

# Chapter 21

## Perceptions of Chinese Investments in Kyrgyzstan



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### 21.1 Introduction

China has long seen Central Asia as an important part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially due to its location, linking Asian and European markets. But the region is incredibly diverse, requiring a nuanced and context-specific understanding from those seeking to invest or engage. Kyrgyzstan, on China's western border, is often lauded for its relative democracy in comparison with its neighbours, as well as for its vibrant civil society and healthy protest culture. It has also seen substantial political turbulence and conflict since independence, however, with the most recent unrest taking place in October 2020 when allegations of vote rigging led to the overthrow of the government amid calls for new elections (Furlong, 2020).

A country of over six million, Kyrgyzstan has experienced intermittent violent upheavals such as in the diverse southern part of the country in 2010 (Pannier, 2020b) and continuous clashes along its borders over disputed land and resources (including recent escalations with Tajikistan in 2021 and 2022) (Imanaliyeva & Ibragimova, 2021). Within communities, conservative gender norms can contribute to violence in the home, particularly against women and girls, while tensions over identity—ethnic, generational, religious—can at times turn violent. These dynamics can be compounded by heavy-handed responses from the authorities, or when violence goes unaddressed due to mistrust of police or other state structures.

This chapter looks at the impact of the BRI and Chinese investments on conflict dynamics in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the perceptions of communities towards these projects. These factors include perceptions of behaviour of Chinese companies and workers, perceived benefits and harms, notions of national identity and sovereignty,

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elite capture and the state-society gap, accountability and corruption, and lastly, the resulting protests and conflicts stemming from these. It concludes by outlining some potential avenues for improved engagement of companies and local government in a way that is sensitive to conflict dynamics and community needs.<sup>1</sup>

## 21.2 The BRI and China Investments

Despite greater international engagement since independence in 1991, Russia's influence is still strongly felt in Kyrgyzstan—especially in urban areas like its capital, Bishkek—through close linguistic, historical, economic, and security ties that have existed for many generations, and through a greater degree of positive public perceptions relating to its role as a partner for Kyrgyzstan (Laruelle & Royce, 2020).

However, since the 2000s, China has become a dominant economic power and the main source of foreign investment in Kyrgyzstan and the wider region (especially Kazakhstan). In 2021, nearly half of the Kyrgyzstan government's approximately \$5 billion debt was held by the state-owned Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM), which has been the case for many years (Standish, 2021). Since the announcement of the BRI in 2013, investments from China have been growing. According to the Kyrgyzstan government's own statistics (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021), the largest foreign direct investors in 2020 were Canada, via the Kumtor gold mine (prior to its complete transfer to the Kyrgyzstan government in April 2022), and China via other major investments in mining. Along with Russia, China has also become a major source for imports into Kyrgyzstan, accounting for \$736 million in 2020 (although this was a substantial decrease from the previous year) (Trading Economics).

While Chinese investments are often not “officially” named as BRI initiatives, they are seen to fall under its remit given their funding source and the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2013 as part of the BRI (Sacks, 2021). Few of these projects, especially in Kyrgyzstan, are seen as particularly profitable for Chinese companies, raising the question of whether alternative incentives and interests, including transit and infrastructure needed for trade elsewhere in the world, drive their implementation (Interview, 3 December 2020).

Loans from Chinese policy banks have declined in recent years, but FDI from private and Chinese state-owned enterprises continues to flow—often in coordination with local Kyrgyzstani ventures—largely in mining, geological exploration, and oil, but increasingly into other smaller-scale ventures in a range of sectors (Van der Klay & Yau, 2021). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on research originally carried out as part of a joint initiative by Saferworld and the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt on perceptions and impacts of Chinese investments in four conflict-affected countries—Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Uganda—for which interviews were conducted with experts, academics, and representatives of civil society (see Abb et al., 2021). Additional interviews were then carried out as part of an expanded briefing by Saferworld.

Development (OECD), the metals industry received over 79 per cent of all FDI in the country—over ten times the next largest sector, building and construction materials (7.1%). These were followed by transport (3.3%) and alternative energy (1.3%) (OECD, 2019). The Chinese government had previously financed several transport and energy connectivity projects as concessional loans, but these have largely tapered off and given way to small grants, including for improving or renovating transport infrastructure (Mogilevskii, 2019). More recently, at the online summit of China and Central Asian countries, President Xi Jinping promised an increase in trade turnover (up to \$70 billion by 2030) as well as \$500 in grants within the next three years (Kumenov, 2022).

