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China's Presence and Regional Development in Cameroon

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Abstract

Cameroon, with its immense natural potential, its surface area of 475,442 km2 and its rapidly growing population (3%), has developed economic partnerships with several countries. This article analyzes China's presence and regional development in Cameroon. In our methodology, we took both a qualitative and quantitative approach to the Chinese presence in Cameroon and its impact on regional development. The survey was carried out among 98 large traders, 232 small traders and 335 consumers in the different regions (Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam, Bertoua), for a total of 665 respondents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key players in Sino-Cameroonian cooperation: Political decision-makers, representatives of international organizations, managers of Chinese companies operating in Cameroon, representatives of NGOs and inhabitants of the selected regions. Our findings show that Chinese investment in Cameroon has reached some 2.5 billion dollars in recent years. China has invested heavily in the construction of roads, bridges, ports and airports. The Nachtigal hydroelectric power station, financed by China, is one of the largest projects underway. Chinese companies are involved in cobalt and iron ore mining. Huawei and in telecommunications and digital infrastructure in Cameroon. The ongoing China-backed Cameroon-Congo railroad project is a significant example of Chinese investment in the transport sector. In addition to direct investment, China has granted low-interest loans to Cameroon to finance infrastructure projects. China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) is one of China's largest oil companies and is very active in Cameroon. In 2007, CNOOC obtained exploration and exploitation rights for several offshore blocks in the Gulf of Guinea, particularly in the oil and gas-rich Kribi archipelago region. CNOOC is responsible for operating several blocks, including the Rio del Rey offshore block. The business practices of Chinese companies, often perceived as dominant, have put pressure on local businesses, particularly in the retail and building materials sectors. Concerns about the illegal exploitation of natural resources, such as deforestation, and working conditions in some Chinese companies have also arisen. Balanced and responsible management of Chinese investments could enable the country to take full advantage of these partnerships while minimizing negative impacts. Over 60.47% of the population is not satisfied with the quality of asphalt roads built by Chinese companies in Cameroon. Over 70% of the population is calling for a genuine bilateral operating agreement, with direct on-site processing in Cameroon. According to some estimates, almost 60% of the timber extracted in Cameroon is exported to China. The unsustainable exploitation of these natural resources has a direct impact on the living conditions and health of local populations. It also leads to the destruction of ecosystems and disrupts their overall functioning.

Keywords: China, Regional Development, Economy, Investment

Introduction

The rise of China on the international scene, and particularly in Africa, has profound implications for countries like Cameroon (Khan-Mohammad *et al*., 2020; Péclard, D., *et al*., 2020) [6, 13]. This dynamic brings new development opportunities, but also challenges, particularly with regard to investment sustainability, governance issues and geopolitical tensions (Moumbagna, Y. L., 2023 Augé. B., 2024) [8, 1]. In the global context, Cameroon represents a key player for China in Central Africa (Delcourt, L., 2024). Cooperation between China and Cameroon has intensified over the years, particularly since the 2000s, with increasing Chinese investment in key sectors for the Cameroonian economy (Joel Nguiffo, S., 2024) [5]. How does China's presence in Cameroon influence the country's regional development? This central question raises several issues. On the one hand, Sino-Cameroonian cooperation has enabled spectacular infrastructure development, contributing to the country's modernization and greater regional integration. Major projects such as roads, bridges, power plants and housing have been built thanks to Chinese investment, facilitating the movement of goods and people and boosting the competitiveness of certain regions (Pairault, T., *et al*., 2023) [12]. However, the question arises as to the extent to which these investments benefit all regions of Cameroon equally, and whether certain territories are being neglected in favor of major cities or strategic zones. On the other hand, regional development can also be influenced by more complex factors, such as the social and economic implications of Chinese projects. The use of Chinese labor, the working conditions of Cameroonians in these projects and the environmental issues linked to certain investments raise concerns about the sustainability of the development model adopted. What are the benefits and challenges of this cooperation for Cameroon's various regions? We have analyzed the political, economic and social stakes involved in Sino-Cameroonese cooperation.

