

Governance and Partnership in the China-Africa Relationship: Rethinking Institutional Development and South-South Bilateral Cooperation

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamic importance of the governance and institutional decisions between China and Africa in the context of South-South cooperation. The study, based on a qualitative multi-case study design about Sierra Leone, Ghana, Togo, and the Benin Republic, explores how the governance practices or models of the Chinese, including the developmental pragmatism, the efficiency of the administration, and policy experimentation, are accommodated and localised among dissimilar African political and institutional settings. The information gathered by semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and fieldwork can point to the realisation that the collaboration between China and African countries in governance goes beyond the normal donor-receiving relationships and establishes mutual learning, policy fusion, and capacity development for institutions. Results indicate that African nations do not adopt Chinese forms of governance: performance evaluation systems, computer-mediated public administration, and anti-corruption systems selectively and preserve their national political autonomy. These adjustments have been strongly

linked to measurable improvements in administrative efficiency, service delivery, and anti-corruption effectiveness, as well as the transformative nature of South-South governance cooperation. The paper finds that China-Africa governance dialogue is a viable alternative to the Western-centrist governance approach, which advocates pluralistic, context-directed, and sustainable institutional growth routes that are transforming the global system of governance.

Keywords

China-Africa Relations, Governance Cooperation, Policy Transfer, Institutional Learning, South-South Cooperation, Public Administration Reform, Global Governance, Developmental Pragmatism

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

The coexistence of China and Africa has passed through a complex phase of development throughout the last seven decades of relations that oscillated between the ideological unification of both sides and multilateral relationships in the scope of trade, infrastructural development, governance, and institutional building. In the early period, the Chinese relations with African countries were marked with the case of economic diplomacy and aid-based programmes in the form of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway built in the 1970s, symbolizing the mutual support of the developing countries (Brautigam, 2009; Monson, 2009). However, in the 21st century, these interactions have expanded to include matters of governance, state administration, and policy reform, moving beyond mere economic transactions to encompass the exchange of governance models and institutional practices that continue to play a pivotal role in their relations with other countries (Scalamonti, 2024). These interactions were institutionalized when the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000, which gave both regions the opportunity to negotiate not only economic but also political and administrative cooperation (Sun, 2021).

The past few years have seen an increasing role of China to assist in initiating governance reforms in Africa, and the focus has been on capacity building, efficiency, and anti-corruption in the public sector. The state-oriented style of economic planning, infrastructural growth, and administrative discipline that the Chinese development approach has implemented has won over many African policymakers looking at viable ways of governing on a more practical level based on their economic and social conditions (Mohan & Power, 2008). China provides an example of the approach of non-government, mutual consideration of sovereignty, unlike the traditional Western donor, which is quite consistent with the desire of African leaders to master the system of autonomy and their own forms of government (Brautigam, 2009). This practical approach to interaction in gov-

ernance highlights a more refined process of institutional learning, in which African states gradually adopt the aspects of the Chinese model of governance and do not change the domestic political framework (Han et al., 2022; Stone, 2017a).

1.2. The Rise of South-South Cooperation

The China-Africa governance relations are a critical form of South-South interaction, a model that has put an emphasis on interdependence among developing nations to attain an identical level of development through shared learning and interchange of resources (UNCTAD, 2023). In the past, South-South cooperation developed as an opposition to asymmetrical relationships between the North and the South that were held by Western countries. In this context, China and African nations cooperate on the premise of equality, solidarity, and reciprocity and not conditionality (Alden & Large, 2019). China promotes African governance reforms through FOCAC and other bilateral mechanisms via African civil servant training, exchange of experiences in the field of public administration, and institutional capacity-building projects (Han et al., 2022; Dreher et al., 2016). Such partnerships have also brought with them new discourses of governance in the Global South—focusing on developmental pragmatism, experimental policies, and adaptive learning in institutions (Tan-Mullins & Mohan, 2021). Unlike neoliberal governance approaches associated with Western donors, China-Africa engagement is frequently framed around a development-state logic that prioritise state capacity, long-term planning, and institution-building over policy conditionality (Davies, 2008; Gu et al., 2016). In turn, South-South relations between China and Africa reconfigure development paradigms, facilitate transnational knowledge transfer, and enable African states to reference the Chinese administrative system and adapt it to their domestic contexts (Obeng-Odoom, 2021)

1.3. Global Relevance

The governance aspects of the relationship between China and Africa hold universal implications, as they challenge the Western-based models that have dominated the international developmental discourse. Chinese models of governance such as performance-based public management, e-governance, and centralized planning are examples of granting alternative direction to institutional modernization throughout the Global South (Rochat, 2025). With the incorporation of aspects of such practices in African nations, it leads to pluralization of global governance patterns, which makes the theoretical and practical bases of state-building more varied (Ryder et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the China-Africa alliance has turned out to be a significant experimentation site of global governance. The principles of governance have undergone adaptation. The bidirectional adoption of governance principles—where African actors negotiate and contextualize Chinese approaches—can generate hybrid governance arrangements that blend state-led developmental practices with negotiated multi-actor forms of coordination (Gazibo & Lema, 2022; Huang &

Lesutis, 2023). Such a dynamic interaction does enhance institutional resilience and gives the Global South more say in the international governance institutions. Cooperation among equals, under the influence of China-Africa governance relations, assists in reforming the architecture of international collaboration to be more inclusive and multipolar and to reflect a wide range of diverse development trajectories (Alden & Large, 2019).

1.4. Research Problem

Although the number of literatures on the topic of China-Africa relations is increasing, the predominant part of this science is dedicated to exploration of trade, investment, and infrastructure, rather than the aspect of governance (Han et al., 2022). Although the prevailing pattern is economic studies, limited research has been conducted on a systematic attempt to understand how the governance philosophies within China, including state capacity building, bureaucratic discipline, and long-term policy planning, are being exported, modified, or challenged to the African administrative systems (Dreher et al., 2016). In a similar vein, the bidirectionality of learning, i.e., how the African governance innovations may affect the Chinese policy engagement, is not frequently addressed in the frame of research literature.

The research therefore gives one a major gap, which is that there is no extensive theoretical and empirical insight into governance partnerships between China and Africa. The processes through which policy transfer is realised, how institutional learning works out, and what the long-term consequences of these processes are on administrative reform and better performance in African states are not studied in depth (Mohan & Power, 2008). They set out a research agenda on the political dimension of China's engagements in Africa, challenging simplistic economic or aid-centric accounts and emphasising power, agency, and contestation in Sino-African relations.

1.5. Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

This study focuses on China-Africa governance dialogue to better understand the transformation of governance in the Global South. More specifically, the study aims to understand the China-Africa governance dialogue in relation to policy diffusion, institutional change, and public administration reform. Most of the existing literature on China and Africa focuses on the economic dimensions of the relationship; however, very little attention has been paid to the conceptual/administrative practice/institution model triad of the governance learning processes. Thus, this study seeks to understand how institutional public sector change and the transformation of governance models from China to Africa occur within the dynamic of bilateral relations between China and African countries.

In relation to this, the study examined whether China-Africa governance practices dialogue instigates the convergence of governance practices, or whether it sustains the plural locally rooted institutional frameworks. The governance learn-

ing processes, bilateral relations as the governance model transmission mechanism, and the extent of domestication and institutional transformation of governance in African countries were all be addressed in the research questions. These questions are intended to help explain and understand the complexity of pluralism, South-South relations, and public sector governance in the Global South.

