

Chinese and Indian economic relations and development assistance to Zimbabwe: Rationale, controversies and significance

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ABSTRACT

Recent economic relations including foreign assistance scenario in Africa show expansion of China and India as emerging bilateral partners, competing with traditional countries in Europe and North America. The results of this paper found that the relationship of China and India with Zimbabwe has resulted in several challenges including increasing resource-backed debt burden, exploitation of the natural resources, and flouting of constitutional, environmental, and labor provisions. The paper recommends that the Zimbabwean government must demand loans and investments that are contracted under clear terms and conditions, with parliamentary oversight and public scrutiny to avoid abuse by the elites.

Keywords: China and India, development assistance, Zimbabwe, Africa

1 INTRODUCTION

The growing economic powers of China and India are unquestionably influencing development activities in Africa, and this has captured the attention of the political economists (Munday, 2021). As their economies grew exponentially in the last two decades, these two 'Asian giants' are now competing with the traditional development partners from Europe and North America (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). Although China and India enjoy a long history of cooperation with Africa, in recent years, they expanded their economic and investment interests in Zimbabwe (Chivanga & Monyai, 2020).

Zimbabwe obtained independence in 1980 from Ian Smith's Rhodesian government and inherited a vibrant economic and agricultural environment and was known as the 'breadbasket of Southern Africa' (Moyo et al., 2019). However, the country experienced deep political, economic and social challenges after its implementation of the highly contested Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) in 2000 (Cliffe et al., 2011). The FTLRP in Zimbabwe was characterised by violent grabbing of farms popularly known as *Jambanja* from the White commercial farmers spearheaded by the former liberation fighters with political support (Moyo, 2011). Political and economic sanctions by its former colonial power—Britain and its Western European and North American allies followed (Moyo & Chambati, 2013). In 2003,

Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government led by the former President Robert Mugabe enacted the ‘Look East Policy’ as a deliberate strategy to delink the country from the Western European and North American investors and donors. Zimbabwe turned towards Asia for assisting with the mounting challenges that included the deteriorating macroeconomic environment (Gukurume, 2019). Although the *Look East Policy* was mainly created to accelerate and strengthen the links with China, it also allowed creation of linkages with other Asian countries including India, Japan and Singapore. Political economists and development specialists increasingly question this strategy and call for a reexamination (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018).

In the above context, the main objective of this paper is to provide a better understanding of the political economy of the foreign assistance by examining the rationale, controversies and significance of economic relations and development cooperation of China and India in Zimbabwe. It also explores policy strategies that can help to foster and strengthen the economic relationship of these two Asian countries with Zimbabwe.

We address the following specific questions: What are the driving forces behind the increased economic relations including development assistance from China and India in the recent years? How does the quality of economic relations and assistance differ between these two Asian economies and between them and their Western European and North American counterparts? What lessons emerge for other African countries from the economic relations of Zimbabwe with India and China and the development assistance Zimbabwe receives from these two nations?

The research for this paper was carried out between August and November 2021. We use quasi-participant observation, key informant interviews (KIIs) and informal conversations to gather primary data on the insights and perceptions of China and India economic relationships with Zimbabwe. A total of 16 key informants were purposefully selected including the Zimbabwean government (4), development partners (2), civil society (3), academia (3), private sector (2) and diplomats (2) to obtain their views about Zimbabwe's cooperation with the two Asian economies (Table 1). The key informants were chosen based on their knowledge, seniority and expertise on Zimbabwe's economic and development cooperation with China and India. To supplement the primary data, we also made intensive use of secondary data sources such as newspaper articles, website information, reports, budget statements and in-depth literature review of published articles about China and India relationships with Zimbabwe.

TABLE 1. Distribution of 16 respondents by stakeholder group, designation level and gender

Category of stakeholder	Total	Designation level	Male	Female
Government	4	Directors	3	1
Development partners	2	Head of programmes/programme managers	1	1
Academia	3	PhD holders	1	2
Civil society	3	Head of programmes/programme managers	2	1
Private sector	2	Managerial	1	1
Diplomats	2	Economic consular	2	0
Total	16		10	6

The rest of this article is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature, while Section 8 discusses the results. The final section (Section 9) concludes the article.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical development of China and India economic relations with Zimbabwe

