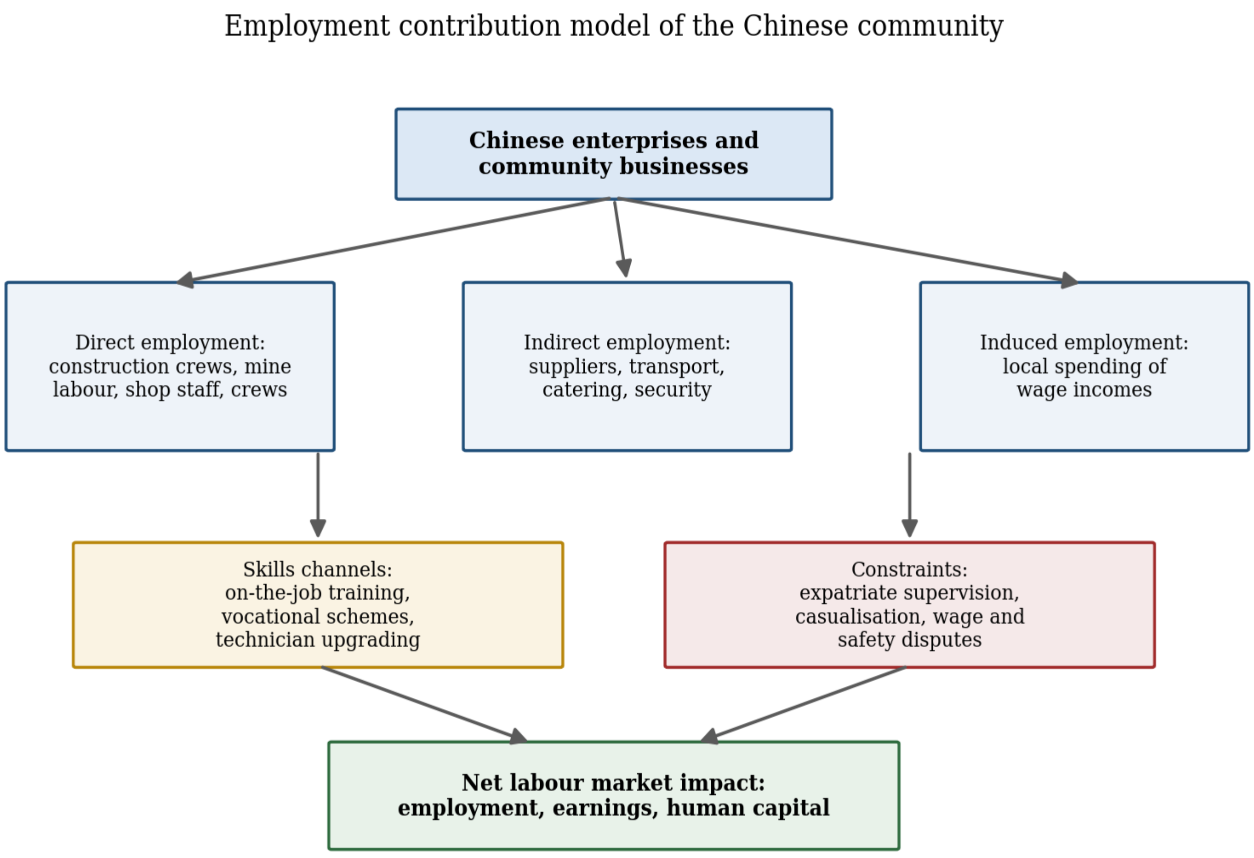


Figure 7. Employment contribution model of the Chinese community.

Table 5 Employment contribution estimates by segment, boom-period conditions

Segment	Direct local jobs (est.)	Skill profile	Principal issues
Iron ore mining and logistics	4,000-7,000	Semi-skilled to skilled	Casualisation; safety; retrenchment cycles
Construction	2,000-4,000	Low to semi-skilled	Project-tied contracts; wage disputes
Fisheries	1,000-2,000	Low-skilled crews and processors	Conditions at sea; observer coverage
Trade, hospitality, services	1,500-3,000	Low-skilled, female-intensive	Informality; hours; contracts
Agriculture (Magbass and outgrowers)	500-1,500	Seasonal	Land disputes; seasonal insecurity

Note. Author’s estimates triangulated from project reports and regional benchmarks (Oya & Schaefer, 2021); ranges deliberately wide and requiring survey verification.

Entrepreneurship and Private Sector Development

The Chinese trading community has restructured segments of Sierra Leone’s retail economy. Import shops supply builders’ hardware, motorcycles and parts, textiles, electronics, and household goods at price points that expanded consumption possibilities for low-income households, while wholesale relationships supply Sierra Leonean market women and provincial retailers, integrating them into Guangzhou- and Yiwu-centred supply chains (Mohan et al., 2014; Marfaing & Thiel, 2013). Business incubation effects are observable but informal: local staff of Chinese shops have opened competing businesses; motorcycle importation seeded the okada transport economy; and construction subcontracting has grown a stratum of Sierra Leonean aggregate suppliers and hauliers. Against this stand displacement complaints from local traders, periodic enforcement campaigns over retail sectors reserved for citizens, and the familiar finding that co-ethnic credit networks advantage Chinese entrants over local competitors who face 20-30 per cent lending rates (Bank of Sierra Leone, 2024). The net judgement from comparative evidence is that consumer welfare gains are real and large, producer displacement is concentrated and politically salient, and the policy answer lies in enforcing the reserved-sector rules that exist rather than in generalised restriction (Marfaing & Thiel, 2013).

Education and Scholarships

Chinese government scholarships have carried Sierra Leonean students to Chinese universities since the 1970s, and the flow accelerated after FOCAC 2015 and 2018 raised continental commitments to tens of thousands of scholarships and training places (King, 2013; FOCAC, 2018). Sierra Leone’s annual allocation, combining Chinese Government Scholarships, Confucius Institute scholarships, and provincial awards, has run at several dozen degree scholarships plus larger numbers of short-course training places, cumulatively producing well over a thousand Chinese-trained Sierra Leonean graduates in medicine, engineering, agriculture, and public administration (MFA, 2021, 2024). The Confucius Institute at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, established in 2012, teaches Mandarin to university and secondary students, runs the annual Chinese Bridge competition, and brokers university partnerships; critics elsewhere question Confucius Institutes’ academic independence, though the Sierra Leone institute has operated without the controversies seen in some Western universities (Hartig, 2015; King, 2013). Vocational cooperation is the growth edge: Luban Workshop-style technical training and agricultural extension feature in recent FOCAC action plans (FOCAC, 2021, 2024). The unmeasured question is graduate absorption; no tracer study exists, and anecdotal evidence suggests both valuable returnee placement in ministries and hospitals and some brain drain into onward migration.

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Table 6 Education and training cooperation, principal instruments

Instrument	Period	Indicative scale	Remarks
Chinese Government Scholarships	1970s-	Tens annually; 1,000+ cumulative	Medicine, economic development, engineering dominant
Confucius Institute, USL	2012-	Hundreds of learners annually	Mandarin, cultural programmes
FOCAC short-course training	2000-	Hundreds of officials and technicians	Seminars in China
University partnerships	2010s-	Several MoUs	Health sciences prominent
Vocational and Luban-style workshops	2021-	Emerging	TVET focus in FOCAC 2024

Note. Compiled from MFA (2021, 2024), FOCAC (2018, 2021, 2024), King (2013).

