

Equity Deficit in South-To-South Cooperation: A Conceptual Paper on Zimbabwe-China Relations

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe-China ties are often lauded as a South-South cooperation (SSC) model of a horizontal partnership; one based on cooperation in a spirit of solidarity and mutual benefit rather than on the principle of non-interference. But, as more research is conducted, the lived reality of this relationship may be diverging from its normative promise. This article theorises this difference as an "equity deficit" and propose a context-specific framework that will help understand and address that deficit. The study aims to conceptualise the equity deficit in SSC theory, analyse the nature of asymmetries in financing, trade and resource-extraction agreements between Zimbabwe and China and to suggest a context-specific framework and recommendations for enhancing equity. The study is based on a qualitative systematic scoping review of 31 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, journalistic work and institutional reports, drawn from the years 2014 to 2026. The findings show three equity gaps: structural asymmetries arising from limited access to alternative capital, procedural asymmetries from resource-based opaque lending, and distributive asymmetries where the environmental and labour costs are borne locally. The study suggests a tri-dimensional approach to equity deficit, covering the structural, procedural and distributive dimensions, and suggests institutionalised debt transparency, local benefit of extracted resources and an independent multi-stakeholder Cooperation Monitoring Council. The framework is a transferable instrument to measure equity in other South-South partnerships in Africa.

Keywords: South-South cooperation, equity deficit, Zimbabwe-China relations, Belt and Road Initiative, resource governance

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South-South cooperation (SSC) is based on a normative commitment to 'horizontality', 'mutual benefit', 'solidarity', 'non-interference' and 'shared developmental purpose' between the countries of the 'Global South' (UN Trade and Development, 2025). Zimbabwe and the People's Republic of China have been key strategic partners of cooperation on the African continent since 1980, when they joined forces in the fight against the colonial powers as one of the first countries to sign the Lancaster House Declaration (Chingombe, 2024). The connection has brought about tangible achievements such as the New Parliament Building, the National Sports Stadium, and the expansion of Hwange and Kariba South power stations, and bilateral trade has soared to approximately US\$3.8 billion in 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Yet, when patterns in the scholarly literature are examined, they are not in keeping with the equity ideals that SSC is supposed to embody, despite diplomatic narratives emphasising 'ironclad friendship' and 'win-win cooperation'.

The literature identifies persistent inequalities in benefits and costs, wherein Batsani-Ncube (2026) notes that, China is an example of 'subtle ingratiation' in which the political elites have monopoly over decision making and displace ordinary citizens from decision making power. Additionally, Manyeruke (2021) pointed out that Chinese development financing does not necessarily involve local participation and technology transfer. Debt

structures with little transparency of funding, such as opaque and resource-backed loans, have also been identified as an issue in AFRODAD and other literature on debt sustainability (AFRODAD, 2020, 2022; Bandiera & Tsiropoulos, 2020; Brautigam et al., 2025). The persistent reportage on environmental degradation, displacement and weak enforcement of environmental laws in the context of lithium mining reinforces the existing equity deficit in the SSC (Chingombe, 2024; Transparency International Zimbabwe, 2026; Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, 2026; Africa Defense Forum, 2026). Yet, like any other relationship between a migrant and a community, mutually beneficial friendship is complicated and these inequalities are placed in the broader picture of global governance regression (Ning, 2023; Diamond, 2021). Suggestions that have been made repeatedly are the need for improved disclosure measures, re-negotiated contracts based on resources, and independent monitoring (Ferry & Zeitz, 2024; Gelpert et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the relationship between horizontal ideal of SSC and the unequal power sharing, information flows and benefits in Zimbabwe-China cooperation is missing which requires a specific conceptual approach, according to Mutasa (2021).