The study is guided by the following research question:

- 1) How does the China-Africa governance partnership shape institutional development in African states?
- 2) What role does policy transfer play in adapting Chinese governance models in African contexts?
- 3) How do institutional learning processes evolve in this partnership, and what impacts do they have on bilateral cooperation?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Governance Theory

Governance theory offers a conceptually based theory that examines the interaction of state and non-state actors in the creation and execution of policy in complex, interdependent systems. The argument presented by Kooimans's (2003) model on interactive governance holds that in governance today, the system is pluralist and that the process of a joining of government, civil society, and market actors in guiding society development is done by networks rather than authority that was centralized at the top. The idea is especially applicable to the relations between China and Africa since both participants engage in a multi-level system of governments where state agencies, private investors, and multilateral organisations play a role in policy coordination and policy implementation (Hyden, 2017). Rhodes (1996) also defined network governance as a concept of managing inter-organisational relationships that can lead to solving problems collectively, and this concept is well applicable in China-Africa cooperation initiatives such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). These models are used to illustrate the way in which the partnerships between China and Africa in governing affairs are developed based on negotiation, resource sharing, and dependency as opposed to pure domination. From a public-value perspective, China-Africa governance cooperation can also be read as a multi-actor effort to generate collective value outcomes through cross-sector coordination rather than command-and-control (Bryson et al., 2014).

The governance theory applied to South-South cooperation emphasizes the fact that South-South partnerships are participatory and flexible. According to Grindle (2012), effective governance in developing nations has to exist within a context, considering the legacies of the past, institutional capacity, and political culture. This approach to contextual governance is also congruent with the non-prescriptive model of China that does not emphasize normative standards of governance but practical outcomes (Routley, 2020). The interaction between the governance capacity and institutional adaptation, therefore, becomes the key to the un-

derstanding of how African states incorporate the aspects of governance practices of China aimed at the centralized planning, the focus upon the evaluation based on the performance, and the long-term developmental vision into their domestic sphere without losing the sovereignty and contextual specificity (Hyden, 2017).

2.1.2. Policy Transfer

The concept of policy transfer theory was created by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) to project the analytical perspective into the manner in which ideas, institutions, and administrative practices are transferred across boundaries and tailored to new settings. Policy transfer may be conducted by coercive, voluntary, and emulative means and be successful based on how compatible the new policies are with the local institutions and cultures. The transfer of policy in the China-Africa context is majorly of the geographical nature of voluntary imitation and co-adaptation instead of dictation. Based on perceived relevance and feasibility, African governments selectively implement Chinese governance innovations, including e-government technologies, reforms in their public service, and anti-corruption strategies (Stone, 2017a).

This process of transfer is one-way; however, it involves reciprocal learning and the co-development of governance models. Evans (2004) posits that the transfer of policies in South-South alliances typically leads to hybridisation, wherein imported policies undergo domestication following specific learning and negotiation processes. So, highlighting that policy transfer is a multidirectional and contextualised process that transcends simple North-South hierarchies, instead involving complex patterns of diffusion and adaptation between developing countries (Evans, 2004; Stone et al., 2020). Conceptually similar to arguments about policy learning and governance adaptation in transnational settings, scholars emphasise how African policy makers engage external models not passively but through selective adaptation and negotiation (Stone, 2017b). So, the theory of policy transfer therefore explains why the China-Africa partnership is not an imitation, as it develops to be a system of complex policy innovation and coping with circumstances.

2.1.3. Institutional Learning

The theory of institutional learning is directed toward the way organisations and governments internalize new knowledge, alter their processes, and reform institutions on the basis of experiential feedback (Argyris & Schoen, 1996). Argyris and Schoen distinguish between single-loop and double-loop learning. In the China-Africa context, institutional learning takes place via systematic interaction in terms of training courses, governance classes, and collaborative efforts in a bid to enhance administrative capacity. African bureaucrats, policymakers, and technocrats engage in structured training programs, study visits, and policy exchange with Chinese institutions, through which they acquire practical exposure to developmental practices and administrative tools that are subsequently adapted to domestic contexts (Roelofs, 2019).

Bennett and Howlett (1992) suggest that learning in the governance partnerships can be instrumental (with an emphasis on technical enhancement), conceptual (by influencing the definition of problems), or social (altering the relationship between organisations). The three forms are prevalent in interactions between China and Africans: African institutions are being taught to employ result-based management (instrumental), are redefining the problem of governance in the light of developmental outcomes instead of political liberalisation (conceptual), and are establishing networks that can reinforce the collaboration between peers (social). In this regard, institutional learning can not only enhance the modernisation of the administration but also help to co-produce the norms of governance that are based on the experience of the Global South instead of Western models (Roelofs, 2019).

2.1.4. China-Africa Governance Dialogue

The process of governance dialogue between China and Africa has undergone changes from ad hoc interaction to institutionalized interaction, which helps create long-term cooperation. With the institution of FOCAC in 2000, it became a watershed in the institutionalisation of these exchanges, which gives a multilateral forum where governance, trade agendas, and a development agenda intersect. As the FOCAC gatherings and ministerial forums have progressively added to the orchestrations, the two parties have broadened their discussions not only on the basis of economic development but also on governance reform, capacity building, and modernisation in administration (Li et al., 2012). The strategy of China is focused on experience sharing in the form of practical cooperation and does not focus on the conditions of prescribed governance but on the ethos of its developmental state. Because baseline administrative capabilities vary widely across the region, assessments of state capacity and institutional performance in Sub-Saharan African provide essential context for interpreting the uptake of external governance models (Isser et al., 2024).

The major aspect of the China-Africa governance talk is the China-Africa Governance Forum (CAGF), which was started in 2018. As a channel of communication between the African officials and the Chinese policymakers and scholars, this forum will share governance solutions, including digital administration, reforming civil service, and anti-corruption policies (Han et al., 2022). As an illustration, the anti-corruption approach led by the Chinese that ultimately established and enforced a centralized system of discipline inspection and performance evaluations has been emulated by such countries as Sierra Leone to implement the same oversight structures, putting a focus on accountability and administrative integrity (Isaksson & Kotsadam, 2018). In Ghana, public administration reforms have emphasized merit-based recruitment and performance management through structured reform programs (World Bank, 2025).

In addition to formal channels, informal governance discourses are also critical. These are associated with training schemes in the name of China's Africa Human Resource Development Fund and the academic exchanges through the bridging of Chinese universities and think tanks. African officials' short and long-term

training in China—alongside scholarships, university partnerships, and other “people-to-people” exchange initiatives—functions as a mechanism for institutional learning and relationships-building that supports China-Africa cooperation (Adovor Tsikudo, 2024; Mulvey, 2025). These exchanges strengthen institutional learning in addition to building personal networks, which promote bilateral cooperation. Scholars emphasise that digital transformation in Africa reflects not only technological change but evolving governance practices shaped by domestic innovation and external engagements, including Chinese involvement in infrastructure and data governance (Bu, 2025; World Bank, 2025). They have, however, also warn against the overgeneralisation of such governance exchanges as being entirely desirable. There are critics who believe that replicating Chinese forms of governance without a high level of localisation could be dangerous, as it may enhance centralized control and lower the amount of democratic participation (Roe-lofs, 2019). However, the vast majority of African authorities have been proactive by opting to practice the elements of Chinese governance conducive to the national development agenda, which signifies a pragmatic and adaptive partnership and not dependency (Bu, 2025).

