GLOBALIZATIONS
2022, VOL. 19, NO. 8, 1195–1210
https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2035481

Inclusive globalization or old wine in a new bottle? China-led globalization in sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article questions whether China's economic initiatives lead to 'inclusive globalization' or tend to sustain the distributional inequalities of neoliberal globalization in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. It argues that many considerations, including China's so-called 'no strings attached' policy and lending behaviour, unfavourable trade relations, concentration of Chinese investments in a few sectors, and limited technology and knowledge transfer, cast doubt on the realization of inclusive globalization. Even though economic relations with China may foster economic growth and provide short-term relief to the poor, which is also conditioned by the recipient countries' degree of state capacity, it is questionable to what degree these relations lead to sustainable pro-poor development. No matter what the underlying political economy explanation is (China's motivations and approach to globalization, weak state capacities in sub-Saharan Africa, structural impediments to development), it is misleading to conclude that China-driven economic globalization is inclusive.

KEYWORDS

China-led globalization; neoliberal globalization; inclusive globalization; pro-poor development; inclusive development; sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

The rise of China has been widely researched from a variety of perspectives, as the country has become the main driver of economic globalization in the new millennium. Yet the jury is still out on the causes and consequences of China's growing influence in international affairs. In scholarly analyses influenced by researchers' world views and starting point of analysis, especially in policy circles, it has been common to adopt one of two extreme positions on the impact of China's activities on foreign soil: exploitative and threatening (usually pro-Western) or inclusive and beneficial (usually pro-China). However, as aptly noted in the context of Africa, 'most sophisticated analyses – particularly analyses that claim to take an "African view" – tend to reject the dichotomous understanding and instead fall somewhere in the middle' (Ovadia, 2013, p. 234). This article also aims to go beyond this dichotomy by turning a keen critical eye on the recent empirical evidence and putting one of the most contested questions on globalization into perspective: Is 'globalization with Chinese characteristics' significantly different from the West-led neoliberal globalization, especially in terms of distributional consequences? On the one hand, Chinese officials and some scholars claim that China-led globalization corrects the failures of West-led neoliberalism in many respects, the most crucial outcome being pro-poor development.[1] On the other hand, others are suspicious of this narrative because what China has been doing leads to exploitation

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of cheap labour in developing countries and extraction of natural resources, undermining pro-poor development.[2]

By critically engaging with the recent scholarship on China's economic activities in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and concentrating on distributional outcomes, this article argues that the current evidence does not support the proposition that China-led globalization is 'inclusive'. Even though economic relations with China may contribute to higher growth rates or provide short-term relief to the poor, such as access to cheaper consumer goods, it is questionable to what degree these result in sustainable pro-poor development. China's so-called 'no strings attached' policy and lending behaviour, unfavourable trade relations, the concentration of investments in a few sectors, and limited technology and knowledge transfer cast doubt on the realization of inclusive globalization in the manner that the advocates of China-led globalization would argue.

The article also supports scholars who argue that the recipient countries' capacities in implementing pro-poor development strategies condition to what degree these countries can benefit from economic relations with China.[3] That is to say, recipient countries should have the willingness and capacity to craft and implement pro-poor policies if the goal is to take a step in the direction of inclusive globalization. Thus, our critical analysis notes some of the significant challenges in achieving inclusive globalization in the twenty-first century and suggests a cautious approach to China-driven globalization if the goal is to achieve sustainable development in SSA and beyond.

The article proceeds as follows. The next two sections elaborate on neoliberal and inclusive globalization to set the scene for the main analysis. The following section concentrates on China-led globalization by focusing on distributional outcomes in SSA. This is followed by an analysis of the importance of recipient countries' domestic capacities in pursuing inclusive development. The final section concludes by briefly discussing further research avenues and how different perspectives in the international political economy make sense of the distributional outcomes of China-led globalization.