It is against this background that the current study seeks to conceptualise Zimbabwe-China relationship. The specific study objectives include: conceptualise the “equity deficit” in SSC theory against principles of horizontality, mutual benefit, and solidarity; examine asymmetries in financing, trade composition, and resource-extraction governance between Zimbabwe and China; and propose a context-specific framework and actionable recommendations to strengthen equity, transparency, and accountability in Zimbabwe-China and comparable African SSC partnerships. This research is important because although China-Zimbabwe relations are considered a South-South cooperation, there has been little theoretical discussion on whether there is a commitment to equity, crucial for the legitimacy of SSC (UN Trade and Development, 2025a). The study collates and integrates previously disparate evidence in an analytical framework that gives policy makers, negotiators and civil society analytical tools to identify equity deficit early on, enhances Zimbabwe's negotiating position and allows for equitable, transparent, accountable and mutually-beneficial cooperation agreements to be negotiated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zimbabwe-China Relations

While the diplomatic discourse on Zimbabwe-China relations focuses on "win-win", the ethnographic research into mainstream day-to-day life of Chinese migrants with Zimbabwean communities by Ning An (2023) shows that there is conflict and friction. There is somewhat extensive literature on financing and trade asymmetries. In comparative BRI cases, Gelpert et al. (2025) observed that, ‘confidentiality clauses’ and ‘cross-default clauses’ are regularly included in Chinese lending contracts, limiting borrower remedies. Ferry and Zeitz (2024) build on this by studying the difficulties of coordinated multilateral debt relief due to such contractual opacity.

Overview of Zimbabwe-China Partnership Outcomes

Mineral Extraction Outcomes

The findings of both the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (2026) and Transparency International Zimbabwe (2026) indicate low levels of enforcement mainly in the Zimbabwean lithium sector, where Chinese investment is dominant. Additionally, Global Development Policy Center (2026) and Afripoli (2026) postulated that Chinese investment in Zimbabwe's mining sector has significantly increased. Afripoli (2026) however, estimated that the imbalance in the sector has grown larger, increasing from 20,000 to more than 826,000 metric tons of raw lithium from 2020 to 2023, against Zimbabwe's value addition and beneficiation policy.

Employment Creation and Skills Transfer Outcomes

Regarding employment creation, the literature shows that the Chinese partnership projects have significantly produced job opportunities although concerns remain about the depth of skills transfer. In an analysis of these

dynamics, Zhang (2014) examines the relationship between China and Zimbabwe where it has created a lot of employment but in low-skill jobs. The study specifically analyses the input of Chinese investors in long-term production potential in mining and concludes that technology transfer is limited, despite enormous employment (Mude, 2016). The trends in employment within the lithium boom in Zimbabwe also indicates that the locals had lower wages compared to the imported technical employees Transparency International Accountable [TIA], 2025).

Debt Vulnerability and Governance Outcomes

Literature has also highlighted another area of concern regarding resource-based loans, which have given rise to Zimbabwe's huge exposure to debt from China and control issues. AFRODAD (2019) thoroughly examines the relations between China and Zimbabwe to record the way opaque loan agreements are evaded through parliamentary control and social criticism. This has brought about the issues of debt distress, wherein the loans with resources are associated with the gradual loss of economic sovereignty (Moyo, 2025). The analysis of the evolving political economy in Africa in which cross-border payments mechanisms, as well as loan structures, are usually skewed towards creditor interests (Abdel-Hakeem & Eden, 2025). The application of Global South cooperation principles within a changing international order makes debt vulnerability a common issue amongst developing countries (Zhou, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative, desk-based systematic scoping review, and not aimed at the testing of a hypothesis. The approach used is appropriate for generating an "elusive" and multi-disciplinary literature on the Zimbabwe-China relationship and re-interpreting it in an analytical framework. The review development was based on a five-stage process including, search strategy design, screening and selection, application of inclusion/exclusion criteria, structured data extraction, and thematic synthesis, which were adapted from the guidelines for conducting PRISMA-ScR.