The relationship between China and Zimbabwe can be traced back to over 600 years when the Ming and Qing dynasties of the Chinese engaged in trade and cultural relationship with the Munhumutapa Empire of Zimbabwe (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019). However, contemporary development cooperation between China and Zimbabwe dates to the period during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle against colonialism and racial oppression from Britain in the 1960s (Chivanga & Monyai, 2020). During this period, China gave Zimbabwe full military support by facilitating training of guerrillas and providing weapons in the fight against colonialism from Ian Smith's Rhodesia. Zimbabwe legitimately became independent from Rhodesia in April 1980 with Robert Mugabe as its first Prime Minister, and the two countries formally established diplomatic relations (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019). Zimbabwe under Mugabe prioritised and strengthened its diplomatic relations with China especially in 2003 after the deteriorating socio-economic and political situation due to the standoff with the Britain and its allies (Hodzi et al., 2012). The current President Emmerson Mnangagwa took over dethroning President Mugabe with the support of the army in 2017 (Nyamunda, 2021). President Mnangagwa remains steadfast in maintaining the diplomatic relationship with China (Melber & Southall, 2021).

India's diplomatic relationship with Zimbabwe dates back to the 14th century when the Munhumutapa Kingdom in Zimbabwe established strong trading links with Indian merchants particularly on textiles, minerals and metals (Nyamadzawo & Chigumira, 2011). In 1890, few Indians belonging to Gujarat state in India, working in the plantations in apartheid South Africa, crossed over to the then Southern Rhodesia (current Zimbabwe) mainly to establish themselves in retail business as well as export and import enterprises. This population has grown now to over 10 000 Zimbabweans of Indian origin (Moyo et al., 2019). Just like China, India also supported Zimbabwe during its liberation struggle for independence. The two countries share similar views on most international political and economic matters, and they closely combine forces at the United Nations (UN) and other multilateral fora such as the World Trade Organization (Asuelime, 2018).

2.2 Zimbabwe's current economic corporation with China and India

While it is axiomatic that China and India are very influential in African economic affairs, these two Asian countries have also established strong economic ties with Zimbabwe (Nyamadzawo & Chigumira, 2011). For instance, while South Africa remains Zimbabwe's leading bilateral trading partner, China is an important trading partner. Imports from China were 12.3% in December 2021 rising from 11.3% in November 2021 (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018; Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT], 2021). Zimbabwe signed its Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements (BIPPAs) with China on the 21 May 1996, and it was ratified on 11 February 1998 (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). BIPPAs are legal policy instruments that stipulate the rights and obligations to be followed for the primary purpose of cushioning

and protecting the economic investments against some discriminatory measures like policy inconsistencies by the host country (Bandera, 2010). Characteristically, BIPPAs are designed to encourage reciprocal encouragement, promote and protect the economic investments between the two countries involved. Zimbabwe's economic cooperation with China is mainly visible in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) enacted in 2000 with the primary objective to promote China–Africa co-operation in various economic sectors (Gu et al., 2016). Through FOCAC, China entered into economic agreements by the year 2009 with 45 African governments including Zimbabwe. However, unlike the North America and other European countries, the majority of the Chinese economic deals and loans are less stringent and overlook human rights and corruption issues, thus making them attractive to most African governments (Fang et al., 2020).

Recently, FOCAC concluded its eighth ministerial meeting held between 29 and 30 November 2021 in Senegal where China presented its vision that will shape its future cooperation with Africa for the next 3 years (The Sunday Mail, 2021a). This high-level meeting presided over by President Xi Jinping reflected substantial changes in China's approaches and priorities unlike its previous patterns. While China's financial commitments to Africa decreased from \$60 billion in 2018 to \$40 billion in 2021, it did not make a specific commitment to infrastructure investments in the next 3 years, despite the country's long history of support to this sector (Sun, 2021). This could be attributed to the difficulties that China has been experiencing in loan repayment by some African countries as in the case of Uganda's Entebbe airport, Kenya's Mombasa port projects and Zambia debt repayment challenges.

While it is difficult to quantify in monetary terms all the development assistance received by Zimbabwe from China, it is contributing little in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), sharply contrasting with what Zimbabwe's neighbours are getting from China since 2003 (Landry, 2021). China has been supporting Zimbabwe mainly through resource-backed loans (RBLs), particularly with minerals from the diamond mining sector, where African countries access loans in exchange for, or collateralised by, future streams of income from their natural resource wealth (Mihalyi et al., 2020; UN Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2021). Chinese RBLs to Zimbabwe are mainly to finance projects in the mining, infrastructure, the wood industry, healthcare, water and sanitation, financial services, tourism, manufacturing and agricultural sectors (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2021a). Table 2 shows some of the recent projects that received financial support from China.