2.1.5. The Role of South-South Cooperation in Global Governance

South-South cooperation (SSC) is another paradigm of international relations and studies on development, which encourages horizontal relationships between developing countries. The China-Africa partnership is a vivid example of this paradigm, where both countries respect each other, consider each other equal, and are non-conditional (Escobar, 2020; Stone, 2017a). As opposed to the North-South aid structures, SSC focuses more on solidarity and mutual learning as well as on a donor-receiving basis. The South-South cooperation is increasingly understood not only as a modality of development assistance but as a mechanism for governance innovation and institutional learning among developing countries, whereby horizontal exchange and mutual capacity building contribute to context-sensitive policy solutions and organizational reform (Stone, 2017c). The way governance is incorporated in China-Africa cooperation is indicative of more widespread changes in global governance, given the fact that the new economies are now active in the dynamics of policy discourses and institutional innovations. The current global governance environment is increasingly shaped by multipolar dynamics and post-Western institutional contestation, creating both opportunities and constraints for South-South cooperation (Duggan, 2022). China and African nations have engaged each other through forums such as FOCAC and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in propagating new standards of governance that have placed a lot of focus on infrastructure connectivity, social stability, and long-term development planning. Institutional assessments of the FOCAC highlight its evolution from a diplomatic platform into a more structured mechanism for policy coordination, implementation planning, and long-term cooperation (Li et al., 2012; Han et al., 2022). Studies of South-South cooperation are increasingly highlighting how horizontal development partnerships—for example in trade, institu-

tional learning, and collective governance framework—contribute to evolving forms of global governance that extend beyond traditional North-South modalities (Berger & Müller, 2025; Murphy, 2022).

Moreover, the China-Africa alliance also highlights the institutionalisation aspect of SSC that may re-establish institutional power relations. SSC empowers African states to become stronger in terms of governance, which lessens reliance on Western aid institutions, thereby diversifying the origin of world policy innovation (Mawdsley, 2018). In this respect, Chinese activities in Africa demonstrate that governance partnerships in the Global South can produce new forms of knowledge and institutional practices that are more responsive to contextual realities. Such transformation is an indicator of a change to a multipolar system of governance, in which several centers of power exist and interact by cooperation and not competition (Dahi & Demir, 2025). This shift towards a more multi-polar, post-Western order is reshaping the opportunities and constraints for South-South cooperation and its role in global governance (Duggan, 2022).

Simply put, the partnership of governance between China and Africa summarizes the emerging characteristics of the South-South collaboration on the level of political and epistemic initiatives. It allows sharing of learning and experimentation in institutions as well as breaking the dichotomy between Western liberalism and authoritarian developmentalism in building governance models. The novel hybrid governance frameworks that this collaboration creates not only promote African institutional resilience but also introduce the global discourse of governance diversity and inclusivity to the richer (Bello, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present research uses a multi-case study, which is qualitative in nature, to understand how China and African countries have developed to enter into the partnerships of governance in the context of South-South cooperation. The qualitative method is especially the best in investigating social and institutional phenomena that are complex, and the transference of policy, institutional knowledge, and collaboration of governance in particular situations can be profoundly comprehended (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study design (Yin, 2018) helped the researchers examine the actual examples of the China-Africa cooperation in governance and consider a wide range of political, administrative, and socio-economic conditions of various African states.

The multi-case study method improves validity and generalisability of the results because it allows drawing parallels between four nations, i.e., Sierra Leone, Ghana, Togo, and the Benin Republic, that represent a wide range of different systems of governance and different degrees of involvement in the Chinese governance initiatives. These cases provide different insights into the ways of Chinese ideas of governance perception and application at the local level and the ways of mutual learning of African institutions with the Chinese ones. The study is, there-

fore, interpretivist in nature, dealing with the meaning, encounters, and perceptions of players in China-Africa governance discourses.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

In order to answer the research questions properly, the research incorporates three major qualitative methods of data collection which include semi-structured interviews, document analysis and field observations. This is a triangulated methodology that guarantees methodological rigidity and an improved validity of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

3.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews with major stakeholders in the interactions between China and Africa's governing relationships will allow the collection of core data. The target audience consists of the African government officials employed in ministries of public administration, civil service reform commissions, and anti-corruption agencies; Chinese diplomats; development experts; and the representatives of the projects conducted by FOCAC. It is preferred to use semi-structured interviews, as they allow the researchers to explore the experiences of participants more thoroughly and, at the same time, enable them to have a similar thematic focus on the cases (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2021).

In total, we conducted 75 semi-structured key informant interviews across the four case study countries: Sierra Leone (15), Ghana (15), Togo (12), and the Benin Republic (12), along with 21 Chinese technical advisers distributed among the countries in groups of 5, 5, 6, and 5, respectively. Each interview took approximately 20 - 25 minutes and was done either through a personal meeting or online platforms, depending on their availability and logistical factors. These interviews were conducted to explore contextual challenges, policy interpretations, and experiential insights. A review of national policy documents, institutional strategies, and UNESCO reports from four countries was conducted to triangulate and contextualise the primary data. **Table 1** below summarises the distribution of interviews according to countries and professionals' roles.

Table 1. Summary of the semi-structured interviews.

Country	Senior officials of Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDAs)	Middle-Level Managers	Anti-Corruption/Oversight Bodies' Members	Chinese Advisers/Diplomats	Total
Sierra Leone	6	4	5	5	20
Ghana	6	4	5	5	20
Togo	5	3	4	6	18
Benin Republic	5	3	4	5	17
Total	22	14	18	21	75

Source: Authors' field data.

3.2.2. Document Analysis

In addition to the interviews, a systematic analysis of documents was conducted to study official government reports, FOCAC communiqués, bilateral cooperation agreements, policy briefs, and documents related to the reform of the public sector in China and selected African countries. This analysis aims to find out the formal processes, policy goals, and institutional structures of China-Africa governance cooperation. Document analysis also helps the study of the language and discourse to comprehend the ways all governance concepts of capacity building, policy learning, and mutual development are defined in various settings (Bowen, 2009).

3.2.3. Field Observation

The field observation was based on institutions that are involved directly in governance partnerships with China, e.g., national administrative training institutes, anti-corruption commissions, and ministries where China-funded projects within the public sector are being implemented. The observational information was useful in understanding how governance practices are applied on a day-to-day basis, how the relationship between Chinese advisors and African authorities is reached, and what the contextual obstacles are to introducing reform initiatives. To document patterns of behavior, institutional processes, and cultural particularities that define the relations of cooperation, field notes was planned in a systematic way (Angrosino, 2016).

3.3. Sampling Strategy

The research uses the purposive sampling method that enables the researchers to select information-rich cases and respondents that are pertinent and useful to the research goals (Patton, 2015). The participants were selected on the basis of their professional engagement in the Chinese-African governance interactions or having personal experience with the China-assisted reform initiatives. The 75-participants sample size consists of senior officials of ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), middle-level managers, anti-corruption/oversight body members, and Chinese development advisors/diplomats deployed to Africa to make the sample diverse and representative. The case studies of Sierra Leone, Ghana, Togo, and the Benin Republic are based on the three criteria that are: 1) the active membership in FOCAC governance activities, 2) its continued public administration reforms, and 3) its institutional cooperation agreements with China in governing training or anti-corruption programmes. This sampling method ensures that the cases are a continuum of governance capacities and institutional engagement levels.