A number of projects—either funded by Chinese government loans or at least partially by FDI from China—have gained notoriety at the national level. After the completion of a \$386 million project to modernise a Bishkek thermal power plant, a malfunction during the winter of 2018 left residents in the capital without heating in freezing cold temperatures, leading to accusations of corruption and an unfair tender process (Higgins, 2019) that ended with harsh penalties for former high-level officials (Fergana News Agency, 2019). Another case involves the cancellation of a \$275 million logistics centre in At-Bashy after local residents staged mass protests demanding the land not be leased to China as part of a new free trade economic zone (Yau, 2020). “A contract was signed, including a clause stating that land would be rented for 49 years to China for the logistics centre,” said one interviewee for this chapter. “There were worries that China will take part of Kyrgyzstan, and there were worries about the future generations of Kyrgyz. At Kichi-Chaarat and Salton-Sary, there have been many issues and protests related to land” (Interview, 29 April 2021). More recently, following the political upheaval in October 2020, several mining operations were seized or damaged by local residents and, in some cases, Chinese managers and workers were expelled during the unrest (Shaku, 2020).

### **21.3 Perceptions and Impacts of Chinese Investments on Local Communities**

Despite its growing economic presence in Central Asia and the frequent eagerness of the authorities (local and national) to attract funding, China is still widely mistrusted by the public in Kyrgyzstan. According to the Oxus Society’s protest tracker covering protests between January 2018 and June 2021, there were 43 rallies and protests in Kyrgyzstan which were in some way related to Chinese policy or investments (Oxus Society “Central Asia Protest Tracker”). According to the interviews conducted for this chapter between 2020 and early 2021, concerns over investments revolve around a range of issues.

First is an underlying perception that China is attempting to grab land or assets—a view that is hardly unique to Kyrgyzstan, but which is reinforced by narratives of historical competition and concern over “debt trap diplomacy,” in which land swap

agreements, leases, and asset seizures as a result of loan defaults are seen as pieces of an overall strategy to expand (Wang, 2022). As in other regions, China's investments are often seen as an attempt to gain footholds abroad to increase its influence, or to use economic leverage to guarantee alignment on key issues. The "expansionist" role of China, it is argued, means that Kyrgyzstan (and other Central Asian states) have limited autonomy in the face of China's growing influence and economic heft.

There are also widespread concerns over environmental contamination by Chinese projects, such as contamination of water or soil as a result of mining projects—along with a lack of community engagement over the environmental effects of such investments. Many also believe that investments are intended to benefit China and local elites, but not local communities. Chinese workers being paid more for the same work, or money going to corrupt officials, are cited as examples of this (Interview, 2 December 2020). This is compounded by a sense that projects are sometimes poorly planned. Examples of this can be found in the proposed transport links through Kyrgyzstan, such as the much-discussed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway which avoids major towns or settlements and is seen to bring few benefits to locals. Such proposals have invited backlash from communities and officials alike (Pannier, 2020a)—although the railway project is now seeing some renewed enthusiasm from the leadership (Radio Azattyk, 2022). "Benefits are often only relevant to China," said one interviewee. "[For the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan railway], 80 per cent of the proposed territory is in the mountains, meaning there is no development at the local level. China chose to shorten the route to reach Uzbekistan" (Interview, 17 November 2020).

Other examples of social cleavages and citizen protest against China's BRI-related development plans arise in local communities. Community leaders have also cited as problematic the limited interaction between local people and Chinese workers, who often bring in armed security to protect their investments. The self-isolation of Chinese workers, who tend to live separately without interacting with the communities in which they live and work, can reinforce divisions and a sense of separateness (Interview, 17 November 2020). Such concerns spill over into xenophobic attitudes towards Chinese people, with protestors demanding that allegedly illegal Chinese immigrants (mostly men) be deported or that marriages between Kyrgyz and Chinese citizens be stopped (Imanaliyev, 2020). This can be driven by Kyrgyz nationalism as well as by gender norms that strongly disapprove of Kyrgyz women marrying foreign men, especially Chinese men (as this can in some minds be linked to another method of expansionism) (Eshaliyeva, 2019). One respondent indicated that these feelings were often driven by nationalist sentiment and were strongest among men and nationalist groups such as Kyrk Choro (Interview, 29 April 2021), stemming from prevailing gender norms that place expectations on Kyrgyz women to marry Kyrgyz men. "This is quite normal though," said one interviewee, "For a small state with low population density to have this fear of a big super populated country just over the border, and with the lack of information about the border, fear can build—you start thinking that one day this big neighbour will take your people, take your territory and create a lot of problems" (Interview, 12 November 2020). Kyrk Choro, with approximately 5,000 members, takes a nationalist line that points to the erosion