Health

Health is the deepest and least contested contribution. Chinese medical teams, drawn principally from Hunan Province, have rotated through Sierra Leone continuously since 1973, staffing surgical, obstetric, and acupuncture services and treating hundreds of thousands of patients cumulatively (Li, 2011; MFA, 2021). The Ebola response scaled this foundation dramatically: China delivered four rounds of assistance, constructed the Jui treatment centre and a biosafety level 3 laboratory, deployed laboratory and clinical teams from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and the People's Liberation Army, and trained thousands of local health workers, its largest foreign health operation to that date (Huang, 2017; Lu et al., 2016; Kickbusch et al., 2017). The laboratory remained after the epidemic, anchoring national testing capacity that proved decisive during COVID-19, when China added protective equipment, expert teams, and Sinopharm vaccine donations that supplied a meaningful share of early doses (WHO, 2022; MFA, 2021). Alongside the official programme sits a commercial layer of Chinese private clinics and pharmacies serving both the Chinese community and Sierra Leonean patients, a sector delivering access but raising regulatory questions about licensure and pharmaceutical quality that the Pharmacy Board has intermittently pursued (Pharmacy Board of Sierra Leone, 2022). System-strengthening effects, as against service delivery, remain the debated margin, mirroring the continental literature (Kickbusch et al., 2017).

Table 7 Principal Chinese health interventions in Sierra Leone

Intervention	Period	Content
Rotating medical teams (Hunan)	1973-	Clinical service in referral hospitals
Jui Friendship Hospital	2012-; expanded 2014-2016	Secondary care; epidemic treatment
Fixed BSL-3 laboratory, Jui	2015-	Testing capacity; disease surveillance
Ebola assistance packages	2014-2016	USD 120m+ regional; PPE, food, cash, personnel
COVID-19 support	2020-2022	Vaccines, PPE, expert teams
Anti-malaria and cataract campaigns	2000s-	Periodic specialist missions

Note. Compiled from MFA (2021), Huang (2017), Lu et al. (2016), WHO (2022).

Agriculture

Agricultural cooperation is the oldest strand and the least transformed. The 1970s rice stations demonstrated paddy techniques whose diffusion was limited by extension weakness; Magbass sugar remains the flagship, employing hundreds seasonally and supplying the domestic market while cycling through disputes over land, wages, and outgrower terms that Brautigam (2015) documents as emblematic of Chinese agro-investment

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realities as against "land grab" mythology. An agricultural technology demonstration centre, rice seed multiplication support, and mechanisation donations feature in recent cooperation, and the 2024 partnership names agriculture and rice self-sufficiency as priorities, aligning with the government's Feed Salone strategy (MFA, 2024; GoSL, 2024). The gap between demonstration and diffusion, a national extension system reaching under a fifth of farmers, remains the binding constraint, an absorptive-capacity finding consistent with the conceptual framework.

Technology Transfer

Technology transfer is the weakest channel, and honesty about this is analytically important. What transfers reliably is embodied and operational technology: construction methods, equipment operation and maintenance, agronomic technique at Magbass and the demonstration sites, and laboratory protocols at Jui. What does not transfer is design capability, procurement of local inputs into technologically demanding stages, and research linkage; Chinese firms in Sierra Leone conduct no local research and development, and backward linkages stop at aggregates, food, and unskilled services (Farole & Winkler, 2014; Oya & Schaefer, 2021). In ICT, Huawei has supplied network equipment and fibre projects to operators and government, including e-government connectivity, transferring operational but not developmental capability, a pattern documented across the continent (Agbebi, 2022). Figure 8 formalises the argument: transfer is real at the operational layer, thin above it, and the binding constraints are absorptive capacity and network closure rather than deliberate withholding.

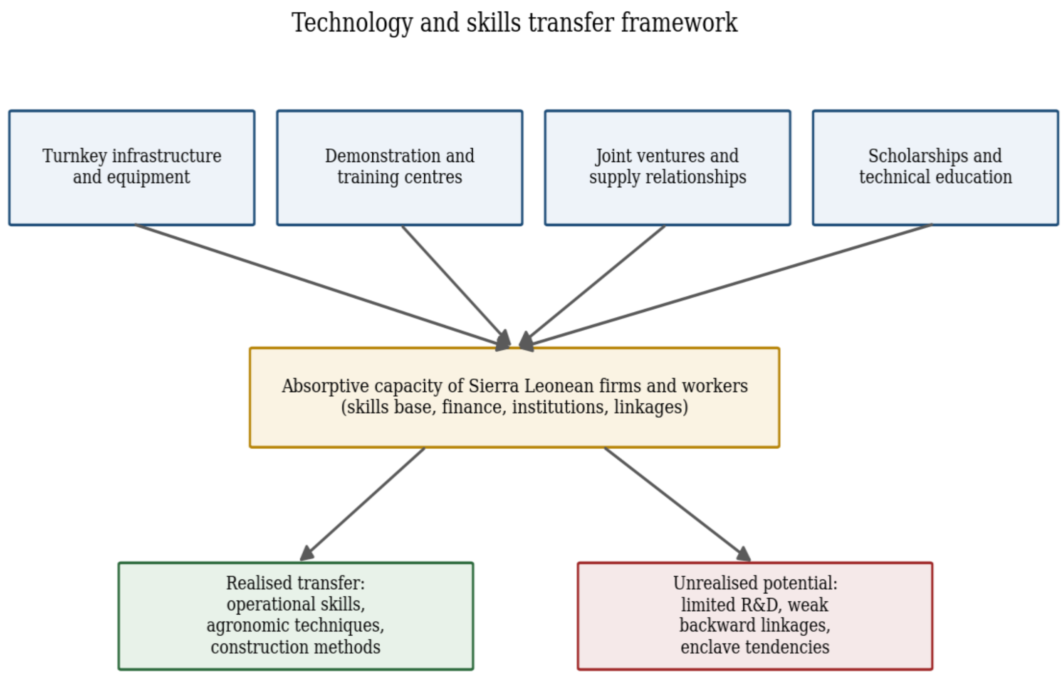

Figure 8. Technology and skills transfer framework.

Trade

Bilateral trade has grown roughly tenfold since the early 2000s. Sierra Leone's exports to China are dominated by iron ore, with rutile, timber, and fish products behind, while imports from China span machinery, vehicles, cement, steel, textiles, rice, and consumer manufactures (WTO, 2024; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024). In high ore-price years Sierra Leone runs a bilateral surplus, an unusual position among African LDCs, but the composition tells the dependency story: unprocessed materials out, manufactures in, with export concentration leaving revenue hostage to the ore price and to Chinese steel demand (UNCTAD, 2024). China's zero-tariff treatment for taxed items from least developed countries, extended to full product coverage from December 2024, is an opening whose exploitation requires exactly the processing capacity Sierra Leone lacks (WTO, 2024; FOCAC, 2024). Figure 6 presents the indicative trade trajectory.

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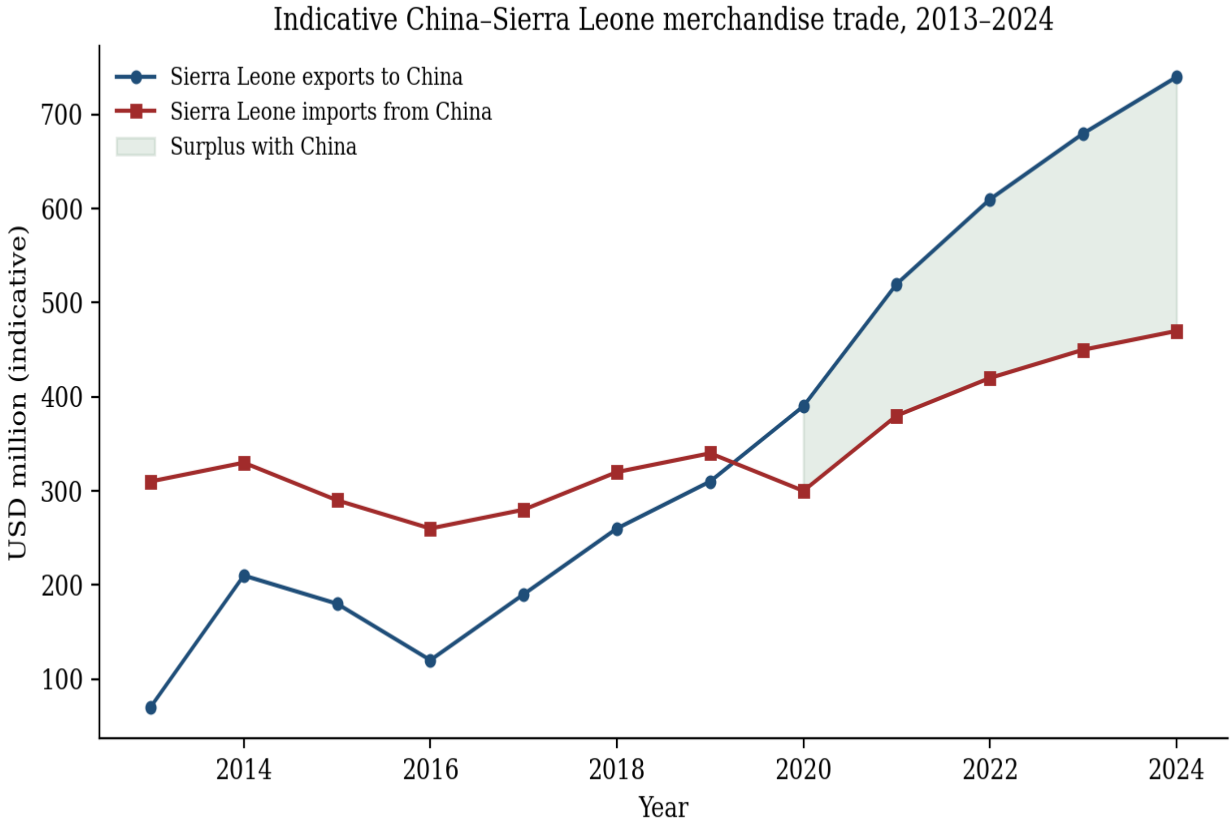