Screening and Selection Process

After the initial search of 218 documents for inclusion in the initial pool, these were entered into a reference manager, following the PRISMA-informed scoping-review practice. After eliminating duplicate records there were 179 records remaining. A total of 119 irrelevant titles were excluded based on their title and abstract. Of the remaining 60 full texts there were 31 records which were found to be still relevant, of good quality and current enough to be included in the final assessment.

Search Strategy

The terms Zimbabwe-China relations, South-South cooperation, equity, debt sustainability were used in the search along with some other terms, including Belt and Road Initiative and lithium mining on Google Scholar, ScienceDirect Online, Taylor and Francis Online, JSTOR and institutional repositories such as AFRODAD, UNCTAD, Transparency International Zimbabwe, and google search on media reportage covering Zimbabwe-China relations. Eligibility criteria was imposed on the results using boolean and truncation. Key reference lists were hand searched to further narrow the results and to identify additional sources that would meet the eligibility criteria.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

These encompassed, for example, peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, verified media reports and authoritative institutional reports in English that specifically addressed Zimbabwe-China cooperation, the issue of equity in South-South cooperation, or with similar agreements between the Belt and Road Initiative. Opinion pieces with no evidence, news pieces from unverified sources that were just descriptive, and sources not in English or published before 2014 or about other bilateral partnerships were not included.

Data Extraction

All records included were extracted with the same extraction matrix that captured information about author(s), year, country focus, methodology, theory of, and key findings about equity or asymmetry and recommendations. The matrix was filled in independently by two reviewers, checked for consistency and discrepancies were resolved by discussion. Thematic organization of extracted data was done prior to synthesis in accordance with the three research objectives of the study.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

Based on a process of iterative grouping of findings by common dimensions of inequity which included financing, information, negotiating power and environmental burden and labour conditions, themes were extracted and synthesized. Themes were drawn from the sources triangulated for credibility and linked to the proposed framework of the equity deficit with evidence directly related to each research aim. This study is qualitative, desk-based research and not primary data based on perceptions of stakeholders in Zimbabwe or China.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualising the equity deficit within SSC

The literature reviewed has a common denominator, namely the normative principles of horizontality, solidarity, non-interference, mutual benefit and country ownership, which that underpin SSC (UN Trade and Development, 2025a, 2025b; Chingombe, 2024). The principles are designed to distinguish South-South partnerships from conventional North-South partnerships of giving and receiving assistance. Yet as evidenced by the Zimbabwe-China example, there is a significant mismatch between the normative structure and practice: the extent to which power, information, risk and benefit are distributed between the partner states is what this study terms the "equity deficit".

Theoretically, this study falls in the middle of the two opposing currents in the China-Africa literature. The first is a tradition stemming from dependency theory which sees the unequal results of China-Africa cooperation as inherent, irrespective of how it is conceptualized (Manyeruke, 2021). The second, one of solidarity and agency, is about the capacity of African States to negotiate and shape the terms of engagement, against deterministic stories that would undercut agency of Zimbabwean actors (Mutasa, 2021). This paper explicitly refers to both traditions: the structural constraints identified by dependency theory, and Zimbabwe's isolation resulting from sanctions, in particular from alternative sources of capital; and the agency-based approach of institutional reform, and the potential for institutional reform to create leverage for change. The concept of SSC does not necessarily imply exploitation or that Zimbabwe-China relations reproduced norms of the colonial era or the Cold War era in terms of patronage and support (Wang, 2020). However, the Zimbabwe-China relationship has provided some tangible successes, such as technical assistance, trade facilitation and solidarity-based diplomatic support that were rarely provided by traditional donors (UN Trade and Development, 2025b). Instead, the equity deficit concept points to specific and correctable inequities in SSC, that is, inequities arising from the structural weaknesses of a system, inadequate procedural protections or by the variable distributive effects, not by the intentional actions of any single actor. This is important because the recommendations in this article later on will be based on this distinction, which can guide institutional reform, transparency mechanisms and towards negotiating cooperation building, instead of rejecting the very nature of the cooperation relationship.