The field observations were conducted using one structured, non-participant observation protocol in order to promote replicability and transparency at citizen service centres and local councils involved in China-supported governance reforms. These observations were concerned with particular institutional relations, including: 1) routines of frontline service provision (e.g., citizen intake, case registration, and turnaround service delivery); 2) decision-making in briefings and

staff meetings; 3) daily form filling and reporting in digital case management kiosks and systems provided by China-Africa cooperation; and 4) systems of accountability such as case reporting, tracking, and oversight. Observation sites were selected based on their formal involvement in the Chinese-supported reform initiatives, as confirmed by policy documents and project implementation reports. Formal access to institutions was secured in advance via authenticating documents from local government authorities or relevant ministries. All observations complied with ethical and confidentiality protocols.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was done in a thematic and comparative manner by combining several sources of evidence to form patterns, relationships, and theoretical implications. The theoretical analysis was carried out based on the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2019), which entails getting used to data, generating primary codes, theme identification, reviewing themes, and categorising definitions. Field notes were made in real-time, then transcribed and coded in NVivo. These notes used the same thematic framework as the interview data. Evidence from observation was triangulated with documents and semi-structured interviews to corroborate practices, confirm the implementation of what was intended, and determine, as per qualitative research standards, what was intended and what remained undone (Yin, 2018). Some of the themes discussed are policy transfer mechanisms, institutional learning processes, localisation of Chinese models, and outcomes of governance. Prior assessment of digital competence among local council staff in Sierra Leone provide an important contextual baseline for interpreting institutional learning and adoption outcomes (Koroma et al., 2024).

A comparative analysis was subsequently adopted to find out the similarities and differences among the four case studies. Through the comparison of the modalities of cooperation, the institutional developments, and the implications of the governance beginning to change, the research aims to identify the extent to which the national contexts can dictate the acceptance and stability of the Chinese modes of governance. In this way, the researchers were able to go beyond single-case conclusions and achieve a larger theoretical implication regarding the processes of governance partnership in the Global South (Ritchie et al., 2014).

3.5. Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

To measure reliability and validity, the study applies various principles such as triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity. The sensitivity of findings and their credibility is improved when triangulated across the data sources, such as interviews, documents, and observations, as evidence obtained in various perspectives is supported by other evidence (Flick, 2018). Member checking was done through sharing important interpretations with the selected individuals to check the accuracy and authenticity of representations.

This study revolves around ethical considerations. All the participants received

an informed consent notice before the data collection process. Since the participants were not minors, the questionnaire also included a clear declaration of the informed consent statement, allowing participants to agree or decline without any consequence. This further ensured a double-layered consent from participants and complied with ethical standards set by national and international standards, as well as the 2008 revision of the Helsinki Declaration, which prioritises the welfare of participants over scientific or societal interest.

4. Results

This section provides the results of the multi-case qualitative study of the governance relationship between China and four African states, namely Sierra Leone, Ghana, Togo, and the Benin Republic. The analysis is based on combining the data obtained during the interviews, policy documents, and field observations to reveal the manifestation of policy transfer, institutional learning, and governance cooperation in the wider context of South-South collaboration.

Findings are structured according to three major themes based on the findings of data analysis: 1) governance transfer mechanisms and cooperation; 2) institutional learning and adaptation processes; and 3) outcomes and policy implications of China's governance partnerships with Africa. There are also comparative insights to show how the various political contexts influence the receivership and application of Chinese governance models.

4.1. Mechanisms of Governance Cooperation and Transfer

Theme one emphasises the institutional routes according to which the collaboration of the governance takes place. In all four states, the dominance of FOCAC systems, bilateral administrative accords, and capacity-building initiatives represented the primary avenues for China's governance discourse in Africa. The Chinese governance support was normally a combination of institutional twinning, policy consultation, and technical training.

Sierra Leone focused more on anti-corruption and administrative accountability, and it used disciplinary systems of centralisation common to China. Also, the country's ongoing discussions about changing how cities are managed, including ideas to split the capital city, Freetown, into two parts, show how digital governance technologies connect with changes in institutions and resource management in African cities (Bakarr et al., 2026). Ghana concentrated on the civil service reform and performance evaluation systems. Their engagement with China in governance reforms aligns with its broader civil service modernisation agenda, which emphasises performance management, institutional capacity building, and accountability as articulated in the National Public Sector Reform Strategy (NPSRS 2018-2023) and supported through the Public Sector Reforms for Results Project (P164665) (World Bank, 2018).

Togo participated in digital governance partnerships that focused on e-government platforms, whereas the Republic of Benin focused on restructuring pro-

grammes and ensuring transparency in fiscal matters within the local government. These reforms were embedded within national decentralization framework that clarified fiscal responsibilities and strengthened local governance structures (Addis Tax Initiative, 2021; Gouvernement de la République du Bénin, 2022). **Table 2** summarises governance cooperation mechanisms between China and selected African countries.

Table 2. Governance cooperation mechanisms between china and selected African States.

Country	Key Focus Area	Governance Mechanism	Implementation Partner	Nature of Cooperation
Sierra Leone	Anti-Corruption and integrity systems	China-Africa Governance Forum (CAGF) & FOCAC training	Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)	Training, policy consultation, institutional twinning
Ghana	Civil Service Modernisation	World Bank (2018)	Ministry of Public Sector Reform	Capacity building, HR reform, performance management
Togo	E-governance and administrative efficiency	Digital Governance Cooperation Agreement	Ministry of Digital Economy	ICT capacity building, digital training
Benin Republic	Local government reform	Addis Tax Initiative, 2021; Gouvernement de la République du Bénin (2022)	Ministry of Interior and Local Governance	Administrative restructuring, financial transparency

Source: Authors' construction.

The results are that the models that China currently uses in the engagement systems are based on mutual gain, alignment of the institutions, and sharing of knowledge. China does not export one model but modifies governance interventions according to the priorities of different countries in policies. Respondents noted that China consistently adheres to the learning-by-doing philosophy, which focuses on providing assistance rather than dictating conditions.

4.2. Institutional Learning and Adoption

The second theme is associated with the way institutional learning plays out in the cooperation between China and Africa. The review displayed three mutually dependent learning processes: 1) technical learning, which entailed the transfer of procedural knowledge; 2) conceptual learning, which entailed changes in the governance paradigm; and 3) relational learning, which entailed intensified institutional networks. **Figure 1** depicts the institutional learning model in China-Africa. Governance Cooperation.

This model (Figure 1) shows how African institutions first participate in technical learning, i.e., the acquisition of Chinese administrative solutions, e.g., performance-based management systems or anti-corruption processes. In the long run, these experiences lead to a conceptual revolution in which governments begin to place greater emphasis on developmental state ideals, long-term planning, and bureaucratic discipline, all of which are key features of Chinese governing principles.