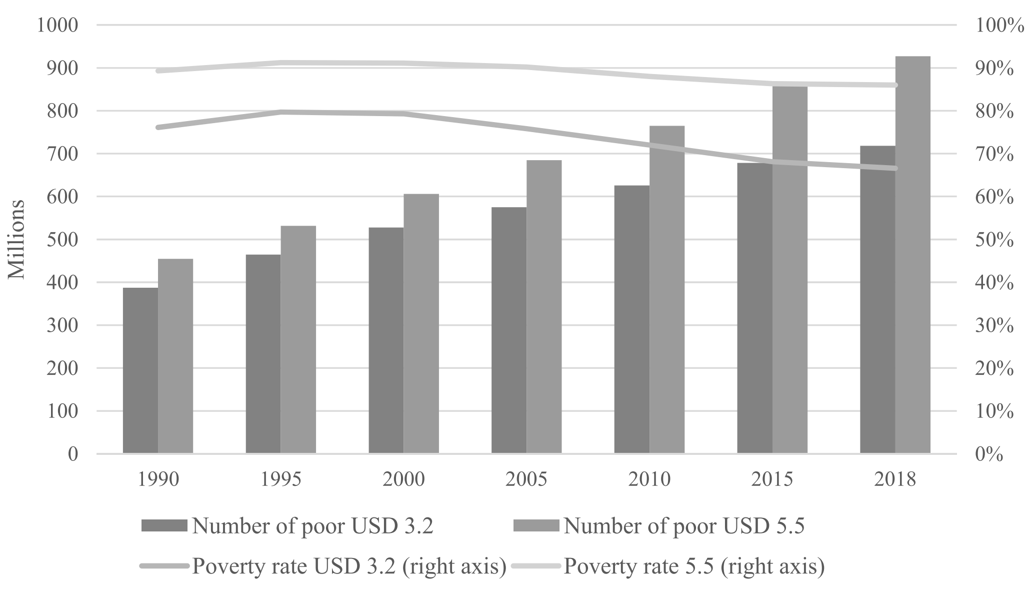
Neoliberal globalization in perspective

Neoliberal practices, drawing on neoclassical economic theory, began to be implemented worldwide in the 1980s. Neoliberalism was essentially a reaction to the crisis of Keynesian economics and welfare state models. Proponents of neoliberalism claimed the state should not have played an active role in the economy in the post-war years, as state intervention in the economy is the root cause of inefficiencies, inferior macroeconomic performance, and crises. The neoliberal agenda promoted the primacy of the market *via* various measures. The most significant of these were the privatization of state-owned enterprises and assets, the liberalization of trade, international investment, markets for goods, services, and money, the reduction of government intervention, the weakening of labour unions, and the liberalization of labour markets. The main objective was to minimize the state's role in the economy, as 'imperfect markets are always superior to imperfect states' (Öniş & Şenses, 2005, p. 264).[4]

There are different views on the consequences of neoliberal globalization. The size of the global pie certainly increased with neoliberalism: the world gross domestic product (GDP) (in 2010 USD prices) grew from 27.8 trillion in 1980 to 84.8 trillion in 2019 (World Bank Data, 2021). The world population benefited from neoliberal globalization as well: the percentage of people living on less than USD 1.9 a day (in purchasing power parity 2011 prices) dropped from 42.1% in 1981 to 10% in 2015 (World Bank Data, 2021). Overall gains from trade liberalization were positive for many countries, causing policy-makers to favour neoliberal practices (Nahm, 2018). Finally, thanks to capital account liberalization, many developing countries could get much-needed investments from abroad to foster economic development (Martin et al., 2018, p. 5).

Yet authors also argue that neoliberal practices recurrently provoked economic crises in different parts of the world with devastating consequences, such as the Latin America debt crisis in 1982, the Russian and Asian crises in 1997–1998, the Argentinean crisis in 2001–2002, and the 2008 global economic crisis (Cerny, 2020). Frequent crises in the post-1980s, almost exclusively in developing countries, are considered by some to be a characteristic of neoliberal globalization (Öniş & Şenses, 2005, p. 268). As for poverty reduction, critics point out that taking the USD 1.9 per day poverty line, as proponents of neoliberalism frequently do, leads to misleading conclusions, since drawing the line slightly higher reveals the chronic and sometimes increasing (depending on the position of the line) levels of global poverty in the last 40 years (Selwyn, 2017). In fact, SSA is a striking example in this regard (Kaplinsky, 2013). Figure 1 demonstrates the poverty rate and the number of poor in SSA in the 1990–2018 period for the USD 3.2 and 5.5 poverty lines. Despite some positive developments, half of the economies in SSA had poverty rates higher than 35% in 2017, even when the USD 1.9 per day line is taken (World Bank, 2020, p. 46). In brief, poverty reduction could not keep up with the rising population in SSA, as the absolute number of people living below the USD 1.9 per day poverty line constantly rose from 284 million in 1990 to 433 million in 2018 (Schoch & Lakner, 2020).

The adverse socio-economic consequences of neoliberal policies, implemented under the auspices of West-based international financial institutions, were observed in many SSA countries in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in Somalia, rapid economic liberalization was associated with



Source: PovcalNet, 2021, World Bank, http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/; (World Bank, 2020).