of Kyrgyz ethnicity and what it sees as associated values. The group has rallied around growing anti-China sentiment, looking to texts such as the epic *Manas* where the Chinese were cast as adversaries, and conducting raids or harassment of Chinese workers in Kyrgyzstan (Shailoobek kyzy, 2021a).

## 21.4 Benefits of Chinese Investment

It is not to say that these views are shared by everyone, or that opinions cannot lie somewhere in between complete support and distrust. Where some see threats or attempts at expansion, others have highlighted the benefits, both short and long-term. Firstly, there are the short-term benefits of Chinese investment bringing jobs and tax money to communities. While differences in pay, experiences of corrupt practices, and the ratio of local to Chinese workers can remain points of contention, the trends seem to be shifting towards more local labour employment (Van der Klay & Yau, 2021). Chinese projects can also bring training and skill-building programmes, as well as Chinese language instruction. For example, in response to discontent caused by mining activities, “social packages” are now expected to be provided for communities, including socioeconomic initiatives (Furstenberg & Toktomushev, 2021). In the longer term, better roads and transport links help move goods and facilitate business and can lead to knock-on effects such as boosts to local economies through increased demand for hospitality, shops, restaurants, and small businesses in locations with an influx of workers (Interview, 20 May 2021). For example, few can miss the highly visible improvements to roads in Bishkek, or from the capital to Lake Issyk-Kul and further south (Ministry of Transport and Roads of the Kyrgyz Republic). Some observers have also pointed to the fact that China is continuing to invest much-needed funds in what is considered to be a high-risk environment unstable for business, and one which is seeing a growing trend towards resource nationalism—not only against China, but against other “outsiders” who are not seen as having the interests of local residents at heart (*Financial Times*, 2021). When such sources of funding from outside the country are used effectively, it can free up government financing for other vital yet under-resourced areas such as health care or education (Interview, 20 May 2021).

Interviewees touched on the fact that local women and men tend to be employed in different kinds of jobs—with men being hired for hard labour in mining or oil refining while women can find opportunities that are often better paid than elsewhere such as cooks, cleaners or sometimes as translators or liaisons between communities and companies (although the latter would represent a relatively small proportion of those hired in total). Local and national government officials, despite being at odds with many of their constituents on this, often approve Chinese investments, seeing them as a crucial source of revenue, infrastructure development, or enrichment.

The interviewees suggest that, even within one town or village, there is no monolithic perception or view of Chinese investment or China more broadly. Perceptions can vary substantially depending on personal circumstances or other factors, such as

employment, social status, age, or gender—all of which help to determine how benefits or consequences are experienced or perceived. Views of investment can also vary depending on the stage of development of the project. For example, in areas with a history of such investments, communities are more likely to know what to expect and what benefits or consequences might come as a result—and companies themselves may have a better idea of the local context after having operated there for a while. On the other hand, where projects are in the scoping, exploratory or early stages of delivery, outcomes are more uncertain and were said to be viewed with greater suspicion (Interview, 17 November 2020). Media access and coverage also play a role—with media in different languages existing in different parts of the country. Rumours and dubious media reports can build on existing grievances or perceptions—COVID-19, for example, has led to growing misinformation and distrust of China, further entrenching opposition to any of its activities, although this seems to have died down as the virus has become more globalised and less tied to China as it was in the early stages. “Anti-Chinese sentiment and fake news is growing,” said one interviewee. “For example, there was official news that China is going to aid us [to prevent COVID transmission], but on private channels and social media, there were conspiracy theories that the masks would contain COVID” (Interview, 2 December 2020). Such perceptions have also been mitigated somewhat by China’s containment of the virus domestically. However, resistance, rumours, and discourse surrounding the various vaccines provided by different countries—namely China, Russia, Europe, and America—indicate that some scepticism remains (Eurasianet, 2020).