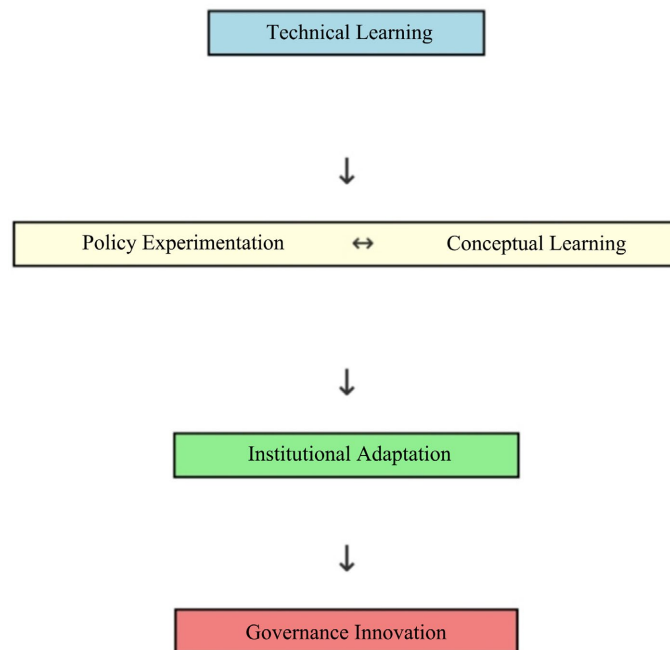


Figure 1. Institutional learning model in China-Africa Governance cooperation. Source: Authors’ construction.

Cross-Country Comparison

Ghana was the best place to experience conceptual learning, as policymakers redefined civil service effectiveness to concentrate on measurable aspects. In Sierra Leone, education primarily focused on practical applications, particularly by imitating the anti-corruption inspection systems used in China. Togo and the Benin Republic had developed relational learning by collaborating with the local governance school and the Chinese administrative school. Table 3 shows the comparative institutional learning outcomes.

Table 3. Comparative institutional learning outcomes.

Type of Learning	Sierra Leone	Ghana	Togo	Benin Republic
Technical Learning	Adoption of centralised reporting systems	Implementation of performance evaluation metrics	ICT-based service delivery models	Fiscal tracking and administrative audits

Continued

Conceptual Learning	Governance efficiency framed as integrity	Bureaucratic modernisation and accountability	Integration of ICT into public administration	Decentralisation and participatory governance
Relational Learning	Institutional partnerships with Chinese agencies	Exchange programmes and joint reform taskforces	Policy workshops with digital ministries	Peer learning networks through governance schools

Source: Authors' construction.

These data affirm that the results of learning depend on situations and are determined by the presence of institutional capacities. As in Africa, Chinese institutions offer technical and conceptual models, which African institutions select and hybridise selectively. This comes in line with institutional diffusion theory, in which recipient states take in foreign governance practices through local reinterpretations as opposed to taking them directly (Scott, 2020).

4.3. Governance Outcomes and Policy Impacts

4.3.1. Deliverables

The third theme is the discussion of the material governance deliverables of China-Africa collaboration. Three large outcomes have been identified, namely: 1) increased administrative efficiencies; 2) better anti-corruption institutions; and 3) better public service delivery. **Figure 2** shows the governance impacts of China-Africa cooperation.

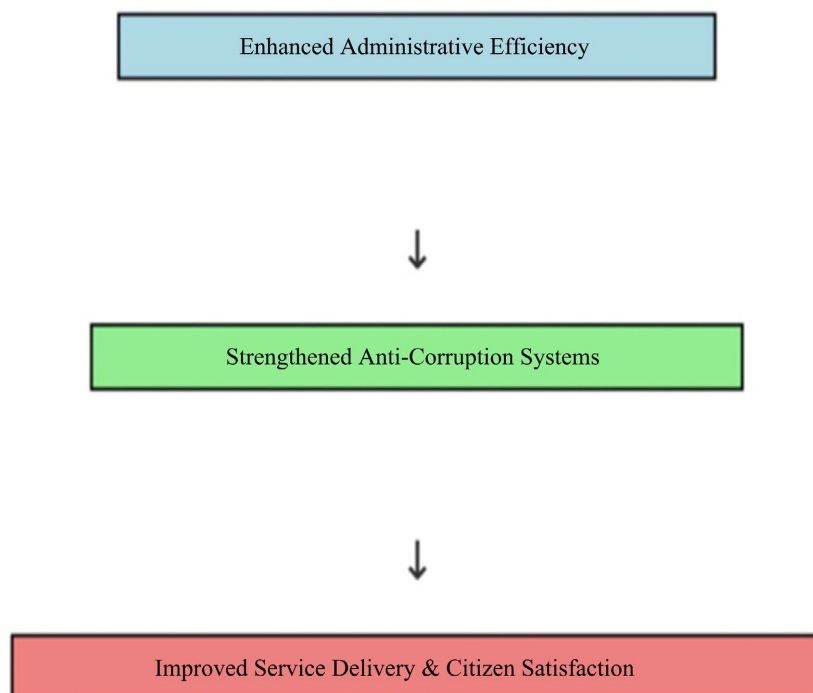


Figure 2. Governance impacts of China-Africa cooperation. Source: Author's construction.

Administrative Efficiency

In Ghana, performance-based reforms supported by China led to more transparent recruitment processes and the introduction of digital personnel management systems. The current drive in the expansion of digital governance tools across African states reflect broader transformation in urban administrative planning and resource allocation, where smart city technologies increasingly shape institutional restructuring and sustainable development trajectories (Bakarr et al., 2026). Sierra Leone's adoption of Chinese inspection models helped streamline public auditing procedures, reducing administrative redundancies. Empirical studies show that Chinese involvement in investing, "gifting" and trading with Sierra Leone and other African countries has helped change some of the perceptions of Africa as a site of mere exploitation of natural resources by Chinese companies. As an example, in the still impoverished Sierra Leone, China has once again become a serious bilateral trade partner and continues to invest in a number of desperately needed development areas (Datzberger, 2013).

Anti-Corruption Strengthening

Respondents in Sierra Leone reported measurable improvements in accountability outcomes. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) assets declaration compliance recorded a towering increase from 52% at the start of 2023 to 96% by November, 2023 (ACC Annual Report, 2023). According to the ACC 2024 report, compliance in asset declaration reached 91.1% (that is, 15,712 out of 17,253) after the commission shift to 100% online asset declaration which was documented through the ACC's digital asset declaration system.

The 2023 ACC report further states that the investigation department handled 441 cases in 2023, with 81 cases concluded, based on the official case registers in the 2023 ACC report. The 2024 ACC report shows that there was an expansion in investigations, prosecutions and assets recoveries including a total amount of twenty-two million and sixty-five thousand one hundred and sixty-two leones (NLE 22,065,162) recovered through non-conviction-based recovery. Assets declaration compliance also increased from about 52% at the start of 2023 to 96% by November, 2023, based on online and hard-copies submission records, that is a 9961 out of 10,376 eligible officials.

According to documented official records, there is a distinct increase in both reported cases and adherence outcomes during the study period, particularly in the year-on-year analysis of audited data on investigation, prosecution, and asset declaration data in the ACC Annual Reports (2023, 2024).

Public Service Delivery

In Togo and the Benin Republic, China-supported e-governance initiatives reduced bureaucratic delays by digitizing administrative workflows. In Togo, a national transparency programme, "Programme de Transparence", was launched in 2023 to strengthen climate transparency systems and reporting (Republic of Togo, 2023). In Sierra Leone, China's involvement in one of the current president's (H. E. Rtd Julius Maada Bio) 5 key priority areas, food security under the initiative "Feed

Salone”, continues to show their support in the most needed areas. It’s believed that the story of Chinese lending is far. Authors have emphasised that China’s oversea lending is far more complex and commercially-driven than being a route to debt-trapping to other nations (Brautigam, 2020). Bakarr et al. (2025) posit in their research on the country’s “Feed Salone Initiative” that 72% of their study’s total respondents acknowledged China’s role and contributions to the Feed Salone Project, while 17.4% of them also indicated that China’s humanitarian gestures to the West African nation strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries.