Figure 6. Indicative China-Sierra Leone merchandise trade, 2013-2024.

Philanthropy and Corporate Social Responsibility

Philanthropy operates at three levels. Official grant philanthropy delivers rice donations, school materials, and anti-malarial supplies through the embassy. Corporate CSR, concentrated among the mining and construction firms, funds school rehabilitation, boreholes, community road spurs, and scholarships in operational districts, documented in SLEITI (2023) social payment disclosures though rarely audited for delivery. Community philanthropy, the least visible layer, includes Chinese business association donations during floods, the 2017 Freetown mudslide, and COVID-19, when the community donated food, protective equipment, and cash publicly acknowledged by government (Chinese Chamber of Commerce records; local press). Critically assessed, this philanthropy is genuine but strategically patterned: it clusters where social licence is contested, functions partly as insurance against regulatory and community friction, and substitutes for, rather than complements, weak formal benefit-sharing mechanisms such as the Community Development Fund provisions of the Mines and Minerals Development Act 2022, whose enforcement would deliver far larger and more predictable flows (GoSL, 2022; Mitchell et al., 1997).

Table 8 Philanthropy and CSR channels

Channel	Typical content	Assessment
Embassy grant philanthropy	Rice, school kits, medical supplies	Reliable, visibility-oriented
Mining and contractor CSR	Schools, water points, feeder roads, scholarships	Real but unaudited; clustered near operations
Business association giving	Disaster relief, COVID-19 donations	Responsive; strengthens community standing
Statutory benefit-sharing (CDF)	1 per cent community fund obligations	Under-enforced; larger potential than all voluntary CSR

Note. Author's assessment from SLEITI (2023), GoSL (2022), and press records.

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Institutional Development

The institutional effects of the Chinese presence run in both directions: engagement has built Sierra Leonean capability in some domains and exposed, sometimes deepened, weakness in others. On the constructive side, four contributions stand out. First, negotiation and contract management experience: the Tonkolili transfers, the Mamamah cancellation, and the 2021 fisheries harbour controversy each forced the Ministry of Finance, the law officers, and sector ministries through complex renegotiations that left institutional learning behind; the Mamamah decision in particular, taken against a signed framework and defended on IMF debt-sustainability analysis, marked a maturation of appraisal discipline (IMF, 2019; Ministry of Finance, 2023). Second, investment promotion capability: Chinese investor traffic has been a principal caseload through which SLIEPA built aftercare practice, and the transition towards a National Investment Board with stronger deal-screening and one-stop functions responds directly to the negotiating asymmetries the Chinese portfolio revealed (GoSL, 2024). Third, policy dialogue infrastructure: the Joint Economic and Trade Commission, FOCAC follow-up mechanisms, and embassy-chamber consultation give Sierra Leone standing bilateral machinery that most small states lack with any partner. Fourth, business association development: Chinese chambers and the responses they provoked, including more assertive Sierra Leonean traders' associations, have thickened the associational landscape through which state-business relations are conducted (Mohan et al., 2014).

On the corrosive side, the record is equally instructive. Regulatory forbearance towards fisheries observation, timber export bans repeatedly announced and repeatedly breached, and mining agreement confidentiality have all been sustained partly by the rents the Chinese portfolio generates for gatekeepers, a mechanism the political settlements literature predicts (Khan, 2018; EJF, 2022; Audit Service Sierra Leone, 2022). Public-private partnership experience has accumulated more in form than in substance, since most "PPPs" with Chinese parties have been contractor-financed arrangements rather than risk-sharing partnerships. The institutional ledger, then, shows genuine capability gains in negotiation and promotion alongside enforcement domains where the presence has tested institutions and found them wanting. Figure 10 summarises.