Figure 1. Number of poor and poverty rates in sub-Saharan Africa. Source: PovcalNet (2021), World Bank, http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/ (World Bank, 2020).

the skyrocketing prices of basic goods, increased unemployment, and rising social inequalities (Emeagwali, 2011; Ihonvbere, 2006). In Nigeria, conditionalities imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) led to the abandonment of subsidies on health and education, which, in turn, led to a significant deterioration in the country's situation in these spheres (Okome, 1998). In South Africa, the implementation of stringent, fiscal, monetarist policies and a cut back on social programmes strongly contradicted the country's national development principles (Emeagwali, 2011). Generally, these policies hit the poorest parts of the population the most. More than 20 years of experimentation with neoliberalism resulted in two billion people in danger of becoming marginal to the world economy (Collier & Dollar, 2001). Therefore, the progress in extreme poverty reduction has been too patchy and insufficient to claim universally positive outcomes *at best*.[5]

One of the most detrimental consequences of neoliberalism was arguably the sharp increase in economic inequality both within and among countries.[6] In the US and the UK, two of the most ardent followers of neoliberalism, the share that the top 1% of the population got from national income increased significantly. A similar tendency was observed in China – the Chinese Communist Party did not prevent increasing inequalities while aggressively pursuing its export-led development strategy; this resulted in high economic growth with relatively low wage growth among manufacturing workers – at least lower in comparison to East Asian developmental states (Hung, 2008, p. 162). Cross-country inequality also increased: 'the ratio of the per capita GDP of the richest country in the world to that of the poorest country stood at 272:1 (in 1982). By 2015, it had increased to 336:1' (Liu et al., 2018, p. 1205). Milanovic (2016) finds that, for instance, being born in the US rather than the Democratic Republic of the Congo multiplies an individual's income by 93 times. Inequality has especially been salient in SSA – in 2016, among the 19 most unequal countries in the world (measured by Gini coefficient), 10 were in SSA (Odusola et al., 2017). Thus, plenty of evidence strongly suggests sharp increases in economic inequality both within and among countries were observed in the neoliberal period.

New era – new type of globalization?

As it became apparent that the 1980s' neoliberal restructuring exacerbated distributional inequalities on a global scale, and major unrest in societies led to alter-globalization movements challenging the *modus operandi* of the international economic system, scholars and practitioners looked for ways to make globalization inclusive.[7] On that note, 'inclusive growth' and 'inclusive development' have frequently been employed as key concepts by influential international organizations such as the World Bank (World Bank, 2008). Pro-poor development is another concept that emerged in those years. The main difference between pro-poor development and inclusive growth is that while the former is concerned with the welfare of the poor, the latter concentrates on the benefits for the majority of the labour force, including the poor (Saad-Filho, 2010). Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are examples of a vision of inclusive development and globalization (Sachs, 2015).[8]

Be that as it may, despite the growing emphasis on inclusive development, (i) weakened faith in the neoliberal system, especially after the 2008 global economic crisis, (ii) transition to a multipolar world order with the weakening of US hegemony, (iii) the US' unwillingness to sustain the liberal international world order and withdrawal from the leadership of economic globalization, and (iv) the relative success of countries that preferred mixed economic models over neoliberal policies have all shaken belief in the actualization of inclusive development under the auspices of West-based organizations.

The form and nature of a China-driven pro-poor economic globalization have excited many analysts and policy-makers under these political economy circumstances. To start with, Chinese officials portray the main pillars of their version of globalization *vis-à-vis* neoliberal globalization by emphasizing its participatory, just, win-win, and inclusive character through the implementation of grand strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's President Xi Jinping, for instance, described BRI as 'an open and inclusive process (that is) not about creating exclusive circles or a China club (but) a new model of win-win cooperation' (Benard, 2020, p. 61; Gao, 2018, p. 322). In contrast with initiatives undertaken in the neoliberal period, the BRI is a 'harmonious and inclusive (project advocating) tolerance among civilizations, respect(ing) the paths and modes of development chosen by different countries, and support(ing) dialogues among different civilizations' (NDRC, 2015, p. 3). Chinese high-officials have consistently underlined how their variety of globalization is a candidate to fix socio-economic inequalities exacerbated by West-led neoliberal globalization.

Having seen China's initiatives as an effort to reform neoliberal globalization as such, some scholars have defined 'inclusive globalization' as a concept in its own right (Liu et al., 2018; Liu & Dunford, 2016). In the process of inclusive globalization, the following should occur: (i) the state is expected to play an effective regulatory role in order to ensure fairer and more equal distribution of benefits among citizens; (ii) inclusive infrastructure development is prioritized with a focus on the least developed areas; (iii) there is no 'one-size-fits-all' principle; (iv) there is voluntary cooperation among countries in generating and sharing mutual benefits; (v) cultural pluralism is promoted. Furthermore, one of the ostensible differences between inclusive and neoliberal globalization is 'that inclusive globalization is designed first and foremost to improve people's livelihoods rather than only serve the interests of capital' (Liu et al., 2018, p. 1208). The advocates of China-led globalization foster these arguments by emphasizing that China is not able to use the former 'imperialist path' of global North–South relations, and the country can only nurture new relations by respecting and using the existing rules of international economic governance and fostering international cooperation (Liu et al., 2018, p. 1208). In this context, China-led inclusive globalization is portrayed as an effort to address the built-in feature of exploitation in West-led neoliberalism, resulting in sustainable and pro-poor development processes throughout the globe. It is framed as 'a more inclusive and equitable model than the heretofore West-led one' (Passi, 2019, p. 172).