TABLE 2. Key projects financed by China in Zimbabwe

Year	Project	Beneficiary	Terms	Value (USD)
2010	Zimbabwe National Defence College	Zimbabwe Defence Forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 2% per annum • Grace period of 5 years • Maturity of 20 years 	153 million
2014	Kariba South Extension Project		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 2% per annum • Grace period of 5 years • Maturity of 20 years 	533 million
2015	Hwange Power Station Expansion Project	Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 2% per annum • Grace period of 7 years • Maturity of 20 years 	998 million
2018	Construction of 650-Seater Parliament House	Parliament of Zimbabwe		100 million
	Harare International Airport Expansion	Civil Aviation Authority of Zimbabwe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 2% per annum • Grace period of 5 years • Maturity of 20 years 	153 million
2019	NetOne Mobile Network Expansion Project	NetOne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 2% per annum • Grace period of 5 years • Maturity of 20 years • Grant element of 29% 	71 million

Source: Republic of Zimbabwe (2021c).

Moreover, China has been funding various health and agricultural programmes, providing long- and short-term education and training opportunities in China for many students and government workers in Zimbabwe (Alao, 2014). Interestingly, the Chinese government also provided budget support (although very small) to the new coalition government between the ruling party (ZANU PF) and the opposition (Movement for Democratic Change) that was negotiated in 2009 (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). However, while there is development assistance from China to Zimbabwe, this cannot be compared with the huge aid flows from

traditional donors (bilateral and UN agencies) especially related to humanitarian relief mainly because China normally does not provide many grants in cash (Muchadenyika, 2016).

While China is financing and implementing many infrastructure projects in Zimbabwe, it has been dominating the local market through Chinese-owned companies in both the manufacturing and trade sectors as well as the importation of industrial and household products (Gagare & Kairiza, 2019). As a result, Zimbabwe imports from China in 2020 were US\$470.73 million compared to US\$411.77 million in 2019 as shown in Figure 1 (UN Comtrade, 2021a).

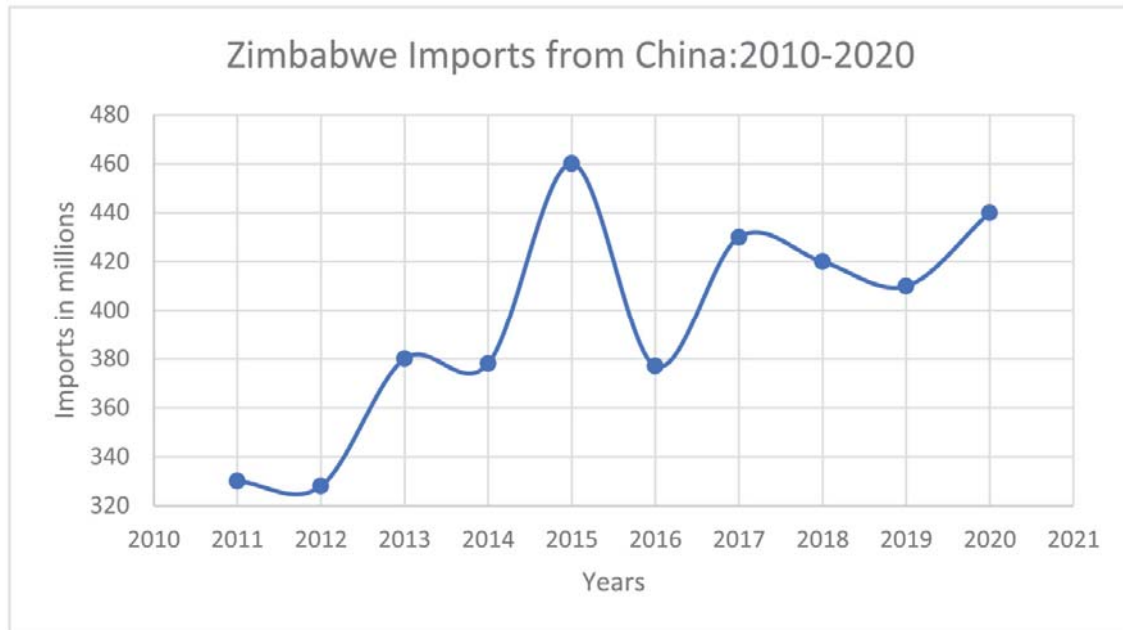


FIGURE 1. Zimbabwe imports from China 2010–2020.