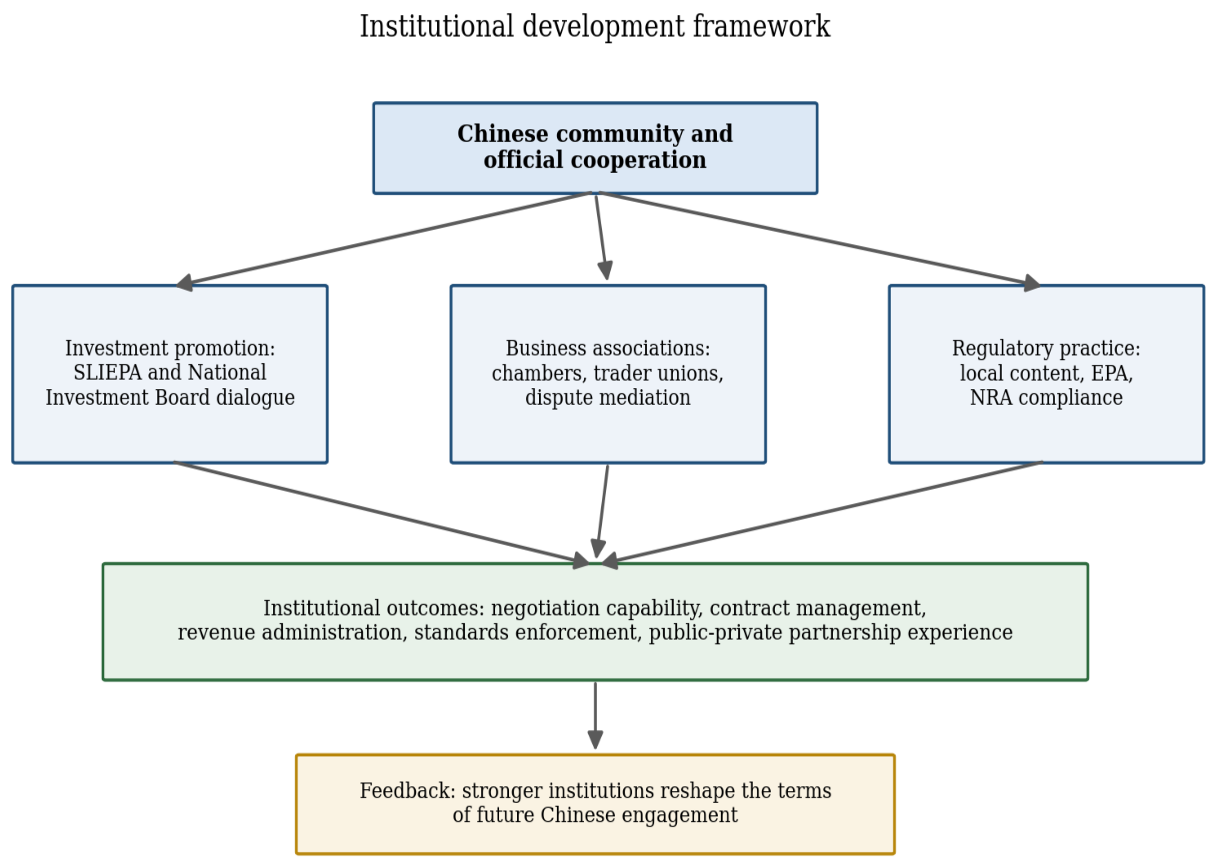
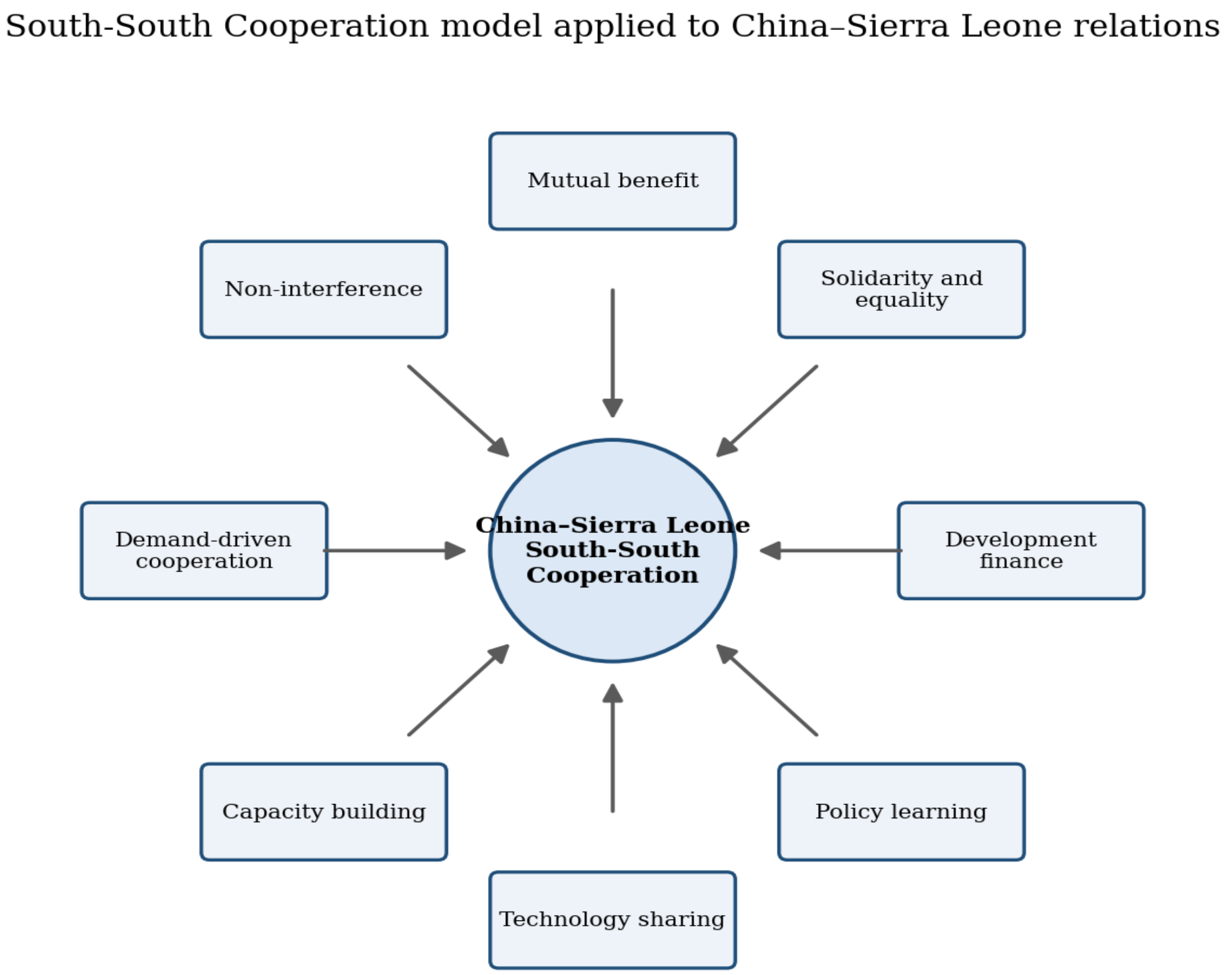


Figure 10. Institutional development framework.

The Chinese Community and South-South Cooperation

South-South Cooperation supplies the normative architecture of the relationship, and Sierra Leone offers a compact test of its principles in practice. Figure 9 arrays the eight principles around the bilateral core.



Mutual benefit *is genuinely present at the aggregate level: China secures ore, fish, timber, and* **Figure 9. South-South Cooperation model applied to China-Sierra Leone relations.**

diplomatic solidarity; Sierra Leone secures infrastructure, health services, scholarships, and finance without policy conditionality. The distributional question, who within Sierra Leone benefits, is where the principle frays, since enclave extraction and weak benefit-sharing concentrate gains (Taylor, 2014). **Non-interference** has been observed in the narrow political sense, China taking no public position in Sierra Leonean elections, while the Mamamah episode showed that non-interference also means accepting host renegotiation, a point in the model's favour. **Demand-driven cooperation** is formally satisfied, projects originating in government requests, but demand articulation in a capacity-constrained state can reflect elite preference rather than appraised priority, which is how a stadium rehabilitation and an airport proposal can coexist with unelectrified districts (Mawdsley, 2019).

Capacity building and **technology sharing** operate through the training, scholarship, demonstration centre, and laboratory channels documented above, with real service-level effects and thin frontier effects. **Policy learning** flows through official study tours and the deliberate marketing of Chinese development experience, special economic zones, agricultural demonstration, poverty-reduction methodology, under the Global Development Initiative, to which Sierra Leone subscribed early (MFA, 2024; Gray & Gills, 2016). **Development finance** on concessional terms delivered the infrastructure inventory of Section 6.2 while the Mamamah cancellation and Common Framework era show the limits prudent debt management places on the pipeline (Horn et al., 2021;

Acker et al., 2020). **Solidarity** found its most concrete expression in the Ebola operation, which Chinese official discourse consistently frames as South-South mutual assistance repaying Africa's support in 1971, a framing with specific resonance in Freetown given Sierra Leone's UNGA role (Huang, 2017; MFA, 2021).

The diplomatic dimension deserves separate weight, since it answers research question eleven directly. Sierra Leone's consistency on Beijing's core interests, the one-China position, support in multilateral votes, early subscription to the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative statements, has been reciprocated with reliability of access: Sierra Leonean presidents have been received in Beijing across every administration since 1971, Chinese foreign ministers have kept Freetown on the traditional New Year Africa itinerary, and Sierra Leone's term on the United Nations Security Council from 2024 raised the country's usefulness as a partner in multilateral coordination (MFA, 2024). The community reinforces this architecture from below: chambers host national-day and Spring Festival functions that double as commercial diplomacy, and the visibility of community philanthropy during the mudslide and pandemic gave the embassy locally legible evidence for its friendship narrative. Diplomacy and community standing are thus mutually supporting assets, and both governments manage them as such.

Within this architecture the community, as against the state, plays an under-theorised role: traders and firms are the everyday face of South-South Cooperation, and public attitudes towards the model are formed less by FOCAC communiqués than by wage practices on construction sites and prices on Sani Abacha Street. Afrobarometer data showing majority-positive Sierra Leonean views of China's influence, coupled with more critical views of Chinese employment practices, capture exactly this duality (Afrobarometer, 2021; Sanny & Selormey, 2021). Comparatively, Sierra Leone's SSC experience most resembles small-state cases such as Liberia and Guinea, where health and infrastructure diplomacy dominate, and least resembles Ethiopia's industrial-policy partnership, underlining that SSC is a framework whose developmental content the host state must itself supply. # 9. Challenges and Criticisms

A balanced assessment requires weighing the contribution record against a substantial charge sheet. Eight clusters of criticism recur in Sierra Leonean public debate, parliamentary records, audit reports, and investigative studies, and the evidence for each varies in strength.