Inclusive globalization or old wine in a new bottle? China in SSA

Is China-driven economic globalization really inclusive, or at least going in that direction? Does it genuinely differ from West-led neoliberalism in terms of distributional outcomes? Or is it simply old wine in a new bottle? Our critical review of the recent scholarship on Chinese economic activity in SSA suggests it is a bit too early to characterize China-led economic globalization as inclusive. As we mentioned previously, China's 'no strings attached' policy, loans, and infrastructure investments, the structure of trade relations, the concentration of investments in a few sectors, and limited technology and knowledge transfer cause us to question the inclusivity of China-driven globalization. We elaborate on each of these issues in turn, in the context of SSA.

China's lending policies in SSA

China provides loans without specific political criteria for countries in SSA, in what is frequently called its 'no strings attached' policy. This flexibility is one of the reasons why many governments in the region seem to prefer Beijing over the West (Joshua, 2019, p. 101). Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Exim Bank and China Development Bank have been the largest lenders worldwide: from 2009 to 2017, these two policy banks provided more finance to developing countries than all Western-backed development finance institutions combined (Chin & Gallagher, 2019, p. 246). There has been a tremendous increase in the number of Chinese loans flowing into SSA in the last 20 years, making the 'no strings attached' policy particularly important. China provided 1141 loans to Africa between 2000 and 2019, amounting to USD 153 billion. Almost 90% of these loans were allocated to SSA countries (excluding regional projects). Around two-thirds were directed to transport, power, mining, and communication sectors (China–Africa Research Initiative, 2021a). This spectacular increase in Chinese loans, especially after 2011, is sometimes interpreted as a catalyst of inclusive development. It is claimed to increase the likelihood of crafting context-dependent pro-poor policies thanks to the 'no strings attached' policy. In contrast to finance from the West-based international financial institutions, the lack of conditionalities from Chinese lenders, the argument goes, allows SSA governments to prioritize infrastructure projects in the least developed regions and gives states an opportunity to redistribute the benefits among the citizens. If this is the case, it would substantiate the 'inclusive globalization' framework (Liu et al., 2018).

However, there are at least two problems with this argumentation. First, the 'no strings attached' policy may also contribute to the institutionalization of bad governance practices in SSA, undermining the attainment of sustainable pro-poor development. Many observers note that the unconditional approach (to good governance) overlooks corruption in Chinese-funded projects, and this tendency has not been observed on the same scale for finance from the World Bank (Isaksson & Kotsadam, 2018). Because China's finance is usually provided based on requests from recipient-country governments (Dreher et al., 2019), the absence of conditionality (on good governance) allows politicians to distribute the funds to their friends at home, thus nurturing patronage networks (Isaksson, 2020, p. 835).

Others are less sceptical. After elaborating on major challenges such as Chinese officials' underestimation of the scale and depth of corruption in Africa and China's absence of an effective strategy to overcome corruption-related problems in the continent, Lagerkvist (2009, pp. 129–130) concludes:

> If the Chinese learn how to deal with African realities better than the European colonial powers […] the US and the Soviets […] did […] there may be some potential for China contributing to global equity through becoming a solid partner in taking the industrial revolution to African nations.

This may be so in the future, but plenty of evidence currently contradicts the suggestion that the 'no strings attached policy' enables states in SSA to pursue context-dependent inclusive development policies.

Second, Beijing's non-interference policy does not necessarily mean the Chinese financial inflow to SSA lacks conditions. In contrast to China's politically-oriented official development assistance (e.g. One-China policy, United Nations General Assembly voting, agreement with Beijing on Hong Kong's status), China's policy banks and enterprises enforce an economic set of conditions (Dreher et al., 2018). For instance, the majority of the loans SSA governments have acquired from China had to be spent on Chinese-produced equipment (Taylor, 2006). More importantly, financial support for infrastructure projects was provided on the condition that they were implemented by Chinese firms (Downs, 2007, p. 56). These infrastructure projects also had to use Chinese materials and technologies. Moreover, Chinese Exim Bank transferred funds directly to the Chinese state-owned enterprises that were the contractors of projects in SSA, so funds never actually left China (Martuscelli, 2020, p. 294). Hence, it is questionable to what degree the policy space claimed to accompany the 'no strings attached' policy actually emerged.