We also examined the challenges associated with this cooperation, including the issue of dependence on China, regional imbalances, debt risks and social concerns such as working conditions and the environmental responsibility of Chinese companies. Our hypotheses focused on the impact of China's presence in Cameroon on regional development, as follows: China-Cameroon cooperation has positive effects on regional development, but unevenly, hypothesis 1. The Chinese presence generates economic benefits (growth, employment, infrastructure), but also risks for the sovereignty and sustainability of regional development, hypothesis 2. The social effects of China's presence vary from region to region, with benefits in some sectors and social tensions in others, hypothesis 3. Sino-Cameroonian cooperation could strengthen regional integration, but also accentuate disparities between regions (hypothesis 4). Cameroonian institutions and local actors play a key role in managing the effects of China-Cameroon cooperation, but their capacity to manage these issues remains limited (hypothesis 5). These hypotheses indicate that the management of China-Cameroon cooperation depends largely on local institutions and governance capacities. If these institutions are effective, they can maximize the benefits of this cooperation, but weak governance or inappropriate management can lead to negative effects, such as corruption, mismanagement of resources or project failure.

Research methodology

In our methodology, we adopted both a qualitative and quantitative approach for a comprehensive analysis of issues relating to China's presence in Cameroon and its impact on regional development. Our approach aimed to explore perceptions, experiences and social dynamics related to Sino-Cameroonian cooperation through non-quantified data. We analyzed a wide range of documents, such as official reports, government studies, publications by international organizations (World Bank, IMF, etc.), press articles, academic studies and corporate documents. These sources enabled us to identify trends, information on projects financed by China, as well as diplomatic and commercial relations between China and Cameroon.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with various key players in Chinese-Cameroonian cooperation: Civil servants, representatives of international organizations, managers of Chinese companies operating in Cameroon, representatives of NGOs, and local residents. To gather quantitative data on the impact of cooperation between China and Cameroon, we measured the scale of investment, the economic and social effects of Chinese projects, and analyzed statistical data. Our geographical sampling focused on different regions of Cameroon (West, East, Yaoundé and Littoral), enabling us to capture disparities in the impact of Chinese-Cameroonian cooperation.

Major cities: Douala (the country's economic center) and Yaoundé (the political capital) were the focal points, as they generally benefit from a greater share of Chinese investment in terms of infrastructure, industry and services. Peripheral regions: These regions, such as the Far North, East and South, where the Chinese presence is often less marked, were also studied to assess whether they benefit from the spin-offs of Chinese cooperation or remain marginalized. All data were processed and analyzed using SPSS software.

1. Historical and geopolitical context of Sino-Cameroonian cooperation

The historical and geopolitical context of Sino-Cameroonian cooperation illustrates an increasingly strategic relationship for Cameroon, but also a complex dynamic of opportunities and challenges. While this cooperation enables rapid infrastructure development and economic growth, it also raises questions about national sovereignty, resource management and international power relations. Sino-Cameroonian cooperation, although marked by a recent intensification, is part of a broader historical and geopolitical context, in which relations between China and Cameroon have evolved significantly over the decades. To fully understand this cooperation, it is necessary to trace its evolution from the first diplomatic interactions between the two countries to their current partnership, while taking into account the regional and international geopolitical dynamics that influence this relationship.

- **Initial interactions and foundations of cooperation (pre-2000)**

The first diplomatic relations between China and Cameroon date back to 1971, with the establishment of official relations between the two countries following Cameroon's recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, these relations remained limited to modest diplomatic and commercial exchanges. China, still in the throes of internal transformation after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), had not yet consolidated its global influence, particularly in Africa. During this period, Cameroon, despite having established diplomatic relations with China, was mainly focused on Europe and the United States, its main trade and investment partners. Ties between the WTO and Cameroon were therefore relatively marginal in the context of Cold War international relations, where the influence of the superpowers, notably the Soviet Union and the United States, dominated international relations.