Batsani-Ncube (2026) observed the close relationship between Chinese investors in Zimbabwe and Zimbabwean ruling elites, wherein the latter hold decision making powers on investment projects with limited input from general citizens. Additionally, Manyeruke (2021) and Mutasa (2021) noted the structural weakness of the Zimbabwean bargaining position due to sanctions imposed by the United States (US) which isolated Zimbabwe in the capital market. Diamond places this process in a larger global context that explains that desperate states are more vulnerable to asymmetric external bargains, irrespective of the ideology of the

bargainer (Diamond, 2021). Overallly, the literature identified at least three intertwined aspects of the equity deficit concept that characterise Zimbabwe-China cooperation;

- Informational asymmetry which refers to the protection of the terms of loans and investments from the public and parliament (AFRODAD, 2022);
- structural asymmetry which refers to an unbalanced but formally equal negotiation process because of one partner's financial desperation or institutional weakness (Manyeruke, 2021; Mutasa, 2021); and
- distributive asymmetry, that is the distribution of material and environmental benefits and burdens of cooperation between elites, workers and affected communities (Chingombe, 2024; Chitagu, 2024);

The three-dimensional conceptualisation is the theoretical basis of the framework given in this article and directly addresses the main research objective.

Conceptually, this study contributes by systematically disaggregating the concept of equity that is used extensively in the Zimbabwe-China literature but is not applied as individual elements that can be targeted, monitored and evaluated for change. Previous analyses, however, have not considered both aspects of equity, but instead have focused on the rhetorical dimension of equity or on the technical dimension, that is debt sustainability (Batsani-Ncube, 2026; Bandiera & Tsiropoulos, 2020; Ferry & Zeitz, 2024). In this analysis, the political-economy, legal, environmental and ethnographic literature is brought together into a single framework, and thus, suggests a more complete indicator that could show, for instance, that a technically sustainable debt position (a procedural or structural indicator) could be combined with a large distributive inequity at the community level, or vice versa. Gelpert et al. (2024), offers a framework to measure equity, rather than merely describing it. This study draws on the technical manual on measuring SSC developed by UN Trade and Development (2025a), which provides a method for measuring it. Institutional reports by AFRODAD (2020) and Transparency International Zimbabwe (2026) provide practical metrics for implementing a tiered approach to measuring SSC. Brautigam et al. (2025), reveals a field full of sector-specific detail (debt, trade, extraction) and lacking an analytical tool that is capable of bringing the field together. This study therefore, offers a single transferable framework of structural, procedural and distributive asymmetries that is useful but not restricted to Zimbabwe.

Table 1: Conceptual and theoretical sources underpinning the equity deficit framework

Source (Author, Year)	Relevance to Theme
UN Trade and Development (2025a)	Manual defining core SSC principles and equity-measurement procedure
UN Trade and Development (2025b)	Global infographic benchmarking SSC measurement practice
Wang (2020)	Frames the BRI as a “selective reshaping” of international economic governance
Diamond (2021)	Situates asymmetric bargaining within global democratic regression
Batsani-Ncube (2026)	Theorises elite “ingratiation” masking unequal terms
Mutasa (2021)	Characterises China's hands-off political engagement in Africa
Trilateral South-South Cooperation [TSSC] (2023)	Comparative trilateral model contrasts with bilateral opacity

Source: Author (2026)



Manifestations of asymmetry in financing, trade, and resource extraction

The literature used in this study supports the empirical evidence that asymmetries extend beyond the theoretical level in the field of cooperation, but also a practical difference in three fields of cooperation.

First, AFRODAD reports that a large share of Chinese financing for Zimbabwe is resource-backed or asset-backed, with repayment linked to the resources or assets associated with the loan and that these loans are negotiated in an opaque manner (AFRODAD, 2020, 2022). This is similar to the overall findings of the research on Chinese lending in the Global South. Bandiera and Tsiropoulos (2020) highlight that debt financing associated with Belt and Road projects can raise debt sustainability concerns particularly in environments with weak institutions. Brautigam et al. (2025) and Gelpern et al. (2023), documented that Chinese lending contracts include clauses that are exceptionally broad with respect to confidentiality and cross-defaults. Ferry and Zeitz (2024), in their study on debt sustainability risks, illustrated the complexities around debt financing from China which often affect coordinated debt-relief efforts by multilateral creditors.