Source: UN Comtrade (2021a)

Correspondingly, India's formal economic cooperation with Zimbabwe is rooted in the BIPPA signed on 10 February 1999 and was ratified on 9 June 2014 (Bandera, 2010). Table 3 shows the major infrastructure projects that received financial support from India mainly through India's Export–Import Bank (Exim Bank). Moreover, the announcement of India to focus on Africa in March 2002 and later extended to Zimbabwe in 2003, backed by India's Exim Bank, increased India and Zimbabwe's economic relations (Melber & Southall, 2021). This programme was designed to support Indian exporters and the related organisations to visit African countries including Zimbabwe to organise trade fairs and explore business opportunities with their trade delegations invited to visit India in return (Asuelime, 2018).

TABLE 3. Main projects financed by India in Zimbabwe

Year	Project	Beneficiary	Terms	Value (USD)
2013	Deka Pumping Station and River Uptake System Phase I Project	Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 2% per annum • Grace period of 2 years • Maturity of 10 years 	28.6 million
2015	Upgrade of Bulawayo Thermal Power Station	Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 2% per annum • Grace period of 3 years • Maturity of 10 years 	87 million
2019	Upgrade of Bulawayo Thermal Power Station (Additional Loan)	Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 1.75% per annum • Grace period of 5 years • Maturity of 20 years • Grant element of 31% 	23 million
	Deka Pumping Station and River Uptake System Phase II Project	Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate of 1.75% per annum • Grace period of 5 years • Maturity of 20 years • Grant element of 31% 	19.5 million

Source: Republic of Zimbabwe (2021c).

Recently, imports from India to Zimbabwe are increasing, and in 2020, about US\$162.33 million was reported as compared to US\$141.48 million in 2019 as shown in Figure 2, particularly on the following products: pharmaceuticals, machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers, plastics, electrical products and rubbers (UNCTAD, 2021; UN Comtrade, 2021b). India's economic cooperation with Zimbabwe is also evident in its capacity-building flagship scholarships, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) founded in 1964 and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) established in 1950 (Nyamadzawo & Chigumira, 2011). These capacity-building programmes mainly target civilians like doctors and nurses as well as defence and security forces for training in India's different centres of excellence.

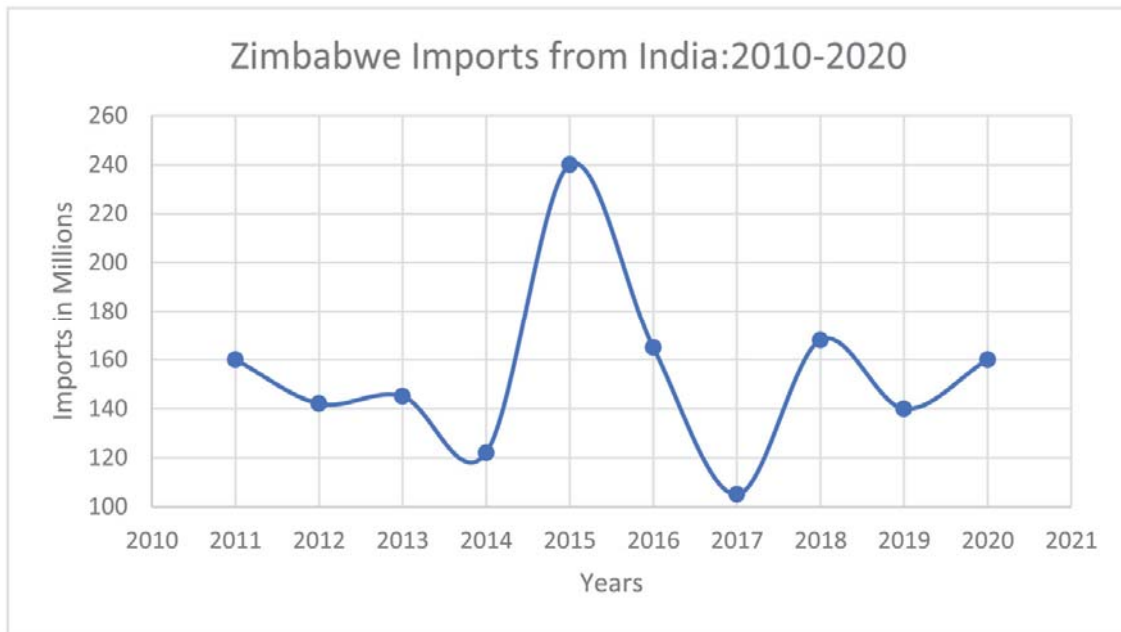


FIGURE 2. Zimbabwe imports from India 2010–2020.