## 21.5 Impacts on Livelihoods and the Environment

The effects of Chinese investment projects on livelihoods vary substantially. Some projects provide direct jobs—both through direct employment as well as indirect increase in trade in the form of greater use of shops, hotels, and restaurants—and training, with a large local labour force feeling many of the benefits (Imanaliyeva, 2020). However, this can create resentment among local people who are not hired and feel left behind. For example, in Ala-Buka village, in Jalal-Abad province in the South of Kyrgyzstan, one respondent noted how those in the centre of the town benefited from infrastructure investments and jobs linked to the Full Gold Mining Company deposit, while those living further out felt they were neglected, leading to more negative associations with the investment projects there (Interview, 17 November 2020).

Many workers compare their pay or benefits to those of Chinese labourers, who are often brought in because of their specialised skills or project management experience. Some residents claim they face hardships because of the projects—including those who work on land or with livestock. They argue that their properties have been poisoned by contamination from mines or refineries (Shailoobek kyzy, 2021b). At some mining sites, artisanal and small-scale miners who once gathered gold or

other minerals close to the surface have now been squeezed out due to increased mining operations by Chinese companies (Ryskulova, 2019). “The arrival of corporate mining companies affects artisanal mining, which impacts local livelihoods,” said one interviewee. “This mainly affects men who do not find alternative employment” (Interview, 3 December 2020).

Apart from the effects on livelihoods, other environmental impacts of Chinese projects are a source of anti-Chinese protests. At deposits like Salton-Sary, which have seen violent clashes between locals and Chinese workers before (KABAR, 2019), cases of contamination of rivers and loss of livestock and crops are frequently cited in nearby settlements, although there has been limited evidence documented and few investigations have been carried out to measure these effects (Ryskulova, 2019). One interviewee described how residents in Kara-Balta, a region that depends on farming and livestock, began to complain of a strong sulphuric smell, as well as damage to crops and an ancient burial ground, leading to the suspension of the work. In Bishkek, the high-profile heat and power plant, which failed in 2018, leading to multiple arrests, is based on coal usage and is thus seen as a “nongreen” project (Mogilevskii, 2019) which contributes more visibly to the city’s dire pollution problem even if it is not the main cause (Interview, 12 November 2020).

Across the country, state inspections have been carried out, but there is little public trust in them (Interview, 10 November 2020). In some cases, Chinese companies have paid compensation, but this has done little to alleviate concerns or resolve grievances. It should be noted that Chinese companies operating abroad largely follow local environmental standards, and so host governments can also play a larger role in ensuring higher standards and enforcement. As we heard from interviewees, however, cleaner technology is more expensive and so is not always the preferred option for the host government when striking such deals (Interview, 20 May 2021). Though, with a greater appetite for green investments within China, and with the country’s desire to move away from its reputation as a polluter, future projects are likely to place more emphasis on environmental factors (Springer, 2020).

## 21.6 Corruption and Tensions with Chinese Companies

Corruption and lack of transparency are factors that significantly damage the reputation of local officials as well as Chinese investors. While the Chinese-funded Bishkek thermal power plant provides a high-profile case study where politicians were allegedly involved in corruption, the interviews suggest this is not unique. Many of the deals struck between Chinese companies and local decision-makers, which are opaque and closed to public scrutiny, involve dealings that often benefit elites or officials and undermine trust between state and society. “There are allegations because of the non-transparent nature of investment, which leads to questions,” said one interviewee (Interview, 2 December 2020). Both public and private Chinese companies prefer to deal exclusively with governments or local officials, without getting involved with civil society or communities directly. “Maybe the logic is, the

more closed you are, the fewer problems you'll have," said the interviewee. "But after years of this, it has made things worse" (Interview, 2 December 2020). If they encounter issues with communities in the course of their work, Chinese companies will work with local officials in the first instance and then escalate to higher level officials in Bishkek through backroom deals rather than engage directly with those affected (Interview, 3 December 2020). This approach—which is standard practice in China and so becomes the default in unfamiliar environments—solidifies public perceptions that the benefits of such projects are intended for a select few, and not for local residents, and can create considerable antipathy towards the companies, and sometimes China more broadly.