Labour disputes. Strikes and protests have punctuated the Tonkolili operation and Chinese construction sites over wages, casualisation, safety, and dismissals; the 2012 Bumbuna-adjacent unrest at African Minerals, though a pre-Chinese-ownership episode, set the template, and disputes under subsequent Chinese operators have continued to draw Ministry of Labour intervention (Human Rights Watch, 2014; local press records). The comparative literature suggests these conflicts reflect the low-margin, high-discipline production regime of Chinese firms interacting with weak labour inspection rather than uniquely Chinese malice, but the grievances are documented and recurrent (Lee, 2017; Oya & Schaefer, 2021).

Fisheries and environment. The strongest-evidenced criticism concerns industrial fishing. Investigations by the Environmental Justice Foundation and academic stock assessments document Chinese-owned or -flagged trawlers among fleets engaged in illegal, unreported, and unregulated practices, incursions into the inshore exclusion zone reserved for artisanal fishers, transshipment abuses, and pressure on stocks that sustain the protein supply of a majority of the population (EJF, 2022; Belhabib et al., 2015; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2022). The 2021 agreement for a Chinese-funded fishing harbour at Black Johnson beach crystallised opposition, with landowners and environmental groups challenging compensation and the environmental assessment; the episode illustrates both the risk and the fact of domestic contestation (EJF, 2022). Timber adds a second front: cycles of export ban and licensed exemption have accompanied documented rosewood flows to China (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2019).

Illegal and informal mining. Chinese nationals have appeared in enforcement actions around unlicensed gold operations and in disputes over quarrying near communities, a smaller-scale echo of the Ghana galamsey crisis, and the National Minerals Agency's episodic sweeps indicate a compliance problem the state manages rather than solves (National Minerals Agency records; Hilson et al., 2014 on the regional pattern).

Tax and customs compliance. Audit Service reports and NRA enforcement actions identify under-invoicing in import trade, unlicensed retail activity in sectors nominally reserved, and fisheries licence revenue leakage; the small-trader end of the community is the locus, and the fiscal cost, while unquantified publicly, is material against a narrow revenue base (Audit Service Sierra Leone, 2022; NRA, 2023).

Business competition and cultural friction. Sierra Leonean trader associations complain of displacement and of Chinese penetration into petty retail; consumer interests point the other way. Cultural misunderstanding, language barriers, management style, limited social mixing, feeds workplace grievance and occasional xenophobic rhetoric, which spiked during COVID-19 before community donations partially repaired standing (Park, 2022; Sanny & Selormey, 2021).

Governance, procurement, and corruption perceptions. Confidential mining and infrastructure agreements, sole-sourced contracts, and the gatekeeping rents noted in Section 7 sustain perceptions of corruption that specific prosecutions only occasionally substantiate; the Kingho agreements' limited disclosure drew SLEITI criticism (SLEITI, 2023). Procurement is the structural weak point. Chinese-financed projects are typically tied to Chinese contractors under the financing terms, which removes them from the competitive procedures of the Public Procurement Act; the National Public Procurement Authority therefore never tests their pricing, and cost benchmarking against comparable regional projects is left to the IMF, the Auditor-General, and journalists after the fact (Audit Service Sierra Leone, 2022; Gelpern et al., 2021). Ratification practice compounds the problem: several major agreements have reached Parliament as faits accomplis with limited time for scrutiny, and confidentiality clauses of the kind documented across Chinese lending contracts restrict what members may even see (Gelpern et al., 2021). Perception matters independently of proof because it prices political risk into every subsequent negotiation, raises the risk premium demanded by non-Chinese investors, and hands opposition politics a standing grievance that periodically spills onto the community itself.

Local participation and content. Backward linkages remain shallow; local content requirements under the 2016 Local Content Agency Act are weakly monitored for Chinese (and other) firms, and managerial localisation lags the workforce numbers (GoSL, 2016; Oya & Schaefer, 2021).

Sustainability. The composition of engagement, extractives plus construction, carries embedded environmental cost and climate exposure, and the durability of the model depends on ore prices and Chinese demand, neither within Sierra Leone's control (UNCTAD, 2024).

The balanced conclusion is not that the criticisms outweigh the contributions or the reverse, but that the two are causally linked through the same institutional variable: nearly every documented harm traces to an enforcement failure that also truncates the benefits. Table 9 summarises the position as a SWOT matrix.

Table 9 SWOT analysis of the Chinese community's role in Sierra Leone's development

	Helpful	**Harmful**
Internal (community and firms)	**Strengths:** capital access; delivery speed; price-competitive supply; long-stay commitment; health and education programmes; disaster philanthropy	**Weaknesses:** enclave networks; thin managerial localisation; weak environmental practice in fisheries and timber; compliance gaps at the trader end; limited R&D and linkages
External (Sierra Leone environment)	**Opportunities:** AfCFTA and zero-tariff access to China; BRI and FOCAC finance windows; Feed Salone and MTNDP alignment; green energy and blue economy investment; National Investment Board reform	**Threats:** ore-price dependence; debt-capacity limits; stock depletion undermining fisheries livelihoods; political backlash and xenophobia; geopolitical pressure on non-alignment

Note. Author's construction.

Comparative Analysis

Benchmarking Sierra Leone against six African peers clarifies which outcomes are structural and which are chosen.

Ghana hosts one of West Africa's largest Chinese communities, tens of thousands at peak, with a trade-and-mining profile similar to Sierra Leone's in kind but larger in scale. Ghana's galamsey crisis, in which thousands of Chinese miners entered small-scale gold mining reserved for citizens, culminating in the 2013 mass deportations and continuing enforcement drama, is the cautionary tale most relevant to Sierra Leone's smaller informal mining problem: delayed enforcement allowed a manageable compliance issue to become a bilateral and ecological crisis (Hilson et al., 2014; Botchwey et al., 2019). Ghana's stronger media and traditional-authority mobilisation eventually forced state action, a civil-society pathway Sierra Leone's fisheries campaigners are replicating.

Zambia represents the politicised extreme. Chinese mining on the Copperbelt made Chinese labour practices a national electoral issue from 2006 onward, produced the Collum mine shootings and reciprocal violence, and generated the continent's richest scholarship on Chinese workplace regimes (Lee, 2017; Sautman & Yan, 2014). Zambia's lesson is dual: labour grievance unmanaged becomes regime-level politics, and debt distress, Zambia's 2020 default with Chinese creditors prominent, shows the financing risk Sierra Leone dodged at Mamamah (Brautigam, 2022).

Ethiopia is the aspirational contrast. A developmental state with industrial policy capability used Chinese finance for the Addis-Djibouti railway and power infrastructure while recruiting Chinese light manufacturers into purpose-built industrial parks, generating tens of thousands of factory jobs and genuine flying-geese relocation before conflict interrupted (Sun, 2017; Oya & Schaefer, 2021; Nicolas, 2017). The Ethiopian comparison isolates Sierra Leone's missing ingredient: not Chinese willingness but host-state industrial strategy and delivery capability.

Kenya demonstrates infrastructure ambition and its fiscal edge: the Standard Gauge Railway delivered logistics capability and a debt controversy in equal measure, and Kenyan courts and auditors have subjected Chinese contracts to the continent's most vigorous domestic scrutiny, an accountability model worth importing (Wissenbach & Wang, 2017; Taylor, 2020). **Tanzania** shows the renegotiation path: the suspension and rescoping of the Bagamoyo port project under Magufuli, followed by re-engagement on revised terms, parallels Mamamah and confirms that hosts retain more bargaining power than dependency framings allow (Kinyondo, 2019). **Nigeria** shows scale effects and diversification: Chinese engagement spans oil-backed lending, Lekki-style zones, telecoms, and a vast trader economy, with outcomes that vary state by state, underscoring that subnational governance mediates results (Mohan et al., 2014; Chen, 2021).