China's infrastructure investments are commonly portrayed as a way to achieve mutual benefit and common development with developing countries.[9] However, in-depth case studies on China-financed infrastructure projects in SSA suggest these projects may exacerbate, rather than remedy, inequalities. Large-scale population dislocations with poor resettlement alternatives, weak participation and deliberation mechanisms in policy-making and implementation, adverse effects on productive activities (farming, fishery, etc.), and land seizures are often mentioned as major problems (Shen, 2020, p. 9). To illustrate, Tang and Shen (2020, p. 1) note that with the completion of the China-financed Bui Dam project in Ghana, 'urban households witness a much higher increase in their ownership of various electric appliances, suggesting that the Bui Dam's improvement of electrification may be predominant in the urban and rich households'. Drawing on interview evidence and focus group discussions, Yankson et al. (2018, p. O486) comment, 'The Bui dam project has been more costly than beneficial to the resettled communities'. Likewise, Bosshard (2009, pp. 45–46) underlines the uneven benefits the projects may yield by referring to China-financed Merowe Dam in Sudan: '(The project) would more than double the country's electricity generation, benefiting industry, urban consumers, and agriculture (but it …) would eventually displace more than 50,000 people from the Nile Valley […] resulting in worsening living conditions'. Examples of this type abound, making the inclusiveness of the projects dubious.[10]

China-SSA trade relations

It is equally doubtful whether the structure of trade between China and SSA is conducive to inclusive globalization. Trade may indeed contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction, as proponents of China-led inclusive globalization argue, with its positive effects on production and factor markets, government revenues and expenditures, and prices of consumer goods, etc. However, it may also have a negative impact by excluding the poor from economic activity, thus having a harmful impact on industrialization. The outcome depends on the types of goods involved in international trade and the conditions of their production (Jenkins & Edwards, 2005). In the context of China-SSA, trade relations do not indisputably encourage inclusive development. To start with, the total volume of China-SSA trade skyrocketed in the last two decades, from around USD 8.2 billion in 2002 to nearly USD 154 billion in 2019 – in both directions (UN Comtrade, 2021). But since 2000, there has not been a significant change in trade composition. The share of fuels and minerals constituted around 67% of SSA countries' exports to China in 2000, compared to around 66% in 2019 (WITS Data, 2021).

In contrast, SSA imports from China have been highly diversified and mainly consist of consumer goods. On the plus side, imports from China have lowered the prices of consumer goods, benefiting the poorest segments of the population the most (Kaplinsky, 2013, p. 1306). This can be considered as a step in the right direction. On the minus side, African non-resource sectors cannot compete with their Chinese counterparts, leading to unemployment in labour-intensive sectors. In fact, African producers cannot compete with Chinese companies even in the local markets (Adisu et al., 2010, p. 5). The same holds for China's internal and many third markets (Jenkins & Edwards, 2005, p. 22). From 2004 to 2014, during the so-called 'commodities boom' in the global economy, the abundance of natural resources in SSA encouraged significant economic growth for the first time since the 1970s (Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018, p. 876). However, once commodity prices fell, the slowdown of economic growth revealed the vulnerability of SSA economies. Therefore, diversification of SSA production is vital to prevent dependence on raw material exports (Joshua, 2019, p. 107). As Kaplinsky (2013, p. 1313) noted on the overall effect of China-SSA trade relations on the African population: '(They) may simultaneously advantage them as consumers and disadvantage them as producers'.

Advantaging producers is also a must for China-SSA economic relations to nurture sustainable pro-poor development, beyond providing short-term relief to the poor. Otherwise, trade relations would replicate 'the trade and investment patterns of traditional core countries in the West, as (China) focuses on importing raw materials in exchange for manufactured goods, thus, contributing to the creation of dependent economies (in Africa)' (Lisimba & Parashar, 2021, p. 1118). Finally, if Beijing aims to become the leader of international liberal trade based on inclusive development, it needs to assure more generous access to the Chinese market for African goods (Alden, 2019, p. 95). The agricultural sector is a case in point. China and the US are currently the biggest subsidizers of domestic agricultural production, which affects developing countries the most. For instance, cotton production is vital for exports and employment in several African countries (e.g. Mali, Chad, Benin, Burkina Faso), but through massive state subsidies, protectionist trade policies, significant market power, and large cotton stocks, China successfully manipulates global cotton prices disadvantaging SSA producers (Hopewell, 2020, p. 89). This is one of the reasons why the US does not abandon its own cotton subsidies.