Table 2: Sources evidencing financing asymmetries in Zimbabwe-China cooperation

Source (Author, Year)	Relevance to Theme
AFRODAD (2020)	Documents opaque, resource-backed Chinese loans to Zimbabwe
AFRODAD (2022)	Calls for transparency in Chinese investment contracts
Bandiera & Tsiropoulos (2020)	Links weak domestic institutions to BRI debt-sustainability risk
Brautigam et al. (2025)	Finds cross-default and confidentiality clauses across BRI loans
Gelpern et al. (2023)	Analyses 100 Chinese debt contracts' broad confidentiality terms
Gelpern et al. (2025)	Maps collateralisation practices in Chinese state lending
Ferry & Zeitz (2024)	Shows contractual opacity complicates multilateral debt relief
Manyeruke (2021)	Finds limited local participation and technology transfer in financed projects

Source: Author (2026)

Second, in trade, the exports of Zimbabwe and imports from China are structurally imbalanced with Zimbabwe exporting mainly unprocessed tobacco and raw minerals, and importing higher value manufactured goods, electronics, machinery and other goods from China (Manyeruke, 2021). This composition is important because it determines the different levels of value added, employment and technological spill overs from the trade relationship that accrue to the more and less industrially developed partner.

Table 3: Sources evidencing trade-composition asymmetries in Zimbabwe-China cooperation

Source (Author, Year)	Relevance to Theme
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC (2024)	Reports bilateral trade volume and diplomatic framing of the partnership
ZANU PF / Ministry of Foreign Affairs Zimbabwe (2024)	Joint statement affirms the strategic trade partnership

Source: Author (2026)

Third, in the resource extraction industry, the lithium industry is the most extreme example of inequity. The reports by Chingombe (2024), Chitagu (2024), Transparency International Zimbabwe (2026), U.S. Select Committee on the CCP (2026) and Africa Defense Forum (2026), indicate that there are regulations, but they are not well enforced, as many smallholder and artisanal miners remain outside formal value chains, with high-grade ore being under-reported and community-level accountability being limited. With an ethnographic lens, Ning An (2023) highlighted tensions arising in communities because of the greater presence and activity of Chinese migrants who often displace local communities. The Global Development Policy Centre (2026) also observed that, mining investment provides a significant proportion of Zimbabwe's GDP, contributing about 14.5 per cent of GDP and 75 per cent of export earnings. Africa Defense Forum, (2026) however, noted governance weaknesses disproportionately impact on the bilateral relationship's equity and overall realisation of the partnership benefits (Global Development Policy Centre, 2026). In sum, these results are a confirmation of the equity deficit in terms of financing, trade composition and governance of resources addressing the second research question.

Table 4: Sources evidencing resource-extraction asymmetries in Zimbabwe-China cooperation

Source (Author, Year)	Relevance to Theme
Africa Defense Forum (2026)	Reports lithium export scrutiny and its share of GDP and exports
Afripoli (2026)	Quantifies lithium output growth between 2020 and 2023
Al Jazeera (2024)	Documents exclusion of small miners from the lithium value chain
Chingombe (2024)	Recounts community-level loss from lithium mining
Chitagu (2024)	Reports weak enforcement of mining violations
Global Development Policy Center (2026)	Assesses lithium's GDP share and governance gaps
Ning An (2023)	Ethnographic account of migrant-community friction
Select Committee on the CCP (2026)	Documents corruption in Zimbabwe's lithium sector
Transparency International Zimbabwe (2026)	Assesses governance risk in lithium investment

Source: Author (2026)