Table 10 Sierra Leone benchmarked against six comparators

Country	Chinese population (est.)	Dominant engagement	Signature success	Signature failure	Lesson for Sierra Leone
Sierra Leone	2,000-8,000	Mining, construction, fisheries, trade	Ebola/health cooperation; infrastructure	Fisheries governance; thin linkages	Enforcement is the binding constraint
Ghana	30,000+	Trade, construction, gold	Bui Dam delivery; trade depth	Galamsey crisis	Enforce early, before crisis scale
Zambia	20,000-80,000	Copper mining	Sustained mining investment	Labour conflict; debt default	Manage labour grievance politically
Ethiopia	30,000+	Manufacturing, rail, parks	Industrial park employment	Debt service strain	Industrial strategy converts FDI
Kenya	20,000-40,000	Infrastructure, trade	SGR logistics	SGR debt controversy	Domestic scrutiny improves terms
Tanzania	30,000+	Trade, infrastructure	Renegotiated engagement	Bagamoyo stalemate years	Renegotiation is feasible
Nigeria	50,000+	Oil finance, zones, trade	Telecom and zone investment	Uneven subnational outcomes	Subnational governance matters

Note. Population estimates from Park (2022) and country literatures; all uncertain. Author's synthesis.

Three comparative findings follow. First, Sierra Leone's per-capita exposure to Chinese engagement is among the highest in the sample once economy size is normalised, so governance quality matters proportionally more. Second, every success case pairs Chinese capital with a specific host capability, Ethiopian industrial policy, Kenyan judicial scrutiny, Tanzanian renegotiation nerve, implying that Sierra Leone's reform agenda, not Beijing's disposition, is the live variable. Third, no comparator solved the fisheries-type enforcement problem without civil-society pressure plus donor-financed monitoring technology, which prefigures the recommendations.

Case Studies

Eight cases, built to a common protocol, ground the analysis. Publicly reported figures are used; all require primary verification.

Shandong Iron and Steel / Tonkolili Iron Ore (Mining)

Shandong Iron and Steel Group entered Tonkolili in 2011 with a USD 1.5 billion purchase of a 25 per cent stake from African Minerals, taking full control in 2015 for USD 170 million after the ore-price collapse bankrupted its partner (Reuters, 2015; Wilson, 2015). At peak the integrated mine-rail-port operation employed several thousand Sierra Leoneans and drove the statistical growth spike of 2012-2013, when GDP growth exceeded 20 per cent; suspension in 2014-2015 amid Ebola and price collapse demonstrated the symmetrical downside. Local sourcing concentrated in labour, fuel, and catering; CSR funded schools and water points in Tonkolili District; disputes over retrenchment terms and community compensation recurred. Lessons: single-commodity dependence transmits volatility directly into national accounts, and change-of-control moments are when host states hold maximum leverage, leverage Sierra Leone used only partially.

Leone Rock Metal Group / Kingho (Mining and Rail)

China Kingho Energy Group's subsidiary took over the Tonkolili assets from 2021, restarting production, rehabilitating the 200 km rail corridor and Pepel port, and reporting workforce numbers above five thousand with expansion plans towards ore beneficiation (SLEITI, 2023; company disclosures). The renegotiated fiscal terms drew parliamentary and SLEITI criticism for confidentiality and generosity, while employment restoration in Tonkolili and Port Loko was locally popular. Lessons: post-distress re-entry investors extract favourable terms from eager hosts; transparency of agreements is the cheapest available safeguard; announced beneficiation is the test of whether the linkage frontier moves.

China Railway Seventh Group (Construction)

CRSG established in Sierra Leone during post-war reconstruction and has delivered road, bridge, and building contracts continuously since, including Freetown arterial works. Its model, mixed Chinese supervisory and Sierra Leonean site labour, aggressive pricing, on-time delivery, typifies the contractor stratum. Employment per project runs from hundreds to over a thousand; subcontracting has developed local haulage and aggregate suppliers; criticisms centre on wage levels, casual contracts, and maintenance handover. Lesson: contractor presence builds a construction labour force but not, without deliberate policy, a domestic contracting class.

Magbass Sugar Complex (Agriculture)

The longest-running case. Built as aid in 1982, rehabilitated and operated under Complant's commercial management from 2003, Magbass cultivates roughly 1,200 hectares, employs several hundred permanent and seasonal workers, and supplies domestic sugar (Brautigam, 2015). Recurrent conflicts over land boundaries, compensation, seasonal wages, and outgrower pricing have been mediated by chiefdom authorities and government. Lessons: aid-to-commercial transitions change community expectations; land governance clarity is a precondition for agro-industrial peace; and fifty years of operation without significant technology diffusion beyond the estate confirms the extension gap.

Chinese Industrial Fishing Operators (Fisheries)

A fleet of Chinese-owned trawlers, operating under Sierra Leonean flags and licences through local agents, dominates industrial fishing effort. Documented practices include inshore exclusion zone incursions, under-reported catch, and transshipment abuses; licence revenue is modest against estimated catch value, and artisanal fishers report declining yields (EJF, 2022; Belhabib et al., 2015; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2022). The Black Johnson harbour project, grant-financed at a reported USD 55 million, promises landing, cold chain, and inspection infrastructure that could formalise the sector or entrench extraction, depending entirely on the governance wrapper. The quantitative asymmetry is what condemns the current arrangement: fisheries licence revenue has run at a few USD millions annually while independent estimates place the value of catch taken from Sierra Leonean waters, legal and illegal combined, at an order of magnitude higher, and the artisanal sector that supports several hundred thousand livelihoods bears the depletion cost (EJF, 2022; Thorpe et al., 2009; Belhabib et al., 2015). Lessons: this is the clearest case where harms plausibly exceed benefits under current enforcement, and where monitoring technology plus transparent licensing would flip the sign; it also demonstrates that grant-financed infrastructure can lock in either reform or extraction depending on the operating rules negotiated before commissioning, which makes the harbour's governance framework the single most consequential open negotiation in the relationship.

Jui Friendship Hospital and Laboratory (Health)

Constructed under grant aid, expanded during Ebola into a treatment centre and the country's first BSL-3 laboratory, staffed jointly by Chinese teams and Sierra Leonean personnel, the Jui complex anchored national testing during Ebola and COVID-19 and continues as a referral facility (Huang, 2017; MFA, 2021). Employment includes a substantial Sierra Leonean clinical and laboratory workforce; skills transfer in laboratory practice is the best-documented in any sector. Lessons: co-located, jointly staffed institutions transfer capability in a way turnkey projects do not; health cooperation buys durable goodwill that survives friction elsewhere.

Huawei Sierra Leone (ICT)

Huawei has supplied network infrastructure to mobile operators and the government's e-governance and national fibre initiatives, trained local engineers through its academy programmes, and sponsored ICT competitions (Agbebi, 2022). Direct employment is small and skilled; the developmental significance lies in network coverage and government digital capability, with the standard caveats about vendor lock-in and data governance. Lesson: service-sector Chinese engagement transfers operational skill efficiently but concentrates strategic dependence in procurement choices.

Freetown Chinese Trading Firms (Retail and Wholesale)

The modal community enterprise: family firms importing hardware, motorcycles, textiles, and household goods, clustered in central Freetown, each employing three to fifteen Sierra Leoneans, financed through co-ethnic credit, and supplying local market traders wholesale (Mohan et al., 2014; Park, 2022). Aggregate employment across the segment plausibly exceeds any single mine. Compliance is uneven; competitive friction with local traders is chronic; consumer benefit is large. Lessons: the trader economy is the everyday interface of the relationship, its regulation (reserved sectors, licensing, customs valuation) is the highest-frequency governance task, and heavy-handed restriction would tax consumers to protect a narrow trading class, while non-enforcement corrodes rule-of-law norms; calibrated enforcement is the narrow path.

Policy Recommendations

The analysis yields one master principle: the developmental yield of the Chinese presence is set less by Chinese behaviour than by Sierra Leonean enforcement and strategy. Recommendations are therefore weighted towards host-side reform, addressed to thirteen stakeholders, and sequenced in the roadmap of Figure 11.