- **China, an emerging player in Africa (2000-2010)**

The situation changed considerably in the early 2000s, when China embarked on an active strategy to strengthen its presence in Africa. Following China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China sought to position itself as a major player on the African continent, not least as part of its global economic and geopolitical ambitions. China then launched diplomatic initiatives to increase its trade, foreign direct investment (FDI) and strategic partnerships with African countries. Against this backdrop, Cameroon, like many other African countries, gradually expanded its relations with China. As early as 2002, China and Cameroon signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement, marking the start of a more structured partnership. Cameroon has become one of the Central African countries where China has concentrated its investment efforts, particularly in the infrastructure, transport and energy sectors. This also coincides with China's desire to diversify its sources of raw materials and secure its energy supplies.

- **Increased cooperation in the form of massive investment (2010-present)**

The second decade of the 21st century saw a decisive turning point in the intensification of Sino-Cameroonese cooperation. Cameroon has become a key player in China's strategies in Africa, thanks to its strategic position at the center of Africa and its natural wealth (oil, minerals, timber, etc.). The Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), created in 2000, has played an important role in strengthening relations between China and African countries, including Cameroon. From the 2010s onwards, Sino-Cameroonian cooperation accelerated, with massive investment in infrastructure: Roads, bridges, railroads, hydroelectric power stations, hospitals and housing. These projects were financed by Chinese loans, often as part of the New Silk Road policy (or Belt and Road initiative, BRI), launched by China in 2013. Cameroon, as a member of the African Union, has aligned itself with China's foreign policy, seeking to take advantage of the economic opportunities it offers. Notable projects include the construction of the bridge over the Wouri in Douala, one of the flagship projects of Sino-Cameroonian cooperation, as well as investments in the energy sector, such as the Memve'ele hydroelectric power station. Chinese companies such as China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) have also invested in the exploitation of natural resources, notably oil and gas.

- **Geopolitical implications of China-Cameroon cooperation**

Cooperation between China and Cameroon is also part of a complex geopolitical context, both globally and in Africa. On the one hand, this relationship is perceived as an alternative to traditional development models, often dominated by Western powers. Indeed, China offers cooperation based on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of African countries, which is often seen as an advantage by African leaders, who wish to preserve their political sovereignty.

- **Challenges and criticisms of Sino-Cameroon cooperation**

Despite its obvious advantages, cooperation between the WTO and Cameroon faces a number of challenges and criticisms. These include Cameroon's growing dependence on Chinese investment, and the question of the sustainability of Chinese-funded projects. Working conditions in projects led by Chinese companies, the Chinese monopoly in certain sectors and the management of natural resources are also raising concerns. In addition, some civil society players denounce the marginalization of local populations, the lack of technology transfer and local skills in certain projects, as well as the environmental impact of mining and forestry projects supported by Chinese companies.

2. Chinese investment and its impact on regional development in Cameroon

Chinese investment in road and bridge infrastructure in Cameroon's regions is a key element of bilateral cooperation between Cameroon and China. These infrastructure projects have strengthened the country's internal connectivity, improved trade, facilitated travel and supported the economic development of Cameroon's regions. Our results show that an overview of these Chinese investments in regional road construction is more or less sustainable and narrow (Guiaké, M., *et al*; 2023) [4]. Chinese investment in road infrastructure in Cameroon is substantial, amounting to billions of dollars. Financing comes mainly from concessional loans, bilateral agreements and partnerships between Cameroon and Chinese companies under the Belt and Road (New Silk Road) initiative.

These Chinese investments in road infrastructure in Cameroon amount to over 5 billion dollars. They include loans, grants and contracts for the construction of roads, bridges and other transport infrastructure. Many of these large-scale projects are financed by China, and some of these projects have specific funding amounts: The Yaoundé-Douala road (RN3), funding for the rehabilitation and modernization of this road amounts to around $200 million. This project is important because it links Cameroon's two main cities, Yaoundé and Douala, and is a major route for domestic trade. The Kribi-Lolabe road (RN55), a strategic axis linking the city of Kribi to the rest of the country, is benefiting from Chinese funding of around $300 million. The project is linked to the development of the port of Kribi, one of China's flagship projects in Cameroon. The Douala-Kribi road, a project to rehabilitate and improve the Douala-Kribi road, another strategic axis for the transport of goods, has been partially financed by China for an estimated amount of around 250 million dollars. The Bafoussam-Dschang road was financed to the tune of $150 million.