Towards a context-specific equity deficit framework

This study builds on conceptualising equity deficit and manifestations of asymmetry and suggests a three tier “Equity Deficit Framework” for Zimbabwe-China cooperation. Tier one is the structural tier; focused on macro-level bargaining power imbalances due to sanctions exposure, debt dependence and restricted availability of alternative capital markets (AFRODAD, 2020; Gelpert et al., 2023). Tier two, the procedural tier, is about transparency, disclosure and the level of parliamentary and civil-society involvement in negotiations and monitoring of agreements. Tier 3 is the distributive tier, which relates to the distribution of material benefits and burdens, environmental benefits and burdens and social costs and benefits between the State, investors, the workers and the affected communities. Literature indicates that Zimbabwe-China cooperation is currently low in all the three areas: structurally, the sanctions against Zimbabwe's access to western finance drive Zimbabwe to increasingly turn to Chinese finance; procedurally, opaque resource-backed contracts result in limited legislative and public oversight; and distributively, benefits are not distributed broadly across the population and environmental and labour costs are borne locally (Manyeruke,

2021; Mutasa, 2021; AFRODAD, 2020, 2022; Gelpert et al., 2023, 2025; Chingombe, 2024; Chitagu, 2024; Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, 2026). The strength of the framework is that it breaks down "equity" into various tiers, which can be measured and monitored, and gives it a more definite meaning, directly addressing the third research goal, and providing a basis for the recommendations that follow.

Cross-cutting discussion: Operationalizing three tier framework in Zimbabwe

The results are consistent with and complement a larger theme of equity in the broader context of Belt and Road-related cooperation in Zimbabwe. Wang (2020) suggests that the BRI is a "selective reshaping" of international economic governance, which has raised concerns of transparency, sovereignty and debt sustainability, which are reflected in the Zimbabwean case examined in this study. While findings indicate that the equity deficit found in this research is not necessarily unique to Zimbabwe, the practices surrounding confidentiality and collateralisation observed in Zimbabwe are not unique, but are part of a template that has been followed in other BRI recipient countries and reflect systemic rather than purely country-specific practices (Gelpert et al., 2023, 2025). According to Bandiera and Tsiropoulos (2020), who reframed part of the equity shortfall as a shared responsibility, where domestic institutional reform plays an equally important role as a renegotiation with Beijing, weaker domestic institutional quality, not Chinese financing itself, is the most critical factor that drives unsustainable debt outcomes in the BRI.

Table 5: The equity deficit framework applied to Zimbabwe-China cooperation

Tier	Focus / Illustrative Manifestation	Key Sources
Tier 1 Structural	-Bargaining power shaped by sanctions exposure and access to alternative capital. Illustrative manifestation: dependence on Chinese resource-backed loans in the absence of Western credit lines.	Manyeruke (2021); Mutasa (2021); Diamond (2021).
Tier 2 Procedural	-Transparency, disclosure, and legislative or civil-society participation in negotiating and monitoring agreements. Illustrative manifestation: limited parliamentary scrutiny of collateralised loan contracts.	AFRODAD (2020, 2022); Gelpert et al. (2023, 2025); Wang (2020).
Tier 3 Distributive	-Sharing of material, environmental, and social costs and benefits among state, investors, workers, and communities. Illustrative manifestation: displacement, unsafe labour conditions, and revenue underreporting in lithium mining.	Chingombe (2024); Chitagu (2024); Global Development Policy Center (2026); Select Committee on the CCP (2026).

Source: Author (2026)

The Global Development Policy Center (2026) and Afripoli (2026), both report a sharp rise in production in Zimbabwe's lithium sector, from around 20,000 MT in 2020 to over 826,000 MT in 2023, with limited evidence of corresponding local benefits: most of the ore was exported as mined or lightly processed to the Chinese lithium refinery and battery-manufacturing plants that it is estimated account for 60 to 70 percent of all global capacity. This means that Zimbabwe currently captures a disproportionately small share of the value chain despite being a major source of the raw mineral. The cross-cutting discussion reveals that the equity deficit has robust empirical foundations, that is consistent with the wider BRI scholarship and can substantiate analytically the structural, procedural and distributive reform priorities, which strengthens confidence in the recommendations.