Isolation and securitisation of Chinese companies and workers also inflame tensions. Chinese workers often have their own compounds and live separately. Project managers hire Chinese private security companies who provide protection in the form of armed guards and equipment (Yau & van der Kley, 2020), which can lead to anxiety among communities due to a growing sense of militarisation and insecurity (Interview, 17 November 2020). These security companies are hired to protect Chinese workers from "hostile populations" and serve to increase the gulf between them and local communities (Interview, 2 December 2020). Some of the interviewees mentioned that, at times, Chinese workers can be seen to act "superior" to Kyrgyzstanis, hiring their own drivers, translators, cooks, and cleaners. While this can provide relatively well-paid jobs, it can also cause resentment and be seen as disrespectful of local people who wish to share in some of the more prestigious positions (Interview, 10 November 2020). "It can be a demeaning relationship, but it is very common in the region," said one interviewee. "It makes locals think Chinese people are there to make money from the country but that they are not respectful. The Chinese think they come to help and that locals are ungrateful" (Interview, 10 November 2020).

## 21.7 Avenues of Engagement

At the national level, despite multiple changes in leadership, many high-level officials or representatives (who are themselves not always popular) have voiced support for Chinese investments, often acting as major advocates for these projects. With few viable alternatives and an unstable investment climate, Chinese money and investments are welcome due to the relative lack of conditionality and willingness to play by local rules. Despite pledges to nationalise investments and the ongoing controversies surrounding the Kumtor mine, the government still faces a budget crisis and so is unlikely to turn away from the few outside opportunities available to fund projects (Eurasianet, 2021). In fact, most projects are launched at the initiative of the Kyrgyzstan government or businesses, which then seek funding from China (Interview, 10 November 2020). Given the unpopularity of many in the government, this support from national or local officials does not necessarily translate into greater sympathy from the public.



A pervasive trust deficit also affects the role of civil society organisations (CSOs). There are suspicions as to why CSOs—especially international entities—would want to get involved in “internal” or national matters, unless they represent the interests of foreign powers. Both the Kyrgyzstan government and Chinese companies therefore prefer to keep third parties out of the equation, meaning that no one benefits from the expertise that local or international CSOs can offer on specific issues, including those related to sustainable investment, local buy-in, and community engagement. Any social benefits or corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes are planned in coordination with the government, with few examples of work involving CSOs. In the interviews, it was highlighted that social, environmental, and economic impact assessments—either in conjunction with civil society support or not—are rarely carried out.

## 21.8 Conclusion

With all the negative perceptions of Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan—as well as the unstable political environment, relatively unprofitable ventures, unsustainable government debt, and clashes with local people—public enthusiasm for such projects is low, showing that business investments on their own do not necessarily reduce instability, especially when such investments are not broad-based and inclusive. Kyrgyzstan’s own political and economic challenges, which have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and unrest, compounded with increased animosity towards investors and China in particular, have reached a level that threatens the sustainability of Chinese investments and security of workers in the country.

For investments to be sustainable, Chinese investors and authorities in Kyrgyzstan will benefit from rethinking their approach, increasing their understanding of the local context and sensitivities, as well as the impact on local communities, including the variable impacts on women and other marginalised groups, and by considering a more transparent, inclusive, and responsive way of working with the public across all stages of the project. Taking a more inclusive approach to project planning and delivery, one that involves affected communities rather than sidestepping them, would be a first step towards building back trust and improving outcomes.

To more effectively mitigate the risks of conflict in areas that have seen Chinese investment, there are a number of avenues that companies, the government, and civil society could pursue which would improve transparency and accountability, trust, and engagement. With these preconditions in place, conflict should be less likely to occur and to disrupt communities’ lives and companies’ business operations.

One step would be to consult with civil society and the wider population about the content and design of transparent development strategies, including the national development plan and other documents guiding policy on foreign investments and more effective mechanisms for implementation. In this way, Chinese and other foreign investment in national development infrastructure and services will be

subject to greater public accountability within a transparent national development framework, and thus less open to potential conflicts of interest or accusations of corruption.

Any corruption case feeds nationalist discourses and dissonance between official and public attitudes. This is no different with regard to the attitudes in Kyrgyzstan towards China and its BRI-related investments. Greater transparency and practices that are in line with international anti-corruption standards and practices would also allow for more open dialogue and feedback on proposals. Complaint mechanisms should be introduced—or, strengthened where they exist—whereby communities can air their concerns. Such systems can be made stronger through increased capacity and response from relevant authorities.