- **Bilateral loans and financing**

As far as concessional loans are concerned, a large part of this financing comes from low-interest loans, generally over long periods. Cameroon has contracted several loans from China to finance its road projects. For the rehabilitation of major roads such as the RN3, China has granted concessional loans worth over $500 million. Loans for the development of port and road infrastructures in Kribi, China has also invested in the port of Kribi and associated road infrastructures, with financing of around 1 billion dollars, divided between various sectors (roads, bridges, etc.).

- **Impact on debt**

These investments have contributed to an increase in Cameroon's external debt to China. By 2023, China will account for around 40% of Cameroon's external debt, with loans being used mainly to finance infrastructure projects, particularly roads. The country's growing indebtedness is raising concerns, particularly as regards its ability to repay these loans over the long term. These Chinese investments in Cameroon's roads therefore amount to several billion dollars. While these projects have significantly improved the country's infrastructure, they have also created a debt burden that requires careful management to ensure that the long-term economic benefits outweigh the financial risks.

- **Littoral region (Douala, Kribi, Limbé)**

This region is one of Cameroon's most strategic, not least because of its main port, Douala, which is a point of competition between the main players for the country's imports and exports (Ntyam, C. L., 2024) [10]. Chinese investment in the region's transport infrastructure includes the Douala-Kribi road (RN3), a major Chinese-financed project to rehabilitate and modernize this road to link the port of Douala with that of Kribi, another developing port. The project aims to improve trade and reduce transport costs. The Dibamba Bridge, which crosses this river, facilitates travel between Douala and the central and western regions of the country. Its rehabilitation was supported by Chinese funding to facilitate travel between major cities and improve traffic flow in the area. The port of Kribi is a port project, but China has financed part of the road infrastructure linking Kribi to the rest of the country, including access roads to industrial zones close to the port. The aim is to boost trade and industry in the region.

- **Central region (Yaoundé, Obala, Bafia)**

Chinese investment in road and bridge infrastructure in the Centre region is also significant, although this road links two key regions. It passes through Yaoundé, and rehabilitation and modernization work has been carried out with Chinese assistance to improve transport efficiency between the capital and the country's main port. The Yaoundé Bridge over the Mfoundi, financed by China, aims to improve traffic flow in the capital, particularly for heavy goods vehicles and vehicles in transit between the cities of the Centre and Littoral regions.

- **Western region (Bafoussam, Dschang, Foumban)**

The West region is a key area for agriculture and industry in Cameroon, and Chinese investment in roads and bridges in this region facilitates trade between rural and urban areas. The Bafoussam-Dschang road, which links Bafoussam, the capital of the West region, to Dschang, has been rehabilitated thanks to Chinese funding. The project aims to facilitate trade and improve access to agricultural markets. The Foumban Bridge, located in the region, has facilitated transport between Foumban and surrounding areas.

- **Northern region (Garoua, Maroua, Ngaoundéré)**

The northern region, often more isolated, benefits from Chinese projects aimed at strengthening connectivity with the rest of the country. These investments facilitate access to rural areas and support trade with neighboring countries such as Chad and Nigeria. The Garoua Kousséri road, which links Garoua (a major city in the north) to Kousséri, near the Chadian border, has been rehabilitated and improved thanks to Chinese funding. This project is essential for trade between Cameroon and Chad. The Benoué Bridge, located in the town of Garoua, has been rehabilitated to provide better access to both banks of the Benoué.