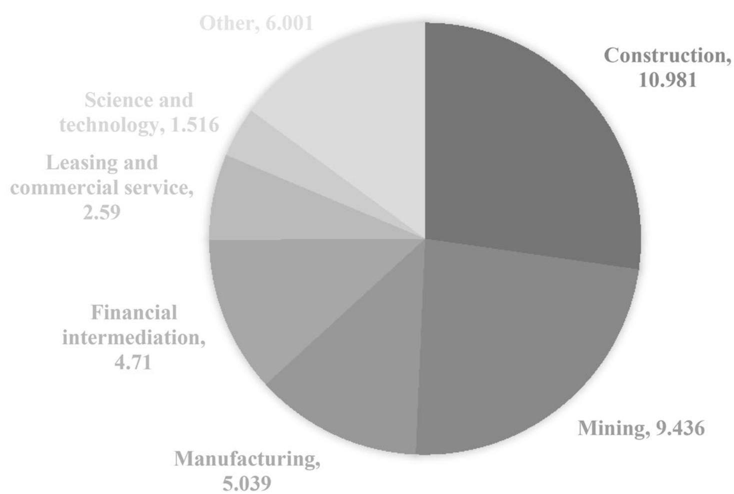
Chinese investments in SSA

Our third concern is the concentration of Chinese investments in a few countries and sectors in SSA. Although foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows may stimulate economic activity in SSA, the benefits of economic growth do not necessarily percolate down to the lower echelons of societies (Joshua, 2019, p. 105). Indeed, the general impact of FDI on the poverty rate is not clear, and economic growth and higher employment rates are context-dependent (Jenkins & Edwards, 2005, p. 11). To distribute the benefits inclusively, investments should be allocated to various sectors stimulating local production and employment. On the one hand, the total Chinese FDI stock in Africa accounted for more than USD 44 billion in 2019. From 2003 to 2019, the total Chinese FDI flow to African countries accounted for USD 41.75 billion (China–Africa Research Initiative, 2021b). This can be interpreted as an encouraging development stimulating inclusive globalization. On the other hand, despite growing numbers and widening geographical coverage, 'investment is heavily concentrated in oil- and mineral-rich states' (Carmody & Hampwaye, 2010, p. 85). Chinese investments centre on a few countries with large natural resource reserves (except for Ethiopia). More specifically, 70% of Chinese finance in Africa has been concentrated in Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Sudan (Martuscelli, 2020, p. 294). Meanwhile, whereas more than half of the total Chinese investments in Africa are allocated to mining and construction sectors, only around 4% is allocated to science, research, and technology (Brautigam et al., 2018, p. 32).

It is no surprise, then, that many studies report a positive but limited transformative effect of Chinese FDI on the industrialization of SSA countries (Megbowon et al., 2019). Construction and mining sectors dominate the structure of Chinese investments in SSA. Even though private investments from China exceed those from state-owned companies (Shen, 2014), and private-led investments tend to allocate money to sectors other than natural resource-related ones, there is still a lack of sectoral diversification of Chinese investments in Africa. Figure 2 shows the average annual amount of Chinese FDI stock in Africa by sectors.

Technology and knowledge transfer

Effective technology and knowledge transfer are crucial catalysts of sustainable development. In that vein, the presence of foreign companies in SSA is expected to stimulate an environment whereby local firms learn from their foreign counterparts, and spillover effects occur. Yet Brautigam et al. (2018, p. 48) highlight that although in some SSA countries, Chinese investments lead to job creation, the diffusion of skills and technologies is limited. Similarly, Lisimba and Parashar (2021, p. 1117) assert that jobs created in the Rwandese construction sector through China-led projects are short-term, unstable, and low paying; moreover, they 'rarely come with adequate job security or training that can be used to advantage […] in applying for more stable and permanent jobs in other firms'. Although Nigerien officials generally praise China-led projects, they complain about the lack of technology transfer (Cabestan, 2019, p. 606). Jenkins (2019, pp. 163–165) comes to the same conclusion by noting: (i) Chinese companies have few connections with local businesses in SSA; (ii) Chinese FDI does not lead to substantial vertical spillovers (backward linkages to local suppliers); (iii) exports to China do not nurture forward linkages; and (iv) there is limited technology transfer through the training of locals employed by Chinese companies. Thus, although limited technology and knowledge transfer may also stem from unfavourable local conditions, the Chinese presence in SSA does



Source: China-Africa Research Initiative, 2021b, Data: Chinese Investment in Africa,

http://www.sais-cari.org/chinese-investment-in-africa

Figure 2. Average amount of annual Chinese FDI stock in Africa in 2013–2019 by sectors (in billion USD). Source: China-Africa Research Initiative (2021b), Data: Chinese Investment in Africa, http://www.sais-cari.org/chinese-investment-in-africa.