Source: UN Comtrade (2021b)

2.3 China and India's economic relations and development assistance to Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic period

China and India's relations with Zimbabwe are also evident during the current COVID-19 pandemic era, where these two Asian countries have been at the forefront of assisting with COVID-19 vaccines and anti-epidemic materials (Scoones, 2021). As of 27 September 2021, Zimbabwe had 129 919 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 122 446 recoveries and 4607 deaths (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2021b). While the efforts to fight COVID-19 are still underway in Zimbabwe, a total of 3 051 371 people have been vaccinated against COVID-19 by 27 September 2021 (representing 15% of the total population) out of the 20 million targets in order for the country to achieve herd immunity (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2021b). China remains the main source of COVID-19 vaccines to Zimbabwe with 4 million Sinopharm and 5.2 million Sinovac doses delivered by end of September 2021 (Manyeruke, 2021). While China remains the biggest partner in supporting Zimbabwe during COVID-19, some scholars believe that it is 'vaccine diplomacy' meant to exploit the country's natural resources given that dozens of Chinese mining companies have set operations in the country digging for anything from gold, coal, diamonds, chrome and palladium (Machaya, 2021). Moreover, Zimbabwe has been receiving overpriced COVID-19 vaccines from China, which cost US\$75 per dose while snubbing the same vaccine sold at US\$25 per dose by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) and financed by the World Bank, UNICEF, WHO and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, thus raising the possibility of corruption because the government opted vaccines with inflated prices instead of readily available vaccines at a lower price (Chikono & Kairiza, 2021; Scoones, 2021).

Equally, the Government of India is also a key player in providing support to the Zimbabwean government during the COVID-19 pandemic (Scoones, 2021). To date, India has donated a

total of 75 000 Covaxin together with tonnes of rice to cushion the vulnerable groups, especially during the completed national lockdowns implemented by the government to reduce the spread of the pandemic (Zikunye, 2021). While the development support from India to Zimbabwe is generally perceived by many scholars as mutually beneficial to both countries, some of the donated goods and equipment to assist the fight against COVID-19 were abused by corrupt government officials who usually diverted them from their intended purpose for personal gain (UN Development Programme [UNDP], 2021).

2.4 Controversies surrounding China's economic relations and development cooperation with Zimbabwe

The engagements between Zimbabwe and China have recently attracted some scholarly attention mainly because of the increased presence of China in the affairs of the country (Manyeruke, 2021). Zimbabwe's development cooperation with China has presented some opportunities, which has led to significant increase in infrastructure investments (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019). For instance, China currently has the largest share of the infrastructure-related projects in Zimbabwe mainly financed through loans from China Exim Bank (Gukurume & Nhodo, 2020; Ojakerotu & Kamidza, 2018). While most of these loans usually have favourable borrowing terms to many developing countries including Zimbabwe, they are generally shrouded in secrecy and negotiated through highly opaque deals, uncompetitive procedures and limited parliament approval. Thus, these loans present some systematic risks and challenges in debt sustainability as they are expensive, benefit only the government elites and are contracted without the public consent (Munday, 2021). The general lack of openness in Chinese deals to African governments including Zimbabwe coupled with less demanding terms and conditions makes them susceptible to abuse by despotic regimes, and these loans usually do not benefit the majority of the citizens (Chivanga & Monyai, 2020; Mihalyi et al., 2020).

As a result, Bodomo (2018) claims that the Chinese RBLs and aid to Africa and Zimbabwe are a new strategy for the re-colonisation since this often results in the siphoning of natural resources from the continent. This calls for the country to exercise transparency and accountability in sovereign debt negotiations, borrowing and debt management and which is enshrined in the African Borrowing Charter and other domestic legal provisions on public financial management. Such an approach will help in sustainably balancing public debt levels with inclusive development (The Sunday Mail, 2021b).