- **Far North region (Maroua, Kousseri, Mokolo)**

The Far North region, one of the most remote and underdeveloped areas, is also benefiting from several Chinese investments in transport infrastructure, mainly to strengthen trade with Chad and Nigeria. The Maroua-Kousseri road is essential for improving access between Maroua and Kousseri, the border town with Chad. It facilitates trade with neighboring countries, and Chinese investment has contributed to the rehabilitation of this road. The Kousseri Bridge over the Logone, which crosses the Logone, a major river on the border with Chad.

- **Southern region (Ebolowa, Kribi, Akom II)**

Southern Cameroon, with its vast natural resources and strategic port of Kribi, has also benefited from Chinese investment in its road and bridge infrastructure. The rehabilitation and construction of this road, supported by China, has stimulated industry and trade in the southern region. The Kribi bridge, which links the various port and industrial zones around Kribi, has been improved thanks to Chinese funding, facilitating access to this strategic port. However, these investments are accompanied by challenges linked to debt management and infrastructure quality.

Table 1: Are you satisfied with Asian road infrastructure in Cameroon (%)

	West	Center	Littoral	Est	Total
Satisfied	2,68	1,88	2,91	1,07	8,61
Little satisfied	5,64	2,68	7,52	8,06	23,92
not satisfied	10,48	12,63	17,74	26,61	67,47
Total	18,82	17,20	28,23	35,75	100

Source: Survey of heads of households

This analysis shows that opinions are divided at national level when it comes to road infrastructure. Although these roads play an important role in transporting trade flows, a comparison of satisfaction between regions reveals major disparities. For example, in the East Cameroon region, where mining and logging are intense, road infrastructure is clearly inadequate compared to other regions of the country. Over 67.47% of the population is not satisfied with the quality of asphalt roads built by Chinese companies in Cameroon. In this part of the country, out of a road network of 22,994 km, only 2.2% are paved, while 97.8% are dirt roads. Despite the region's economic potential, its riches are often exploited to the detriment of its development.

The roads are strewn with ditches, quagmires and broken bridges, as is the case on the Diang-Abumadjali-Esselegue-Belabo section. This 48 km road is overgrown with vegetation and has not been maintained for a long time, forcing users to travel by motorcycle.

- **China and the Port of Kribi**

The Port of Kribi, located in the southern region of Cameroon, is the flagship port project financed and developed by China. This fast-expanding port plays an important role in Cameroon's strategy to boost its commercial competitiveness in Central Africa and in international trade. Construction of the deepwater port of Kribi was financed to the tune of 1.2 billion dollars. The project was implemented by Chinese companies such as China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) and China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). The port of Kribi handles up to 3 million tonnes of cargo per year. The first phase of the project, completed in 2018, included the construction of a container terminal and an industrial terminal (Manceau, E., 2024) [7]. This phase created the basic infrastructure and enhanced the capacity to accommodate ships. The second phase, currently underway, involves extending the terminal, developing an industrial zone and building new port infrastructure to increase the port's capacity.

- **Port of Douala (Port Autonome de Douala - PAD)**

The Port Autonome de Douala (PAD), Cameroon's main commercial port, has also benefited from China's involvement in infrastructure expansion and modernization projects. Although China is not the main financial backer of the Port of Douala, Chinese companies have been involved in a number of port infrastructure rehabilitation and expansion projects. China has invested in modern port equipment and in the modernization of handling facilities. Chinese funding has enabled the purchase of port cranes, freezers and container handling equipment to strengthen the port's management capacity.

- **The port of Limbe**

The port of Limbe, also located on the Cameroon coast, has benefited from investment as part of China's support for maritime infrastructure development. Although this port is smaller than Douala and Kribi, Chinese companies have been involved in the construction of quays and the installation of oil terminals to support the local oil and gas industry.

3. Oil production in Cameroon

China plays an important role in oil production in Cameroon, mainly through Chinese companies investing in the exploration, production and refining sectors. These investments are part of China's strategy to strengthen its presence in Africa and secure energy supplies for its own growing economy. Cameroon's oil projects are also supported by bilateral loans and partnerships between Cameroon and China.