Note: For the leasing and commercial service sector, the average is counted for the 2017–2019 period only. For the science and technology sector, it is the 2013–2016 period.

not foster entrepreneurship or strengthen local innovation systems in the way suggested by the advocates of China-led inclusive globalization.

Domestic institutions and inclusive globalization: looking beyond China

Analyses of Chinese economic activities abroad commonly focus on what China does or intends to do. However, recipient states' domestic institutions and conditions are equally crucial if the goal is to uncover the political economy causes and consequences of Chinese undertakings. It is important to recognize, for instance, how Nepalese elites put Chinese capital and expertise into productive use by exerting their agency (Murton et al., 2016) or how social contestation within BRI recipient states may generate disputed outcomes. An example of the latter was Myanmar's unilateral suspension of the construction of Myitsone Dam in 2011, then China's largest hydropower project abroad (Kiik, 2016).

The same holds for China–Africa affairs. As Clapham (2018, p. 1157) notes, 'African states actually enjoy far greater freedom of action in articulating and implementing their own development policies than much of the literature that continues to emphasize African "dependency" has been willing to concede'. Ovadia (2013) and Jenkins (2019, p. 171) observe the importance of domestic conditions in Angola; Bhamidipati and Hansen (2021, p. 215) make the same argument for Kenya, and Kaplinsky (2013, p. 1295) argues the China-induced commodities price boom can be utilized to promote more equal patterns of growth throughout Africa. Thus, focusing on China's motivations and undertakings alone is insufficient if the discussion is on how to craft inclusive development in SSA.

On that note, many studies argue weak state capacities in SSA undermine development potential. The absence of embedded autonomy, the prevalence of clientelist networks, weak bureaucracy, and ineffective bureaucratic coordination are noted as major issues. Nigeria is an oft-cited example. It has the potential to become a rising star but fails to do so mainly because of weak state capacity (Ezema & Ogujiuba, 2012). Ethiopia, frequently praised for having high state capacity, seems to be an exception. Here, Chinese finance is directed to social sectors, mainly health and education, and seems to have an overall positive effect on development (Morgan & Zheng, 2019). State capacity is also considered important for the effective implementation of the BRI (Ehizuelen & Abdi, 2018, p. 302) and knowledge transfer (Osabutey & Jackson, 2019, p. 9). Writing on the linkage between state capacity, clientelism, and patronage, Dreher et al. (2019) suggest that although Chinese-funded projects improve local economic development outcomes, political leaders favour their birth regions, and these are already wealthier than other regions. After noting that clientelism and patronage politics frequently have an ethnic dimension, Isaksson (2020) builds on Dreher et al. (2019) to come to a similar conclusion. In short, a growing body of literature signals that achieving inclusive globalization necessitates high state capacities, in the sense that state apparatuses should be able to pursue pro-poor policies by exploiting opportunities offered by China's economic activities. There is a caveat, however, and we elaborate on it in the concluding section.

Concluding remarks

This article has questioned whether China-led economic globalization is indeed inclusive and significantly different from West-led neoliberal globalization in terms of distributional outcomes. Our critical review in the context of China-SSA relations suggests it is premature to characterize China-driven globalization as inclusive. Specifically, China's lending policies, trade structure, the concentration of Chinese investments in a few sectors, and ineffective knowledge and technology transfer all cause us to question assumptions of inclusive globalization. Even though relations with China may promote economic growth and provide short-term relief to the poor, it is too early to claim that a sustainable pro-poor development path is carved out by China in SSA. Thus, our analysis supports scholars who are sceptical about the inclusive character of China-led globalization and see a continuation of West-led neoliberal globalization in terms of distributional outcomes.

Another crucial point is that any kind of globalization's degree of inclusiveness is conditioned by the strength of state capacities in the Global South, a topic needing investigation in its own right. It is essential to question recipient states' internal and external capacities to execute smart policies, i.e. their autonomy, embeddedness, professional bureaucracy, bureaucratic coordination, the institutionalization of relations with societal actors, etc. Hence, our elaboration supports scholars whose analyses signal that a thorough discussion of the inclusivity of China-driven globalization calls for a separate analysis of recipient states' domestic institutions, state structure, and state-society relations. While the aforementioned China-related concerns undermine inclusive development in SSA, the question of the extent to which SSA countries can benefit from economic relations with China is conditioned by the degree of their state capacity.