In terms of public service delivery and institutional performance, the Sierra Leone National Anti-Corruption Commission Strategy (NACS) monitoring through 832 tracked action points shows that: 1) MDAs improved compliance from 82% to 91% and 2) local councils improved compliance from 89% to 99% (ACC Annual Report, 2023).

However, for Sierra Leone, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Annual Reports for 2023 and 2024 serve as the primary sources for all quantitative metrics mentioned both in the previous section and in this section. These metrics originate from institutional records that have undergone auditing, which include registers for cases, databases for asset declarations, records of prosecutions, and the reports that monitor the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS). Interviewees have neither self-reported any quantitative indicators, nor have the authors made any estimations. The interview data have been used solely for the qualitative contextualisation and interpretation of the officially documented trends.

In Togo, online public service delivery is increasingly centralised through the government’s national e-service platform, which currently lists over 100 digital administrative services. It, however, hosts 113 at the time of access, January 10th, 2026. This portal has also experienced rapid growth in usage, as it reportedly processed about 400,000 requests in 2024 (Government of Togo, n.d.), indicating high uptake and expanding online service delivery. In 2023, there was also a launch of a national transparency programme to strengthen climate transparency systems and reporting in.

In Benin, the Ministry of Digital Affairs and Digitalisation launched the e-communes platform in 2025, piloting it in Porto-Novo, Lokossa, and Djougou with plans for a nationwide rollout to strengthen municipal digital service delivery (*Ministère du Numérique et de la Digitalisation [Bénin], 2025*).

In Ghana, the Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS), a digital platform used by the government to manage public sector resource functions, such as employee records, recruitment, payroll, promotion, training, performance management, and workforce planning, became operational in 2023 with full rollout plans (Government of Ghana, 2024). However, the 2025 Program-Based Budget Estimates for the Public Service Commission state that HRMIS had gone live with 12 piloted public service organisations in 2023 to 96 public service organisations (PSOs) on HRMIS in 2025, indicating towering progress after 2023.

Table 4 represents the comparative governance outcomes of our study.

Table 4. Comparative governance outcomes.

Governance Domain	Sierra Leone	Ghana	Togo	Benin Republic
Administrative Efficiency	MDAs improved compliance from 82% to 91%, while local councils improved it from 89% to 99% (NACS report via ACC Annual Report, 2023).	HRMIS, which was piloted with 12 PSOs, became operational with about 70 MDAs in the baseline year, 2023, with a towering increase of up to 96 MDAs in 2025 (Government of Ghana, Ministry of Finance, 2024).	The government's national e-services platform is increasingly centralising online public service delivery (Government of Togo, n.d.).	The official e-communes platform was piloted in the municipalities of Porto-Novo, Lokossa, and Djougou, with rollout plans underway (<i>Ministère du Numérique et de la Digitalisation [Bénin], 2025</i>).
Anti-Corruption	Increase in assets declaration compliance: from 52% at the start of 2023 to 96% by November 2023 (ACC Annual Report, 2023).	Civil service ethics framework updated	A national transparency programme, "Programme de Transparence," was launched in 2023 (Republic of Togo, 2023).	Public expenditure tracking improved
Service Delivery	Reduction in bureaucratic delays	Introduction of one-stop citizen service centers	Citizen satisfaction improved	Fiscal accountability and local transparency enhanced

Source: Authors' construction.

In general, the results indicate that China-Africa governance partnerships are dynamic institutions in relation to institutional building. The FOCAC dialogue of governance has moved into a pattern that is not necessarily based on aid, but one that focuses on transforming the governance in the long run. Although China is still playing the role of a catalyst, the African governments show ownership by being selective in localizing imported practices.

However, these advancements in administrative efficiency and positive results in anti-corruption cannot be completely ascribed to China-Africa governance cooperation. In all four countries, China-supported reforms coincided with domestic reforms and external initiatives (e.g., donor-funded public financial management reforms, civil service modernisation, or integrity initiatives), resulting in an attribution problem typical of multi-actor governance settings. Recent studies indicate that the consolidated presence of China and other traditional partners most often determines development outcomes in Africa, where the interrelation of partnership initiatives and coordination failures produces development results hard to associate with one particular donor (Marson & Savin, 2022). Similarly, we consider Chinese cooperation in the framework of the broader reform ecosystem and not as an autonomous factor. In order to manage the presence of confounding variables, we opted for process tracing and triangulation to assess contribution pathways as opposed to making broad causal claims. More specifically, we: 1) juxtaposed major institutional changes with the evidence-based implementation timelines of China-supported initiatives, 2) evaluated the plausibility of the user described (e.g., digitised reporting routines, inspection protocols, performance

dashboards) construction of the initiatives, and 3) reconciled the testimony of respondents with policy documents, implementation manuals, and reports on the initiatives.

This approach aligns with recent quantitative work that combines different donor effects using geo-referenced project information with donor-specific project attribution strategies, particularly in contexts with multiple relational players emphasizing the importance of time and design attributes for valid claims (Gehring et al., 2022). Still, we draw attention to the residual limits of attribution because governance reforms are, more often than not, “messy” interventions. One additional challenge is that governance reform financing and implementing “footprints” are elusive and opaque, particularly where external project-related liabilities or terms are not captured in the dataset to varying degrees—an issue noted in scholarship on China’s overseas lending and “hidden” debt. This kind of opacity makes it harder to identify the externally-driven reform support and the temporality of externally-driven reform support, which makes it even more difficult to identify and control for confounding factors (Horn et al., 2021). Therefore, our claims are limited in scope and we identify believable mechanisms with evidence that Chinese support, in conjunction with domestic reforms and other international aid, influenced the governance reforms we are discussing, while, to the best of our ability, stating that an even partially clear causal attribution is not possible with the current design.

4.3.2. Operational Challenges and Risks in China-Africa Governance Partnership

Despite the positive governance outcomes documented above, the China-Africa partnerships examined in this study also face important operational constraints that shape their sustainability and long-term institutional impact. In the case of Sierra Leone and Ghana, users repeatedly pointed out ongoing gaps in the usability of IT systems, particularly in the maintenance and management of operational data, which undermine the long-term sustainability of the newly implemented reporting systems, which are supplemented by external technical assistance. This challenge was particularly pronounced in reporting and performance management systems in digital monitoring and evaluation units, where low employee turnover, budgetary inflexibility, and lack of in-house problem-solving support diminished institutional stewardship. Furthermore, this challenge was particularly pronounced among digital reporting and performance monitoring systems in sub-units of monitoring and evaluation, where low employee turnover, budgetary inflexibility, and lack of problem-solving in-house support diminished institutional stewardship. Several mid-level managers expressed resistance to externally imposed, non-contextualised performance management systems, especially when such systems are perceived to have a weak fit with the bureaucracy’s operating culture. All four cases highlighted a concern that although they are implemented, there is a lack of Chinese technical support for configuring and maintaining systems, leading to concerns about local learning, autonomy, and the sustain-

ability of reform.