A closer look at the business operations done by the Chinese migrants in Zimbabwe has revealed flouting of labour and constitutional rights characterised by considerable exploitation of the natives and abuse of their human rights (Gukurume & Nhodo, 2020). According to Gukurume (2019), Zimbabweans working for the Chinese traders and companies in mines and construction sectors usually work for long hours and under poor labour conditions in return for meagre wages and salaries. Additionally, the Chinese enterprises are usually given special privileges and favours by the Zimbabwean government's political elites resulting in them undermining and overriding the local workers' rights, evicting local community members to pave the way for their projects without meaningful compensation and flouting on cultural and environmental regulations. For instance, in the year 2015, the Zimbabwean government under the former President Robert Mugabe granted mining rights

for coal mining to the Chinese companies in Hwange National Park (Watts, 2020). However, this has received wide criticism, particularly from environmentalists indicating that it will shrink and disturb the habitat of many rare species as well as destroy safari tourism. Similarly, a Chinese mining company, Heijin, has reportedly evicted villagers in Kaseke in Uzumba district to pave way for granite stone mining and told them that they have no title deeds to the disputed communal land (Saunyama, 2021).

2.5 Controversies surrounding India's economic relations and development cooperation with Zimbabwe

India's economic development cooperation in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular is generally associated with controversial trade arrangements (Nyemba et al., 2013). Most concerns are associated with Indian business enterprises established in Zimbabwe who produce goods for re-export and expatriate the profits. Moreover, other concerns over India's cooperation with Zimbabwe are associated with land acquisition, displacements and relocation of locals to facilitate their investments, sometimes without adequate compensation (Mpofu, 2011). This contravenes Mahatma Gandhi's quest for cooperation that goes beyond material gain and engaging in a more people-oriented and non-exploitative cooperation. However, India's cooperation with Zimbabwe is generally perceived as less controversial than that of China with the latter's development support regarded as more exploitative and tends to benefit the Chinese and native elites than the ordinary citizens (Hodzi et al., 2012). While the Indian enterprises operating in Zimbabwe are traditionally associated with poor conditions of service characterised by paltry wages and salaries, they are not abusive as compared to their Chinese counterparts.

In addition to challenges in economic cooperation, India's relationship with Zimbabwe is also infringing on socio-cultural issues with the locals. For instance, Mpofu (2011) reveals that Indians in Zimbabwe have resorted to racial residential segregation particularly in Belvedere in Harare where they have dominated the suburb and buy out house owners of other races. In view of the above, the cooperation between India and Zimbabwe signifies some merits and demerits in both the short- and long-term perspectives, especially on economic transformation. As a result, it is crucial for the Zimbabwean government to devise bold strategies for cooperation that are in line with the government's development vision and benefits both nations and the local people.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chinese and Indian economic relations and development cooperation with Zimbabwe and Africa, in general, have received mixed views not only from the proponents of sustainable development and scholars of international relations and political economy analysis but also from the respondents of this research. For instance, the Chinese and Indian economic relationship with Zimbabwe has been hailed by some key informants as based on mutual friendship and development cooperation. A key informant's narrative is illustrative:

As you are aware, China and India are amongst the few nations that have been helping Zimbabwe since the liberation struggle and as the country is currently under sanctions from the Western countries, we have been receiving the much-needed financial

support from these Asian bilateral partners and they are 'All-Weather Friends'.
(Government director with one of the ministries in Zimbabwe)

Such acknowledgement of the importance of Chinese and Indian development assistance to Zimbabwe was echoed from some of the KIIs conducted with members of the academia who noted that the two Asian countries have significantly financed infrastructure investment projects. The following presents a narrative by a member of academia:

Our economic relationship with China and India must be applauded as most of our development-related projects are currently financed by these Asian-based economies which are emerging world economic powers. For example, China contributes the largest share to the current development assistance to Zimbabwe, particularly in infrastructure development, mining, and agriculture sectors. (Professor of International Relations and Politics at one of the state universities in Zimbabwe)

China and India have also been viewed by some key informants as Zimbabwe's key sources of official development assistance particularly after the country adopted its Look East Policy in 2003. According to these interviews, development support by these two Asian countries is mainly in water, energy, health and construction of government facilities and buildings. A diplomat with the Chinese embassy in Zimbabwe has this to say:

Although our friendship with Zimbabwe dates to the period before the attainment of independence in 1980, my country has increased support to Zimbabwe particularly in infrastructure development and recently in health as a result of COVID-19. My country has signed numerous mega deals with Zimbabwe since the country adopted its Look East Policy, which demonstrates our commitment to support the development of this country. (Diplomat with Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe)