- **Chinese companies in Cameroon's oil sector**

Several Chinese companies have signed partnership and concession agreements for the exploration and exploitation of the country's oil reserves. China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) is one of the largest Chinese oil companies and is very active in Cameroon. In 2007, CNOOC obtained exploration and exploitation rights for several offshore blocks in the Gulf of Guinea, particularly in the oil and gas-rich Kribi archipelago region. CNOOC is responsible for operating several blocks, including the Rio del Rey offshore block. Another Chinese company, Zhenhua Oil, is also present in Cameroon. It is involved in exploiting oil resources in partnership with other international companies. Zhenhua Oil has a stake in Campo Block 3, in the Gulf of Guinea, where several oil discoveries have been made. Sinopec, one of China's largest energy companies, has also been involved in drilling and exploration projects in Cameroon. Although its involvement is more marked in the refining and supply sectors, it plays an indirect role in Cameroon's oil value chain.

Chinese investment in oil production in Cameroon amounts to around $2 billion. These include investments in exploration, production and associated infrastructure such as pipelines and refineries. Cameroon produces an average of 60,000 to 80,000 barrels of oil per day. Daily production from this block may vary, but CNOOC is responsible for a significant share of Cameroon's oil production. Total production from the Rio del Rey block is around 40,000 barrels a day. The Campo field, also an important offshore area, has been the focus of Chinese investment through Zhenhua Ou. Production in this area is around 10,000 to 20,000 barrels a day. This field is important for Cameroon's energy supply. In addition to oil, Cameroon also has natural gas reserves. Some Chinese companies, notably CNOOC, have invested in the development of gas infrastructures with a view to exporting gas or using it for the domestic market. The offshore gas project in the Gulf of Guinea is estimated at $1.5 billion.

- **Oil infrastructure**

Several of these infrastructures have benefited from Chinese financing. Pipelines linking offshore production sites to refineries and ports are essential for crude oil exports. The Kribi-Lolabe pipeline, an important oil transport link, received Chinese funding for its construction. The Limbe refinery project, essential for refining oil produced in Cameroon, has benefited from Chinese investment, although its financing is shared with other international players. The cost of building the refinery is estimated at around $2.5 billion, with Chinese companies playing a role in supplying technology and construction services. In addition to direct investment, China has signed several cooperation agreements with Cameroon to support the exploitation of its oil resources. These include production-sharing agreements, under which Cameroon and Chinese companies share the production of extracted oil, according to each party's share in the exploitation blocks.

- **China in the exploitation of mining resources in Cameroon**

Thanks to massive investments and strategic partnerships, Chinese companies have acquired a leading position in this sector, which represents a significant part of the country's economy (Ottou, M., 2024) [11]. Mining in Cameroon is dominated by several key resources, such as bauxite, iron, gold and cobalt, which are in strong demand on international markets, particularly in China. These mining projects are an integral part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enabling China to secure its supply of raw materials.

- **Mining sectors concerned**

Société minière de bauxite du Cameroun (SMBC), a joint venture between Chalco (Aluminum Corporation of China) and Cameroon's Camrail, is involved in bauxite mining. The Lomié and Minim-Martap bauxite project has attracted investment of around $0.5 billion. The project aims to produce 3 million tonnes of bauxite per year, with the potential to export to China and other international markets. Construction of the infrastructure, including roads and a rail line for bauxite transport, is being financed largely by low-interest Chinese loans. The Mbalam mine development project is led by Shaanxi Coal and Chemical Jridustry, a major Chinese partner.

The project has benefited from Chinese financing for the construction of the mine and associated infrastructure, including the railroads and port terminals needed to export the ore. The cost of the Mbalam project is estimated at 1.5 billion dollars. Part of the financing comes from a consortium of Chinese banks, which have provided low-interest loans for the development of the infrastructure and the mine. The project should enable Cameroon to export around 5 million tonnes of iron per year to China and other countries. Chinese companies are involved in artisanal gold mining, particularly in the eastern and southern regions of Cameroon, where gold is extracted in small quantities. These companies have facilitated access to finance, technology and equipment for local miners. Gold mining in Cameroon is still largely dominated by small-scale, artisanal operations, but Chinese companies are increasingly involved in developing industrial projects to boost production.