Government of Sierra Leone. Publish all mining, fisheries, and infrastructure agreements with Chinese parties, applying SLEITI standards to contract transparency; consolidate a whole-of-government China strategy under the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, aligning FOCAC commitments with the MTNDP results framework; and defend debt discipline by subjecting every proposed loan-financed project to published appraisal, institutionalising the Mamamah precedent.

Chinese Embassy. Extend the medical-team model of co-located capability transfer into agriculture and TVET; require FOCAC-financed projects to report local employment and sourcing annually; and support a joint compliance compact under which the embassy and chambers commit member firms to labour, tax, and environmental standards, with public reporting.

Chinese community and business associations. Formalise a code of conduct covering employment contracts, minimum-wage compliance, and dispute escalation; fund Krio and English language training for managers and Mandarin scholarships for staff to lower the friction that produces disputes; and channel philanthropy through the statutory Community Development Fund architecture rather than around it.

SLIEPA and the National Investment Board. Build a dedicated China desk with Mandarin capability; maintain a public registry of Chinese investments with employment and local-content data; screen inbound proposals against linkage potential, not headline value; and target investor recruitment at light manufacturing and agro-processing matched to zero-tariff access to China and AfCFTA rules of origin.

Ministry of Trade and Industry. Enforce the reserved-sector and local content rules predictably and publicly, replacing episodic sweeps with scheduled compliance cycles; and negotiate supplier-development obligations into major contracts, following the Ethiopian park model.

Ministry of Finance and National Revenue Authority. Close customs valuation gaps with pre-shipment data exchange under the China-Sierra Leone customs cooperation channel; publish annual fiscal reconciliation of Chinese-linked revenue including exemptions; and cap tax expenditure in future agreements.

Ministry of Fisheries and EPA. Make satellite vessel monitoring data public in near-real time; condition the Black Johnson harbour's operation on independent observer coverage and published landing statistics; and ring-fence licence revenue for artisanal sector co-management.

Local councils. Negotiate and publish community development agreements for all extractive and agro-industrial operations in their districts, and institutionalise grievance mechanisms jointly with chiefdom authorities.

Private sector. Sierra Leonean firms should organise supplier consortia to meet Chinese contractor procurement thresholds, and the Chamber of Commerce should run a matchmaking facility with the Chinese chambers.

Civil society. Sustain the fisheries and land accountability campaigns that comparative evidence shows are necessary complements to state enforcement, while resisting xenophobic framing that conflates governance failure with ethnicity.

Development partners. Finance the monitoring technology, fisheries surveillance, customs systems, labour inspection, that makes enforcement feasible, treating it as complementary to rather than competitive with Chinese engagement.

Academic institutions. Establish a China-Africa studies capability at the University of Sierra Leone linked to the Confucius Institute but independent of it, run graduate tracer studies of Chinese-trained alumni, and conduct the firm-level surveys this article shows are missing.

Table 11 Policy recommendations matrix

Domain	Priority action	Lead	Horizon
Contract transparency	Publish all Chinese-party agreements	GoSL / SLEITI	2026-2027
Investment screening	Linkage-based screening and China desk	National Investment Board	2026-2028

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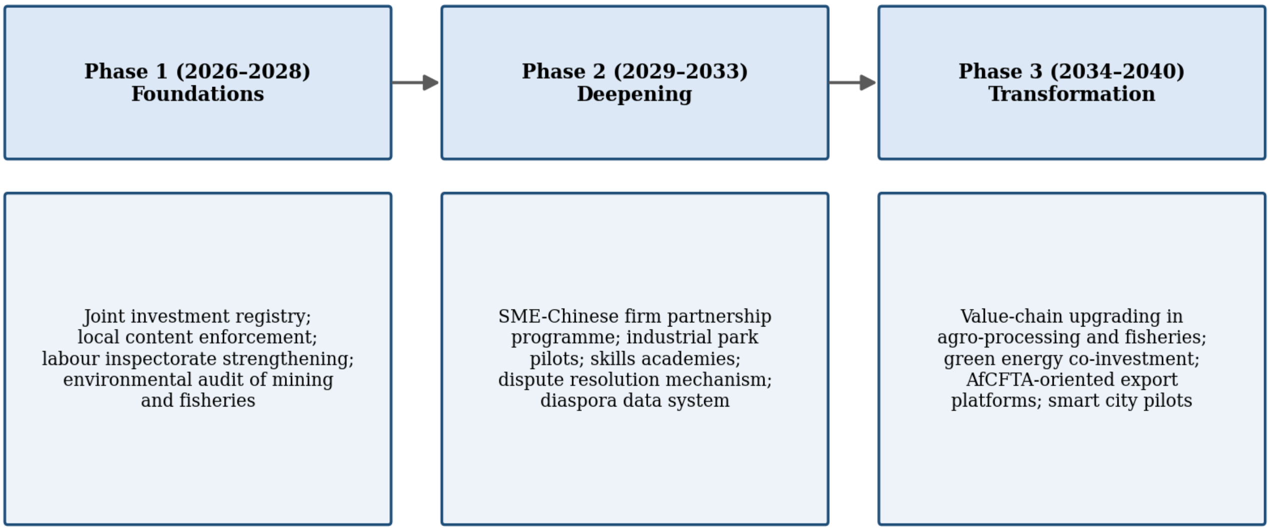
Fisheries governance	Public vessel monitoring; observer coverage	Min. Fisheries / EPA	2026-2028
Labour standards	Joint compliance compact; inspection cycles	Min. Labour / Embassy / Chambers	2026-2029
Revenue integrity	Customs data exchange; exemption reporting	MoF / NRA	2026-2029
Local content	Supplier development obligations in contracts	Min. Trade / LCA	2027-2030
Skills and TVET	Co-located training institutions	MTHE / Embassy	2027-2032
Community benefit	CDF enforcement; published CDAs	NMA / Local councils	2026-2030
Industrial linkage	Agro-processing and light-manufacturing parks	MoPED / NIB	2029-2035
Knowledge base	Firm surveys; tracer studies; China studies unit	Universities	2026-2031

Note. Author’s construction. CDA = community development agreement; LCA = Local Content Agency; NMA = National Minerals Agency.

Policy implementation roadmap, 2026–2040



Future Prospects

The forward opportunity set is shaped by four frameworks whose intersection Figure 12 maps: the BRI, under whose 2018 memorandum Sierra Leone can access connectivity and energy finance windows; FOCAC, whose 2024 Beijing Action Plan emphasises small and beautiful projects, agricultural modernisation, TVET, and the zero-tariff opening for least developed country exports; AfCFTA, which converts Sierra Leonean processing capacity into continental market access and makes the country a candidate site for Chinese firms seeking rules-of-origin compliant African production; and the MTNDP 2024-2030 with Feed Salone, which supplies the domestic priority structure (FOCAC, 2024; GoSL, 2024; AfCFTA Secretariat, 2023).

Ten opportunity areas follow. **Agricultural value chains**: rice, cassava, cocoa, and oil palm processing matched to Chinese demonstration-centre technology and Feed Salone irrigation targets. **Blue economy**: converting the fisheries harbour into a governed landing-processing-export platform serving Chinese and regional markets, with stock sustainability as the licence to operate. **Green energy**: Chinese solar and mini-hydro cost curves fit Sierra Leone’s 30-odd per cent electrification rate, and climate finance can blend with EximBank windows (IRENA, 2024). **Industrial parks**: a single, credible agro-processing park executed to Ethiopian standards would test the flying-geese hypothesis on Sierra Leonean soil. **Manufacturing**: building materials and food processing offer import substitution with proven Chinese investor interest continent-wide (Sun, 2017). **Digital economy and AI**: fibre backbone completion, e-government expansion, and digital skills programmes ride existing Huawei infrastructure, with data governance frameworks needed in step. **Logistics**: the rehabilitated Pepel rail-port corridor can be opened to third-party agricultural and general cargo, converting a mining enclave asset into national infrastructure. **Tourism**: peninsula beach assets and direct-flight connectivity to Chinese hubs are a long-dated but real option as Chinese outbound tourism returns. **Smart city elements**: Freetown's congestion and cadastre challenges match standard Chinese municipal technology offers, to be procured competitively. **Mineral beneficiation**: announced iron ore concentration and any future processing move Sierra Leone up the value chain that dependency theory says is blocked; the announcement's execution is therefore theoretically as well as economically significant.