Another important issue must be considered and further researched. It is relatively more challenging to establish good institutions in the twenty-first century than in the previous one. A shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge economy, pressures for democratization, the need to forge broad coalitions among diverse actors with competing interests, ecological limits, and epistemological shifts in the meaning of development mean states must craft novel capacities in today's world (Doner & Schneider, 2016; Williams, 2014). Hence, pursuing developmentalism is more difficult in the new millennium, and it is questionable to what degree states in SSA can approximate the ideal-typical state structure.

Another issue needing further investigation is the changes in Chinese economic behaviour in SSA countries. For instance, Chinese projects in Africa were associated with the ideas of Third-World solidarity in the 1950s and the 1960s. Commercial interests became the priority with market-oriented reforms, and as China's large state-owned companies searched for overseas resources and markets from the mid-1990s onwards, Beijing initiated the 'Going Out' Policy in 1999. Eventually, not only large state-owned firms were involved in SSA; private investors and Chinese policy banks became involved as well. The launch of BRI is often seen as a continuation of the 'Going Out' Policy (Zhang, 2017). This process has paralleled the Chinese party-state's fragmentation, decentralization, and internationalization from 1978 onwards (Jones & Zeng, 2019). Finally, for some researchers, China developed its distinctive aid model mixing aid with commercial forms of economic engagement in the mid-1990s (Morgan & Zheng, 2019). Apart from the growing financial involvement, there has not been a change in Chinese behaviour in the 2000s in favour of encouraging inclusive globalization. The main issues of the 'no strings attached' policy, trade structure, the concentration of investments in a few sectors, limited knowledge and technology transfer seem to persist.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been affecting China-SSA economic relations directly and indirectly with potential long-term consequences. For instance, some argue that the pandemic will negatively impact global economic trends, strengthen countries' protectionist positions, dry up foreign aid inflows to Africa – while simultaneously making the continent a field for China-West competition from which African countries may benefit (Mimiko, 2022). However, some major powers' concerns about the motivations and style of Chinese overseas financing, primarily the US and India, may undermine the realization of BRI infrastructure projects

(Liow et al., 2021). It seems that the degree of Beijing's commitment to rule-based multilateralism will be an important factor influencing China-SSA economic relations. Again, this is an issue needing further investigation.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that the nature and drivers of China-led globalization can be interpreted in different ways, leading to different conclusions and policy prescriptions. As a rule of thumb, for advocates of neoliberalism, China's economic model and approach to economic globalization is the main issue to be problematized, i.e. authoritarian state capitalism and the 'no strings attached' policy. Here, key discussion points are China's pragmatism, flawed policies, and tolerance of and indifference to bad governance practices. For scholars who advocate strong and active states, the essential issue is the degree of state capacity: Chinese economic engagement offers both opportunities and challenges, and it is up to the recipient state to exploit these opportunities to foster pro-poor development. For scholars who adopt a structuralist perspective or offer a class-based analysis, the main issue is neither China's policies nor recipient states' capacities: rather, it is the inherent contradictions and the exploitative nature of capitalism. The structure of global economic governance, which builds on the exploitative and conflictual nature of capitalism, does not leave any room or agency for SSA states to achieve sustainable development. The question of which perspective offers a better account of China-driven economic globalization, or to what degree structural conditions limit or higher state capacities enable development prospects is beyond the scope of our inquiry. At the end of the day, taken together and no matter what the reason is, recent empirical evidence strongly suggests it is misleading to characterize China-led globalization as inclusive.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Liu et al. (2018) and Liu and Dunford (2016).
2. See, for instance, van der Merwe (2019).
3. Ziso (2018) and Jepson (2020) offer perspectives on state capacity.
4. There is no single form of neoliberalism, i.e. the Chicago school, German ordoliberalism, Austrian school, Washington *vs.* post-Washington consensus, etc. Notwithstanding the differences, neoliberalism 'has been purposively promoted and championed by individual states, transnational corporations and key international organizations […] all driven by a belief in the benefits of free markets and free trade' (Martin et al., 2018, p. 4).
5. China is the exception, with both decline in the poverty rate and absolute numbers of the poor. Nevertheless, even though a massive reduction of poverty in China is associated with neoliberal globalization (Bishop & Payne, 2021, p. 5), some of China's development policies implemented since 1978 are at odds with the fundamental principles of neoliberalism, sharing similarities with the East Asian developmental state model (Beeson, 2009).
6. For a thorough political economy critique of neoliberalism, see, for instance, Bruff and Tansel (2019).
7. For resistance by civil society organizations and citizens to neoliberal development practices, for instance, see Carroll and Jarvis (2015).
8. For a critique of MDGs, see Weber (2015).
9. See, for instance, Liu et al. (2020).
10. Although it does not change the overall conclusion, we should highlight that local actors also play a role in these adverse consequences (Shen, 2020, p. 9).

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the three anonymous referees of *Globalizations* for their valuable and constructive comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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