In the field of cobalt and nickel mining, a number of Chinese companies have signed agreements to explore and exploit these minerals in the regions of Cameroon, particularly in areas close to Lomé and N'Gaoundéré. Chinese investment in this sector is still in the expansion phase, but is estimated at several hundred million dollars. These cobalt and nickel projects are carried out in partnership with the Cameroonian government, which holds part of the mining rights. Chinese companies, such as Zhejiang Materials Industry Group, are involved in setting up the mining infrastructure and managing the sites.

- **Mining-related infrastructure**

Chinese companies have been involved in building the infrastructure that facilitates the transport of minerals to international markets. Chinese mining projects, such as those at Mbalam, require the construction of railroads to transport the ore extracted from the sites to the ports. The 500 km Mbalam-Kribi railroad project is financed by Chinese loans. The port of Kribi, currently being developed with Chinese support, is also essential for mineral exports. The port is designed to cope with increasing transport capacity for natural resources, notably bauxite and iron. The mining sector accounts for some 5-6% of Cameroon's GDP. Investment in transport and logistics infrastructure has improved Cameroon's competitiveness in international trade and facilitated access to world markets. Chinese investment in mining in Cameroon has had a profound impact on the country's economy. With major projects in bauxite, iron, gold and other mineral resources, China has become a key player in Cameroon's mining sector.

4. China mines timber in Cameroon

Cameroon is a strategic supplier for China, which imports large quantities of lumber, plywood, furniture and other by-products. According to some estimates, nearly 60% of the timber extracted in Cameroon is exported to that country (Baidoo, A., 2024) [2]. The country is thus becoming a major player not only in logging, but also in wood processing, often at lower cost. Chinese companies operating in Cameroon are often involved in large-scale logging activities. These companies are responsible for the massive felling of precious wood species such as ebony, cherry and sapelli. Most of these operations are carried out under forest concessions allocated by Cameroon (Weng, X., *et al.*, 2014) [3]. However, these concessions are sometimes the source of conflicts linked to illegal practices and non-compliance with logging regulations (Table 2). Massive logging leads to deforestation and loss of biodiversity, which contribute to climate change. Many critics point to the lack of mechanisms to control the practices of Chinese forestry companies, which exacerbates the problems of illegal and unsustainable deforestation.

Table 2: Are you satisfied with the presence of resource companies in your region?

Activity and workforce	Satisfied	Little satisfied	Not satisfied	Total
Teachers	2,65	4,26	5,88	12,79
Mine diggers crafts	1,91	6,47	8,67	17,05
Farmers	3,23	4,26	5,44	12,94
Forestry company	5,88	3,08	4,55	13,53
Mining company	6,91	5,15	2,21	14,26
Road company	5,73	3,23	2,94	11,91
Self-employed	0,05	6,76	5,73	17,50
Total	31,32	33,23	35,45	100

Source: Survey of local players, 2024

Our results show that large-scale exploitation of natural resources for export does not benefit the local population. In fact, over 70% of the population would like to see a genuine bilateral agreement signed for the exploitation of these resources, with direct local processing. By processing our minerals locally, we could benefit from all the employment opportunities, improved living conditions and other direct advantages. However, 35.45% of the population expresses dissatisfaction with the presence of foreign operators in the natural resources sector. The infrastructure they sometimes build does not meet current quality standards. Indeed, the unsustainable exploitation of these natural resources directly deteriorates the living conditions of local populations and harms their health. It also leads to the destruction of entire ecosystems and disrupts their overall functioning.

5. Trade with this country is booming

Chinese traders are playing an increasingly important role in Cameroon's economy, particularly in the retail, import and construction sectors, as well as in areas such as mobile telephony and building materials. Their presence is visible through a series of large and small Chinese companies that have been investing heavily in the country for several decades. Chinese traders are involved in a wide range of economic activities. Many Chinese traders have set up shop in the country's major cities, such as Douala, Yaoundé and Bafoussam. They are responsible for importing a variety of products, including textiles, electronics, household appliances, food and clothing. Chinese-style stores are widespread, offering a wide variety of products at prices often lower than those on the local market.