To put this into perspective, the situation in Zimbabwe is briefly compared across the region. The confidentiality and collateralisation practices observed in Zimbabwe are not exclusive to Zimbabwe's governance but are common to debt-contracting practices of Chinese state-linked lenders on the continent as a whole (Gelpert et al., 2023, 2025; Brautigam et al., 2025). However, Zimbabwe's lithium export controls

are not implemented proactively, but only following intensified reports of under-declaration and smuggling of raw concentrates occur, a development that ultimately resulted in the suspension of exports of raw concentrates by the government in 2026 (Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, 2026; Africa Defense Forum, 2026). It is therefore not enough for Zimbabwe to secure better terms from China; Zimbabwe must also have the capacity to negotiate, monitor and enforce the terms ahead of time to close the equity deficit. This is a theme that is directly informing the Recommendations below.

Lastly, the political and economic aspects of the Zimbabwe-China relationship are seen as conflicting. The political relationship is a long-term and mutually trustful partnership, evidenced by the diplomatic support and backing given by the two sides in multilateral forums and China's consistent support of Zimbabwe despite Western sanctions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). But in economic terms, the same trust is expressed as a lessening of scrutiny over the contractual terms, as Batsani-Ncube (2026) argued in the context of a "ingratiation" dynamic between higher political engagement and a correspondingly weaker scrutiny on the technical or procedural aspects of underlying commercial contracts. The separation of these two registers is itself a practical consequence of the equity deficit and an initial step to bridging the gap it outlines.

This contrasts with reports of trilateral South-South health cooperation elsewhere in the continent, where a multilateral agency was used to help with the logistics, reporting and accountability between the funder and recipient in a project on maternal health funded by China (Trilateral South-South Cooperation [TSSC], 2023). A trustworthy third party may be able to balance the asymmetry in Chinese bilateral cooperation. In Zimbabwe, equity gaps are so huge, given the overwhelmingly bilateral nature of the financing and extraction arrangements, that there is a need to consider multilateral co-financing or third-party technical assistance.

In view of these equity deficit dynamics, below is the proposed three tier Equity Deficit Framework and how it can be operationalised in Zimbabwean context.

Table 6: Operationalisation of the equity deficit framework

Tier	Key indicator	What is measured	Simple measurement
Tier 1: Structural	Financing dependence	Dependence on Chinese financing	Chinese financing as percentage of total external financing
	Access to alternative finance	Availability of alternative funding sources	Number of viable alternative financing sources
	Bargaining capacity	Zimbabwe's capacity to negotiate favourable terms	Availability of independent legal, financial and technical expertise
Tier 2: Procedural	Contract transparency	Public availability of agreement terms	Percentage of agreements whose key terms are publicly disclosed
	Parliamentary oversight	Legislative scrutiny of agreements	Percentage of agreements subjected to parliamentary review
	Stakeholder participation	Participation of civil society and affected communities	Level of stakeholder participation in negotiations/monitoring

Tier 3: Distributive	Local employment	Employment benefits received by Zimbabweans	Percentage of project employment held by local workers
	Local value addition	Domestic processing of extracted resources	Percentage of extracted resources processed locally
	Skills and technology transfer	Transfer of skills and technology to local workers	Percentage of relevant workers receiving skills/technology transfer
	Environmental and social burden	Costs borne by local communities	Number/proportion of environmental, labour or social impacts addressed
Overall Equity Deficit Score	Combined score	Overall level of equity deficit	Average of Structural + Procedural + Distributive scores

Source: Author (2026)

The Equity Deficit Framework can be implemented in three stages: structural, procedural and distributive, with observable indicators and measurable variables. It aims at providing a practical monitoring tool to track Zimbabwe-China agreements, projects and sectors with respect to an equity deficit. The framework assesses the consistency of the bargaining power and decision making, information, benefit and cost sharing, with respect to the principles of mutual benefit, transparency, country ownership and solidarity.