These empirical findings align with the literature on technology transfer and institutional learning in China-Africa cooperation, which suggests that rapid project implementation does not always lead to deep organisational capability development. Li (2016) suggests that even though training and technical exchanges are components of the China-Africa partnerships, knowledge transfer remains partial and uneven such that host institutions are restricted in their ability to self-manage and reconfigure complex adaptive systems over time. This concern is especially relevant for digital governance reforms, where sustainability is contingent on not only the initial installation but also on continuous system updates, active cybersecurity, and the governance of data. Externally supported reforms, without sustained investments in human capital and organisational processes, create what I may call a “maintenance dependency”, in which the reform partner’s domestic institutions apply routinised operations that depend on the facilitating partner’s operational expertise. The maintenance problems in Sierra Leone and Ghana are cases of a broader political-economy pattern evident in the literature, where there is a disparity between the speed of implementation and the rate of institutional absorption.

The study’s findings, aside from capacity constraints, point to the risks of governance, accountability, and the possible counterproductive effects of reforms. Several scholars noted that Chinese-financed or supported projects operate within contracting and monitoring environments of low transparency and asymmetric information, making them more susceptible to local capture. For instance, Isaksson and Kotsadam (2018) provide subnational evidence that proximity to Chinese aid projects correlates with heightened local corruption, which they explain by changes in norms and supervision frictions, rather than the specific features of Chinese involvement. Gehring et al. (2022) complement this by arguing that, in comparison to World Bank interventions, Chinese development cooperation is more likely to favour authoritarian governance and, paradoxically, deteriorating accountability as the administrative efficiency of processes improves. In this instance, all the mentioned studies provide plausible explanations of the phenomena whereby performance-based reforms face some degree of bureaucratic pushback. Efficiency-boosting instruments may be regarded as externally driven tools that lack commensurate domestic legitimacy or oversight anchoring.

Due to the wide-reaching macro-institutional and political-economy dynamics, there are additional operational challenges that impact the sustainability of the reform processes. One of the most relevant studies in this respect focuses on the opacity and the undisclosed public debt exposure related to China’s overseas lending that inhibits fiscal planning and may trigger unanticipated changes in expenditures that are poles apart and disrupted (Horn et al., 2021) and that may disproportionately affect the maintenance of IT systems, staff training, and system upgrades on a recurrent basis. These kinds of fiscal constraints were indirectly mirrored in interviewees’ comments about sustaining digital reforms after the conclusion of initial project funding cycles. The lack of net positive distributional out-

comes—itself an issue in Chinese-linked projects where there is a belief that local projects do not generate domestic skill development or employment opportunities—countered political and administrative support for reforms (Wegenast et al., 2019). The cumulative impact of the aforementioned literature reinforces the key consideration of the present study that although there are significant improvements in the provision of services and efficiency in the processes of administration that result from Africa-China partnerships in governance, the operational sustainability of these partnerships is a function of the domestic retention of such reforms through mechanisms of integrated accountability and institutional change that are unencumbered by externally driven fiscal arrangements. This is further exacerbated by limited finances, bureaucratic paralysis, and sometimes having to put too much reliance on Chinese technical assistance.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reinterpreting Governance Partnerships in the Global South

According to the results of the current study, it is possible to see that China-Africa governance cooperation goes beyond traditional paradigms of donor-receiving relations, making two-way and practical learning of governance possible. This result goes against the traditional orthodoxy of development that has traditionally offered Western institutions as the main source of governance patterns to the Global South. Instead, findings demonstrate a new model of mutual governance learning, where both China and African countries can adjust their governance approaches with each other and use contextual learning through experimentation (Hodzi, 2019). The evidence from the multi-country experience shows that the Chinese model of governance, based on performance management, long-term planning, and institutional discipline, has been selectively localised in the context of African administrations without pushing the old traditions of governance offline (Sridharan, 2020).

In contrast to the Western model of governance based on a liberal democracy, transparency, and market effectiveness, the model in China is focused on developmental pragmatism, an orientation of results founded on government capacity and policy stability. The diffusion of this model to the African states highlights the increasing agency of African policymakers in transforming governance to reflect localised needs (Scalamonti, 2024). Rather than viewing governance as a universally prescriptive set of liberal-democratic norms, governance in the Global South should be understood as a historically contingent and politically mediated process in which policy disruption, rhetorical reframing, and pragmatic experimentation shape development trajectories according to shifting domestic and global power relations (Kararach, 2022).

5.2. Policy Transfer and Hybridisation

The empirical data indicate that the policy transfer between China and Africa is more of a voluntary and iterative process than one of conditionality through co-

ercion. The African governments copy particular instruments of government, including a centralised system of inspection or an electronic system of governance, and adapt them to the national administrative systems. This procedure is in line with the idea of hybridising policies, where foreign experiences are transformed to strike a balance between foreign innovation and domestic reality (Stone, 2017a). As an example, the Chinese performance appraisals were adopted in Ghana with some modifications that provided participatory methods of oversight to ensure accountability in a democratic system. Correspondingly, the anti-corruption reforms conducted by Sierra Leone were based on the Chinese models of discipline but incorporated them into the existing law of the country.

This hybridisation is an effective indicator of a two-way learning process, which is dynamic and requires the adjustment of the strategies by each actor. China is taught to adapt its governance export institutions to match local institutional specificities, and African states are taught to localise external designs without losing sovereignty (Warwick et al., 2022). The process supports the theoretical assumption that the process of policy transfer in South-South cooperation does not only concern imitation but negotiated accommodation (Stone et al., 2020). This observation undermines previous arguments about the existence of Chinese governance engagements as the risk of diffusing authoritarianism (Kopiński et al., 2011). According to the data, rather, African states have enough agency to sieve and incorporate aspects of the Chinese system of governance that increase effective institutional functioning without undermining democratic accountability.

5.3. Institutional Learning and Capacity Building

The findings also prove the fact that institutional learning is at the core of China-Africa governance alliances. As seen in Ghana, Togo, and the Benin Republic, the way African institutions absorb the concepts of governance used in China is through exposure, training, and local experimentation (Brix & Anand, 2021). This methodology is aligned with the organisational learning model, which assumes that recurring contacts, feedback, and experience help bring gradual change to the institution (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). What in-text citation can suitably be put in the dotted brackets above? One for each, and please also provide the full bibliographic reference in APA style. Please use a peer-reviewed paper. Governance adaptation in multi-polar systems is shaped by process and interorganizational learning where actors adjust strategies and structures in response to shifting contexts (Heikkila et al., 2019).

China's engagement model, which focuses on demonstration rather than prescription of ideas, enables this learning process. The training and site visits help African bureaucrats to observe the practicality of Chinese governance systems in their environments and reinterpret that experience (Haug, 2021). This results in institutional learning within these partnerships that is both technical (involving reforms to operations) and conceptual (entailing changes in policy paradigms towards developmental governance). This bilateral learning helps institutional ca-

capacity sustainability through internalising governance reforms into the personalities of the recipient countries in terms of culture and bureaucracy.

Furthermore, the relational learning aspect enhances inter-institutional trust through the establishment of joint committees, cross-border workshops, and policy dialogues. This reflects the conclusions drawn in general literature on South-South cooperation, where peer-to-peer learning networks are critical in increasing governance resilience in developing countries (Mawdsley, 2018). In this regard, the cooperative models practiced by China are in direct opposition to the top-down technocratic models promoted by Western aid agencies since they enable African officials to act as co-creators of the reform process and not recipients.

5.4. Governance Outcomes and Development State Dynamics

As the findings show, the China-Africa governance relationship has provided a lot of administrative efficiency, anti-corruption, and better service delivery. These improvements are particularly evident in the digitisation of Ghana's civil service reform and Sierra Leone's efforts to enhance accountability. These results can be discussed in terms of the developmental state theory, which emphasises the capacity building of the state as the basis of economic transformation (Leftwich, 2000). The case of China, where bureaucratic discipline has been integrated with developmental planning, offers a feasible model of governance in these African contexts, where there is a balance between efficiency and state legitimacy.