Risks frame the opportunities: Chinese lending has shifted smaller and more commercial since 2019; ore-price and geopolitical cycles can compress the pipeline; and every opportunity above fails under the enforcement conditions that produced the fisheries record (Acker et al., 2020; Horn et al., 2021). The future, like the past, will be decided in Freetown's institutions more than in Beijing's.

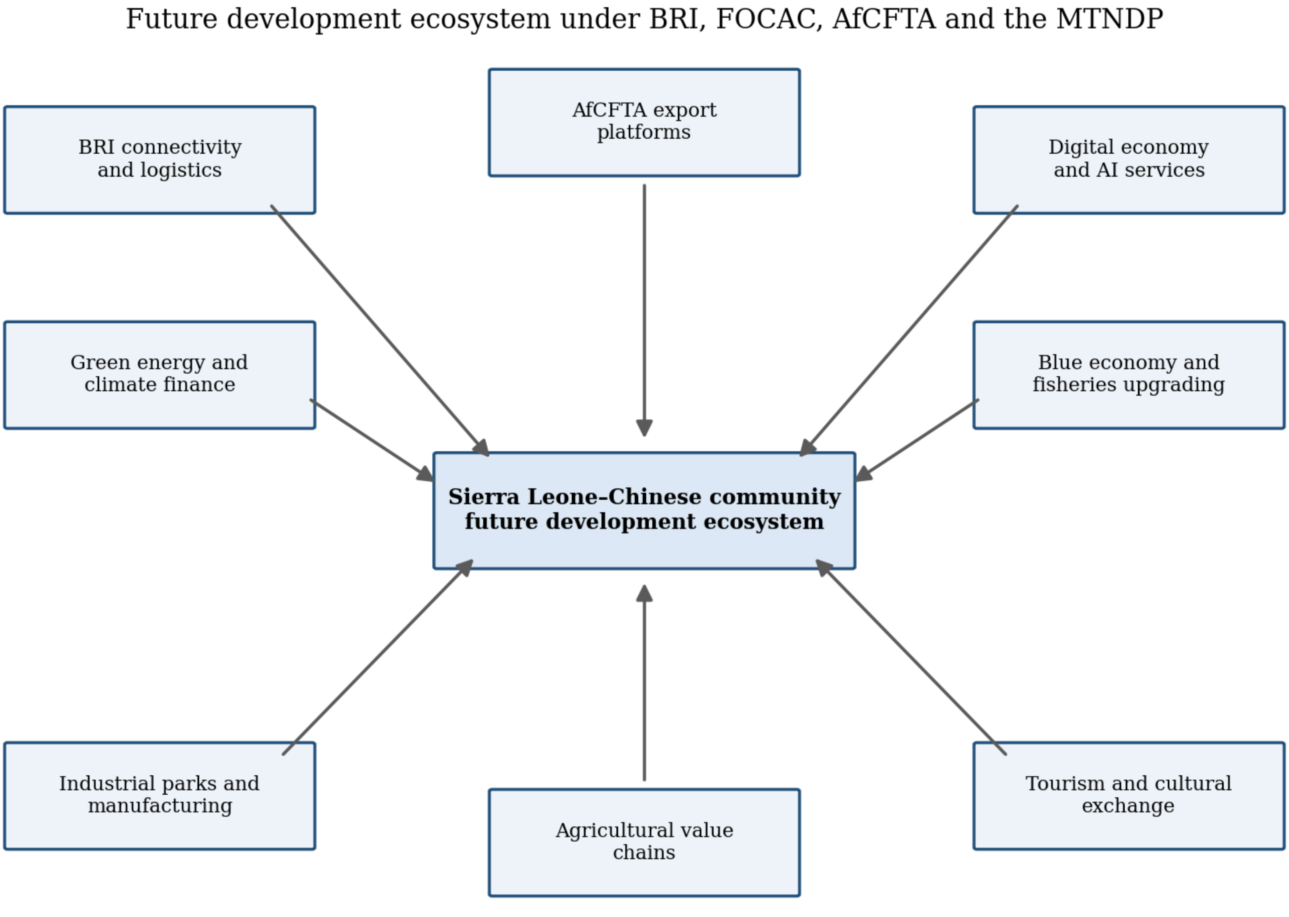


Figure 12. Future development ecosystem under BRI, FOCAC, AfCFTA and the MTNDP.

Table 12 Future opportunities matrix

Opportunity	**Framework anchor**	**Preconditions**	**Indicative horizon**
Agro-processing value chains	FOCAC; Feed Salone	Extension reform; park infrastructure	2027-2033

Governed blue economy	Harbour project; MTNDP	Monitoring; observer coverage	2026-2030
Solar and mini-hydro	BRI green pledge; NDC	Off-taker creditworthiness	2026-2032
Industrial park pilot	AfCFTA; NIB reform	Serviced land; power; management	2029-2035
Zero-tariff exports to China	FOCAC 2024	Processing capacity; SPS compliance	2027-2035
Digital economy and AI services	GDI; e-government	Data governance; skills	2027-2035
Pepel corridor logistics	Existing rail-port	Third-party access regime	2028-2034
Tourism connectivity	Cultural exchange	Air links; facilitation	2030-2040
Smart city pilots	Municipal cooperation	Competitive procurement	2030-2040
Mineral beneficiation	Kingho commitments	Power; fiscal terms; enforcement	2028-2038

***Note.* Author's construction.**

CONCLUSION

This article set out to assess what the Chinese community has meant for Sierra Leone's development across half a century, and the answer resists both the celebratory and the condemnatory scripts. The principal findings are five. First, the Chinese presence has evolved through distinct phases, from rotational technical teams through prestige construction to a diversified resident community anchored in mining, construction, fisheries, and trade, and its history is inseparable from the bilateral relationship founded in 1971. Second, contributions are real and large where delivery is the metric: infrastructure stock, export earnings, employment in the low tens of thousands across direct and indirect channels, continuous medical service, epidemic surge capacity, scholarships, and consumer welfare gains from trade. Third, harms are equally documentable and concentrate where enforcement is weakest, above all in fisheries, timber, labour standards, and revenue compliance. Fourth, comparison shows Sierra Leone's outcomes are not fated: peers that paired Chinese capital with specific host capabilities extracted more value from the same partner. Fifth, the community dimension matters independently of the state dimension, because everyday commercial conduct, not summit communiqués, forms public judgement of South-South Cooperation.

The theoretical contribution is the transmission-channel framework and the demonstration that dependency and institutionalist mechanisms operate simultaneously: trade structure follows dependency's script while variation across channels and countries follows institutions. The policy contribution is a sequenced, stakeholder-specific reform matrix whose master principle is that enforcement capability, not renegotiated friendship, converts presence into development. The practical implication for the Government of Sierra Leone is to treat the 2024 comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership as a bargaining platform whose value depends on published contracts, monitored fisheries, inspected workplaces, and screened investment.

The future research agenda follows directly from the study's limitations: a representative survey of Chinese firms and their Sierra Leonean workers; a census-quality estimate of the community's size and composition; tracer studies of Chinese-trained graduates; quantified fisheries stock and revenue accounting; and process-tracing of the Kingho beneficiation commitments as a live test of whether the linkage frontier can move. Sierra Leone and its Chinese community will remain bound together by geology, geography, and fifty years of accumulated relationship; whether that bond ripens into transformation is, on the evidence assembled here, a question whose answer lies mainly in Sierra Leonean hands.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors confirm that no conflict of interest exists in relation to this work. None of the authors has received financial assistance, employment, consultancy engagements, shareholdings, honoraria, or remunerated expert testimony from any organisation holding a financial stake in the subject of this study. Every source of funding is acknowledged in the acknowledgements section. The study was carried out with full independence, and no

commercial, financial, or personal association shaped its findings or compromised the integrity of the manuscript.

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