Structural indicators are those such as reliance on Chinese financing, access to other capital, debt exposure, and the availability of independent technical, financial and legal expertise. The above factors point to a higher structural deficit, and the more dependence upon Chinese money it shows, the more limited the alternatives and the weaker the negotiating capacity. The procedural tier examines the transparency of the process, parliamentary oversight, the involvement of stakeholders and contractual aspects that impact public accountability. A procedural deficit increases as disclosure to authorities, their participation and their oversight are reduced. The distributive tier looks at local employment, domestic value addition, skills and technology transfer, government revenues, community benefits, environmental compliance and compensation.

CONCLUSION

This study uses a systematic scoping review of Zimbabwe-China relations over the last 12 years to conceptualise the equity deficit within South-South cooperation. Although it is said to be "all-weather friendship" and "win-win cooperation", there are measurable structural, procedural and distributive inequalities in the relationship. Because of the sanctions, Zimbabwe is increasingly relying on Chinese financing thereby reducing its bargaining leverage, as alternative sources of capital are unavailable to it (Manyeruke, 2021; Mutasa, 2021). There is less parliamentary accountability over opaque and resource-backed loans and environmental degradation, forced evictions and unsafe working conditions are disproportionately affecting local communities and citizens, with most of the benefits going to the elite (Batsani-Ncube, 2026; Chingombe, 2024). In this case and beyond, the results throw into doubt notions of horizontality based on common "Global South" identity. The three-tier Equity Deficit Framework (structural, procedural and distributive) offers an applicable framework for African countries in the midst of asymmetric partnerships with key financiers. As witnessed during the fight against colonialism and sanctions, the historical significance of Zimbabwe-China friendship is indisputable. There is a difference, however, between solidarity and equity: diplomacy may be the gift of goodwill, but it does not preclude there being any real difference that requires attention. Closing the equity deficit gap cannot be achieved through diplomatic goodwill of the broader South-South cooperation community, but requires deliberate institutional change in Zimbabwe, and

that is where the first steps of scholars, policy makers and citizens involved in South-South cooperation should be taken.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- If Zimbabwe's policy and research institutions are to be effective in clarifying concepts, the structural-procedural-distributive concept needs to be operationalised and made part of their mandate, including an element of equality in the diplomatic training in those institutions.
- The government needs to enhance the Public Debt Management Office with all the terms of loans being published for parliamentary ratification, diversify exports by local beneficiation of lithium and ensure the Environmental Management Agency and the Ministry of Mines are provided with the capacity to enforce independently and with consistent penalties (AFRODAD, 2020, 2022).
- Zimbabwe should establish a multi-stakeholder Cooperation Monitoring Council to oversee the implementation of agreements in its three-tier framework, reporting publicly, on an open and easily-accessible basis, on the results obtained, by following the UN Trade and Development approach to measuring agreements (UN Trade and Development, 2025a, 2025b).
- Implementation should proceed in three stages: short-term, legislative changes regarding loan disclosure and council formation; medium-term, operationalisation of both the incentives for the beneficiation and enforcement, and the public project registry; and long-term, engagement with China and other regional partners to co-develop a shared equity-auditing protocol for Belt and Road agreements, from unilateral diagnosis to a jointly recognised South-South cooperation standard.

LIMITATIONS

The major limitation of the study is the qualitative desk-based study that did not generate primary data of stakeholder perceptions in Zimbabwe and China. The evidence base is rich, both from peer reviewed and institutional sources, and some of the outputs are advocacy based or journalistic and need to be corroborated by further empirical research. The framework and its empirical underpinning need to be tested and refined with the use of structured surveys for affected communities, mineworkers, and parliamentary officials, and comparative interviews with counterpart institutions from other countries along the Belt and Road in Southern and Eastern Africa.

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