However, these reforms also prompt enquiries about the system's sustainability and political ownership. As Chinese-sponsored projects have short-term benefits, which are tangible and yield short-term benefits, the success of such ventures depends on local institutional continuity and fiscal autonomy. Other African leaders indicated fears that the governance innovations could stall as soon as the policy is no longer pursued and invested in by the domestic resources upon termination of external technical assistance (Tull, 2022). Thus, the sustainability of Chinese-African governance cooperation relies on empowering countries to strengthen their domestic institutional frameworks, ensuring coherence in policies, and integrating the reform processes into national development plans.

However, rather than framing China's engagement in global institutions as purely conforming to Western norms, recent scholarships show that emerging power often pursue pragmatic multilateral strategies that reshape governance through coalition-building, bureaucratic influence, and normative negotiations (Friman, 2025). In this sense, the China-Africa relationship is not just an economic/diplomatic phenomenon but a normative change in the way governance is thought and exercised globally in the South.

5.5. Theoretical Implications

The study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it expands the theory of governance by showing that effective governance in the Global South is achieved not through the delivery of Western institutions but through the hybridisation of multiple governance practices. Second, it advances the policy transfer theory by

introducing the notion of the transference of hybridity, in which transferred policies are refined in the course of context-specific experimentation. Third, it contributes to the institutional learning theory, as it is the empirical evidence of how the intergovernmental partnerships promote capacity building in the long term on the cognitive, procedural, and relational levels.

Recent scholarships in *Global Studies Quarterly* highlight how multipolar dynamics, particularly the alignment pattern of states in international institutions like the United Nations (UN), reflect deeper shifts in global governance and the role of Global South actors in reshaping multilateral outcomes (Nurullayev & Papa, 2023). These observations underscore the necessity transcending the dichotomies between Western and Chinese forms of governance. Rather, Global South governance ought to be understood as an evolving ecosystem characterised by innovation, adaptation, and mutual influence across multiple centers of authority and knowledge production (Acharya, 2014, 2018; Berger & Müller, 2025; Gray & Gills, 2016; Mawdsley, 2018). This point is evident in China-Africa case, where institutional development has been more pluriversal than universal, indicating that pluriversal models, rather than universal ones, should be incorporated into future studies of governance.

5.6. Limitations of the Study

Even though the qualitative multi-case study design presents some valuable insights, it is inherently limited in extrapolation beyond the selected cases and the themes explored in the design do not claim, nor lend themselves to, statistical generalisability. The study is primarily dependent upon the perceived subjective experiences and retrospective memory, which may produce, and is especially more vulnerable to, politically and socially sensitive phenomena like the ones pertaining to the politically sensitive location of the anti-corruption performance management, and the China-Africa engagement in governance, and the politically sensitive location of sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, the governance outcomes in the region of Sierra Leone, and the under-study countries of Ghana, Togo and Benin, have been and less frequently, the sub-Saharan Africa region and the under-study countries have, been located and observed to have unfolded alongside domestic reform agendas, and, been located and observed to have been less frequently, during the same time, from the region of the under-study countries from Africa, the sub-Saharan Africa region, and the under-study countries, during the same time, or from the same location, or from the region, from the same time, or from the region of the under-study countries from the region of the sub-Saharan Africa, from the region of Africa, and the under-study countries of the region, from the same time. The study attempts to limit attribution challenges by means of triangulation across interviews, documents and field notes, but is less definitively positive. As a foreign researcher, some documents and discussions might be deemed to be overly sensitive thereby facing a few restrictions. This may lead to a limited exposure facts there by limiting generalisaion.

However, overcoming these challenges was possible through data triangulation

from various sources and incorporating a variety of stakeholders, which ensured the advancement of empirically informed analyses of the operational functioning of China-Africa governance collaboration within the institutionalisation dynamics of the Global South. This study does not aim to make any general conclusions, but it seeks to offer an empirically informed insight into the functionality of China-Africa forms of governance collaboration within the practical aspects of institutionalisation in the Global South.

6. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the cooperation with Africa in governance on the part of China represents a radical break from the existing order, in its hierarchical structures of aid and governance diffusion. It does not reproduce the donor-recipient relationships of the past, and it does not export pre-cooked governance templates. Rather, it is a process of mutual, practice-based learning, driven by the adaptation of governance structures and the contextual learning of the individual states. The governance models promoted by China were not passively accepted by the African states. China's developmental governance model, with its focus on management by performance, bureaucratic governance, and planning, was selectively adopted by the African states and integrated into their own systems. This hybridisation is the process indicative of the shift in global governance from prescriptive models to those that are pragmatically sound and model a capacity of governance. It illustrates the global shift to the effective, institutional fit containment governance, and stability of the policy, rather than the conformance to the structures of governance. The cooperative engagement in governance with Africa by China continues to refine the concept of governance, which is often confused with the prescriptive structures of governance. It rather demonstrates the governance of countries in cooperative engagement as an ever-changing, flexible, and dynamic process dependent on the circumstances.

The study challenges the empirical application of the dichotomy views that consider the Western liberal and Chinese developmental governance as exclusive or incompatible. Instead, it proposes a governance theory in the Global South, which reflects a more relational pluralistic approach. In this case, the result of pluralistic institutional frameworks is dependent on a negotiated hybrid, iterative reflexive learning, and relational diplomacy. With respect to policy transfer theory, it demonstrates that in the context of South-South relations, the diffusion of policy is largely the result of voluntary adaptation, which fosters agency, innovation, and an institutional level of internal discretion. Additionally, the evidence reinforces the empirical frameworks of institutional learning by demonstrating the phenomenon of repeated exposure and peer-to-peer exchange as the catalyst of intellectual, procedural, and cognitive deep-seated learning. Collectively, the above demonstrates that governance theory has to make a departure from universalistic postulations to consider governance as an ecosystem with multiple determinant and disproportionate local rationalities.

The findings further suggest that, from an African perspective, development

partners in the Global South should focus on structural reforms that promote governance primitive processes such as learning, policy trial and error, capacity building (and not just refrain from reorganisation, administrative restructuring, or best practices from other countries). For African policymakers, the cooperation between Africa and China entails lessons on selective borrowing and contextual adaptation, which, in terms administrative capacity, service delivery, accountability, and political legitimacy, that may be of great value. Nonetheless, the success of such reforms rests on the ownership of the reforms, the fiscal policy commitment, and the alignment of such reforms to the national development plans. Therefore, policymakers should focus on the enhancement of local institutional frameworks, the development of bureaucratic training, and the institutional embedding of processes of reforms in the governance system. For international development actors, the findings compel the need to innovate on the support of governance towards more facilitative and partnership oriented, along the lines of the incremental and path dependent, and support the local envisaged governance innovations. There is need for future research on the evolving nature of pluriversal governance and on the various political configurations to enhance understand of comparative governance in the Global South.

Declaration

All the authors have read and agreed to the details contained in this manuscript and their contributions. They have further agreed for the manuscript to be submitted to Scientific Research Publishing-Open Journal of Political Science and therefore take full responsibility thereof.

Data Availability

The authors confirm that the data that support findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Abu Bakarr Koroma, upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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