The Kyrgyzstan and Chinese governments have yet to engage in building public confidence that loans will not result in a debt crisis or loss of autonomy, continuing (and clearly communicating) concessional policies for loans and pitching grants. More transparent policies are needed, such as public information on financing or information sessions for affected communities in Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere in the region, to provide a greater degree of transparency and as a measure to mitigate the risk of clashes. Where these transparency initiatives exist, outreach could be conducted to provide information in a way that is more widely accessible to and understandable for target audiences who may not have experience interpreting financial reporting (Furstenberg & Toktomushev, 2021). Current analysis tends to find that more exposure of investments to public scrutiny is risky given the potential dissatisfaction with aspects of projects that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Done in the right way, however, such exposure could greatly increase the public's acceptance of Chinese projects and presence.

Chinese companies and local officials should also take into account factors that are often forgotten, such as how investments can affect dynamics between members of communities, including in relation to women of different ages and backgrounds. Assessments and consultations taking these factors into account can be held at various stages: before project implementation and at key milestones. Such measures could complement and enhance the commercial risk assessments which are already carried out by Chinese development banks. They would also create greater transparency and demonstrate Chinese concern for local people's well-being through the willingness to take into account their concerns and priorities. This would not only maximise benefits for communities and put their well-being front and centre, but it would also make commercial sense for companies to gain "buy-in" from residents, enhancing a company's social licence to operate. Such preliminary assessments, for example, might have raised people's concerns in a productive format in areas where clashes or protests occurred—especially over effects on livelihoods and practicalities around rental of land (Lemon & Jardine, 2020).

Local and national government officials in Kyrgyzstan can play a significant role in promoting transparency and conflict-sensitive business practice. Given that local actors have greater access to communities, they can have a large part to play in ensuring sufficient opportunities for public feedback on proposed projects, as well as via feedback mechanisms during the project cycle. In some cases, where government

officials may face public scepticism, they can work with trusted third parties or impartial groups to facilitate such initiatives, including CSOs where appropriate.

Increased communication through multiple channels—such as town meetings, radio, or social media, depending on how people access information in different locations—would help to raise public awareness of the ways in which existing projects already bring benefits to communities, including jobs, training programmes, and CSR programmes. These can increase access to opportunities for both women and men who may be interested in developing their skills. While budgets may be set aside for these programmes, the lack of information or substantial engagement between companies, workers, and communities can mean that perceptions shift little or that people will be unaware of the opportunities that Chinese investments can bring.

As reported in the interviews, China generally does not invest as much of its energy in tailoring its “soft power” to local conditions or perceptions. It chooses to focus on the economic sphere, with the assumption that better infrastructure will lead to development and, in turn, a better view of China and decreased conflict. While there have been some improvements through increasing exchanges between Kyrgyzstan and China—especially among younger generations, both among women and men, who are provided with scholarships to study Chinese or live in China through the Confucius Institute and other programmes—more work can be done to promote people-to-people ties and reduce animosity. This could involve “community engagement and benefit plans,” which could include activities such as cultural exchange events, free or subsidised health or education services, and sporting events.

Local media in Kyrgyzstan is one avenue through which the purpose of investments and the facts behind them can be better explained and presented—as well as an avenue to more openly discuss concerns and impacts on communities as they arise. While media outlets should not be treated as solely “public relations” opportunities to promote investment, trusted sources could provide the population with factual information as well as a space to raise their concerns.

Thus far, little research has been done on the effects of investment on gender dynamics, including factors such as access to opportunities, the workplace environment, and the changing pressures and expectations placed on women and men. Focusing on this area could help inform future engagement with women and men in communities affected by large investments.

In many parts of the country, there are strong suspicions not just of China but also international non-governmental organisations and foreign governments. These entities should be aware of how they may be perceived and focus on establishing strong collaborative partnerships with international, national, and community-based organisations that are trusted locally and which have a strong understanding of the dynamics in any given region. Such organisations can act as mediators for consultation or help monitor the implementation of projects to ensure they stay on the right side of the law and do no harm—especially where public trust in local officials is low. Where needed, requests for international organisations to provide training or other support should be discussed with local partners.

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