The economic relationship between Zimbabwe and these two Asian countries has often epitomised by controversies and cynicism. Some of the KIIs noted that the development cooperation between these two Asian countries and Zimbabwe is characterised by an unfair and exploitative relationship. One way in which this relationship is viewed exploitative is the trade composition—Zimbabwe exports precious raw materials to these economic giants whilst in return Zimbabwe imports manufactured goods. Consequently, Zimbabwe is losing out on the benefits of value addition and beneficiation. In an interview with *AllAfrica*, one of the traditional leaders in the country complained that the Chinese are looting vast mineral resources like chrome and gold in the country. He also highlighted the controversial and detrimental role played by China since the liberation struggle for an independent Zimbabwe, which was meant to advance their political and economic interests in this natural resource-rich Southern African nation. The traditional leader's narrative is illustrative:

The Chinese are just behaving like MaShurugwi (notorious gold panners in Zimbabwe) where they operate without paying any taxes. These people (Chinese) do not talk to anyone, and they take what they want and go. They do not even recognize local communities or chiefs in the areas they operate in and the law is not doing anything. As traditional leaders we are the protectors of our mineral resources and we will

eventually see if and how the resources underground will be protected. (Traditional leader)

While the study findings indicate that China and India are some of Zimbabwe's major economic and development partners, the partnership with these two Asian countries has been criticised for lacking mutual economic advantages because the country exports raw materials such as minerals, losing on benefits associated with value addition and beneficiation (UNCTAD, 2021; UN Comtrade, 2021b). It is thus imperative for the country to implement policies that promote value addition and beneficiation of its natural resources in order to improve its revenue streams, create employment for the locals and ensure a favourable balance of payment.

Although both Chinese and Indian development assistance to Zimbabwe has been increasing in recent years, the former's RBLs to the country are greatly criticised for lacking transparency, clear terms and conditions and are only benefiting the elites at the expense of the majority of the citizens resulting in odious debt burden for the country. The head of programmes with one of the Western development partners in Zimbabwe had this to say:

At the turn of the new millennium Zimbabwe adopted a new financing model called RBLs where the country is accessing funding that is collateralised by future streams of funding from their natural resources. However, the lack of access to information on the terms and conditions of these loans amounting to about USD 6.8 billion and most of which is owed to China Exim Bank is possessing a serious risk to the economy in terms of debt distress, stifling private sector investments as well as negatively affecting the nation's credit rating and public confidence. (Head of programme from a Western development partner)

Results from both literature and KIIs highlighted that RBLs are an important feature of Zimbabwe's current development finance in recent years. While RBLs are generally perceived as important in developing capital-related projects that result in economic development, the general lack of transparency as well as the less demanding terms and conditions makes them prone to abuse by tyrannical governments as these loans usually do not benefit the majority of the citizens (Chivanga & Monyai, 2020). Therefore, the Zimbabwean government must ensure that the contractual arrangements of RBLs are done in a transparent and accountable manner and also executed with the oversight of parliament, civil society and international development institutions. There is again a need to ensure that the terms and conditions of accruing these RBLs do not compromise both environmental and public debt sustainability.

Documentary searches revealed that financial contributions to Zimbabwe from both bilateral and development partners are usually stated in the national budget statements. However, in recent years, the figures and terms and conditions of financial support from China to Zimbabwe remain loosely stated and kept classified information from the general public. For instance, the Finance Minister in his 2022 National Budget Statement noted that, 'Government also acknowledges the support received from China towards the construction of Parliament and Pharmaceutical Warehouse, drilling of 500 boreholes, COVID vaccines as well as rehabilitation of infrastructure destroyed by Cyclone Idai', without indicating the actual financial contributions (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2021d, p. 76). The lack of disclosure on

figures, terms and conditions of the official development assistance by China to Zimbabwe suggests that some of the deals might have been negotiated in bad faith, a key reason why they are not open to public scrutiny.

Chinese economic and development cooperation with Zimbabwe has been also widely criticised for unfair labour practices. KIIs with both the civil society organisations and the private sector found that there are gross human rights and labour regulations violations by the Chinese's migrants working on projects and enterprises such as infrastructure, mining, manufacturing and retail outlets, and this is particularly characterised by poor working conditions, abuse and meagre wages and salaries to the native employees. A KII with the programme manager for a civil society organisation working on natural resource governance in Zimbabwe said:

I think the Chinese are worse than the Indians and even the whites of European and American origin for many reasons. In all their operations in Zimbabwe, they are here to loot our precious natural resources and take them back to their country. What happened to Chiadzwa is a clear sign of the Chinese's grant plan to re-colonise Zimbabwe and Africa at large because of its rich endowments of natural resources. Although there are complains of low salaries being paid to Zimbabwean workers by the Indian business people, the Chinese's operations in the country are entrenched in gross abuse of human rights such as poor working conditions, working long hours, and even beating of the native workers. (Programme manager of a natural resource governance CSO)

Results from KIIs and documentary searches revealed that there is abuse of Zimbabweans working for the business enterprises linked to the two Asian economies. This study resonates with literature such as Gukurume and Nhodo (2020), who argue that most Chinese investments and business enterprises in Zimbabwe are characterised by gross violation of human rights and labour laws to the local workers including long working hours, meagre wages and salaries, disruption of the environment and forced evictions of community people without adequate compensation to pave way for their investments. It is crucial for Zimbabwe to closely monitor the operations of the Chinese investors to ensure that they abide by the country's constitutional, labour and environmental regulations and statutory provisions to avoid abuse of human rights and disruption of the environment. Clear investment terms and conditions have the potential to cushion both the local workers, ordinary citizens and environment from abuse by the investors.

Despite the fact China and India have been expanding their interests in Zimbabwe, KIIs revealed that the two Asian countries are different in terms of their approaches to development assistance. For instance, it was noted that the Chinese still maintain their traditional strategy of resource exploitation, elite wealth making and infrastructure development. On the other hand, India's development assistance to Zimbabwe has been generally perceived by most key informants as designed to promote mutual benefits for the two countries. An Indian diplomat in Zimbabwe has this to say:

India's development assistance in Zimbabwe and elsewhere around the world is influenced by the need to promote equal benefits for all the parties. In recent years, India's focus is on enhancing capacity development, skills, and knowledge as well as supporting the growth of small to medium enterprises. It is self-evident that India's development support to Zimbabwe is without criticism and influenced by the need to positively impact the lives of people in this country. (Indian diplomat in Zimbabwe)

One key informant highlighted that despite India's commitment to supporting Zimbabwe's growth trajectory, the challenge is around slow project delivery and implementation as compared to their Chinese counterparts. The Chinese were mainly credited for ensuring that development projects are delivered on time, although some key informants were quick to point out that some of their projects were not durable. The narrative of one of the key informants from the government has this to say:

We cannot compare the Chinese and the Indians in terms of ensuring timeliness in project delivery. Whenever you give the Chinese a project to do they make sure it is delivered on time. They work on targets and sometimes work 24 hours nonstop, until a project is delivered, and this is what we want as a country. Timeliness in project delivery is crucial in order to achieve our national developmental target of achieving the upper middle-income economy with 65 billion GDP by 2030. (Government professional)

The research found that both China and India have clearly laid strategies for engaging Zimbabwe and Africa in general. Ojajorotu and Kamidza (2018) argue that the Government of Zimbabwe has crafted the Look East Policy of 2003 to accelerate and strengthen the links with the Chinese and other Asian countries like India, Japan and Singapore. However, this policy is ambiguous and lacks clarity of purpose because it was a reactive stance to the unexpected termination of strong economic ties that the country was enjoying with its traditional partners in Europe and North America. Therefore, it is imperative for Zimbabwe to have a vibrant and concrete policy framework and strategy for engaging India and China to mutually benefit from the cooperation. A more coherent, holistic and clear country-specific strategy for engaging these Asian economic giants is imperative because of their increased interests and focus on Zimbabwe and the African continent.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Harnessing development assistance from China and India could open vast opportunities for infrastructure investments, improve economic growth and ultimately result in a socio-economic and political transformation in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, the interests of these two Asian countries in Zimbabwe need to be cautiously and strategically managed. Investment deals need to be closely monitored, transparent and open to public scrutiny. Furthermore, development cooperation between Zimbabwe and these two Asian giants poses several political, economic, environmental and legal challenges to be effectively managed. Development cooperation from China and India to Zimbabwe poses several problems that need to be successfully addressed, including corruption, exploitation of natural resources without benefiting the general public as well as constitutional, labour and environmental regulation breaches by their investors. More so, Zimbabwe's economic relations with China

and India have been associated with an increasing odious debt burden to the country arising from opaque deals with the country's political elites. Addressing these problems calls for measures to ensure monitoring, transparency and openness in a manner in which investment deals are managed. A comprehensive, country-specific strategy for engaging these two emerging economic powers from Asia is also imperative in order to ensure that every Zimbabwean equally benefits from the relationship.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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