These stores have transformed the commercial landscape, making consumer goods more accessible to the local population. Chinese traders are also involved in the sale of vehicles, spare parts and motorcycles, notably through large retailers who import these products directly from China. Chinese cars, often less expensive than European or Japanese brands, are increasingly popular with Cameroonians. Chinese companies also dominate the market for cell phones and accessories in Cameroon. Brands such as Huawei, ZTE and Xiaomi hold a large market share, and many Chinese traders operate in the sale of these products, as well as in the repair of phones and other electronic equipment (Nicole, B., *et al*; 2024) [9]. They have developed well-established distribution networks, joining forces with local partners or creating supply chains directly between China and Cameroon. These networks make it possible to import goods at lower cost, enabling them to sell at competitive prices and dominate a large part of the market. These companies are present not only in major cities, but also in less urbanized areas, increasing their influence nationwide.

- **Relations with the local community and authorities**

Chinese traders are often perceived as a closed community, tending to work mainly with their compatriots, especially in business management and recruitment. However, many Chinese traders employ Cameroonians, often in sales, management or services. Relations with the local population can be complex, sometimes marked by accusations of exploitation, but also by community integration initiatives and partnerships with local businesses.

Conclusion

The impact of China's presence in Cameroon is a complex issue that includes risks related to the country's indebtedness, as well as social and environmental concerns. Chinese investment in Cameroon has led to a significant increase in national indebtedness. Indeed, the country has benefited from several loans for infrastructure projects, often granted by China in the form of bilateral credits. Cameroon's public debt has increased considerably in recent years. In 2024, external debt represented around 30% of the country's GDP. A significant proportion of this debt comes from Chinese loans, used to finance infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges and stadiums.

China is one of Cameroon's main creditors. In 2021, around 15% of the country's external debt was owed by Chinese creditors. This debt often comes with strict repayment conditions, and some projects are financed by loans at relatively high interest rates, putting further pressure on the national budget. Cameroon's debt has risen to around $6.6 billion in 2023. The lack of diversification of financing sources exposes the country to the risk of over-indebtedness and increased dependence on China. In 2020, sub-Saharan Africa saw many countries, including Cameroon, negotiate debt restructuring with China under the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI). Working conditions in Chinese companies in Cameroon are also a matter of concern for trade unions, workers and civil society. Wages in Chinese companies are often lower than the national average. In the construction and mining sectors, many workers receive salaries ranging from 100,000 to 200,000 FCFA (150 to 300 USD) per month, well below the wages of workers in local or multinational companies operating in the same sectors.

Safety conditions are often deemed inadequate, particularly in the mining sector. According to the Syndicat National des Travailleurs de la Construction (National Union of Construction Workers), nearly 20% of workers in Chinese companies have reported serious workplace accidents, due to a lack of adequate safety measures, particularly in quarries and on construction sites. The Global Rights Fund's 2022 report revealed that 40% of Cameroonian workers in Chinese companies do not benefit from a formal employment contract. In addition, the practice of withholding passports, particularly for Chinese migrant workers, has been denounced by several international NGOs. Chinese companies operating in Cameroon, particularly in the mining, forestry and oil sectors, are often criticized for their environmental management. Chinese companies are responsible for around 30% of deforestation in Central Africa, particularly through illegal logging in protected areas. Much of this deforestation concerns forest concessions awarded to Chinese companies that do not respect local environmental standards. In 2021, studies revealed that Chinese companies operating in the mining sector in Cameroon were responsible for 20% of river pollution in certain regions, particularly in the gold and mineral extraction sector. These companies often use polluting techniques, such as mercury, without regard for waste management standards. Chinese companies are often accused of not respecting environmental standards in force in Cameroon. Surveys have revealed that almost 50% of Chinese companies in the mining sector do not have adequate environmental impact management systems in place, such as emission control or industrial waste treatment.

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