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The Belt and Road from a Global Perspective

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Abstract: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a project that has heavy emphasis on basic infrastructure and is sponsored by the government of the People's Republic of China. It deeply impacts Africa's economy in terms of its transport infrastructure investments. Railways, ports, and transnational infrastructure have been made not only as tools for economic integration and trade expansion between countries but also as ways of including people in development processes. Out of many BRI promises, one of them entails the potential to uplift peripheral areas, with the hope of giving these areas that have traditionally been expensive capitals and government investors a chance. Though the claims surrounding this initiative are robust, an interview with current practitioners on the ground brings to the fore a problematic concern: precisely to what extent have the rural poor across the wealthiest subregions of Africa, the continent's least fortunate and most underserved populations, benefited to any significant degree from these infrastructure projects? An exploration of a central contradiction about the BRI: inevitably, it involves the fact that through BRI infrastructure, regions are connected to a better, easier trade system. However, sociopolitical benefits fully tend to be in the hands of the ruling elite, foreign contractors, and the urban centers. However, the majority of those citizens who most need economic injection will stand aside from either the decision-making process or be cut off from partaking in the ongoing benefits. Therefore, projects that should reverse existing disparities might actually maintain or even worsen the old problems. The research topic spans three transport works under the BRI in Africa, which are Tanzania Zambia Railway (TAZARA), Addis Ababa Djibouti Railway, and the Port of Djibouti, with the aim of assessing any poverty alleviation carried directly by these works among marginalized demographics. This paper collects data on project outcomes in more neutral and local indicators, such as job creation, market access, skills development, and recovery of tourist attractions. Pro-poor tourism literature as well as the theory of development are being discussed, and the point is made that the investment size is not the key to solving everything that will end all poverty. Instead, it is about the careful consideration behind each and every project's design and execution as to whether it addresses the systemic poverty that has existed for a long period of time. Participatory planning, transparent governance, and common ownership of capacity building and community, as the last part of policy offerings, are the suggestions provided. These will determine if BRI infrastructure can be turned from a bilateral, top-down pattern of integration and interaction to a real field of multidimensional and accountable development in Africa.

Keywords: Belt and Road; Tanzania Zambia Railway; International trade

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1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which China initiated in 2013, has since proved to be one of the most far-reaching global strategies for development cooperation and infrastructure investment, covering more than 140 countries. The initiative seeks to realize the concept of connectivity and economic integration through infrastructure investments in transport, energy, telecommunication, and other key areas. China's financial and technical assistance under the BRI has been simultaneously welcomed and criticized in Africa, where the lack of infrastructure has always been a barrier to regional growth and human development.

Another pillar of the BRI is transportation infrastructure projects, such as railways, highways, and ports, which play a pivotal role, ushering in economic transformation, easing mobility, and promoting regional integration. But large-scale projects are often praised for their macroeconomic benefits, greater GDP growth, higher trade volume, and more investment inflows; less is known about their social effects, especially for poor and marginalized groups. Integrating infrastructure development with pro-poor policies can diminish spatial inequality, augment access to services, and set new employment opportunities in motion. Nevertheless, due to the absence of such intentional alignment, most of these benefits may pass opportunities by for communities that need them the most, worsening existing inequalities or opening the door to new types of poverty.

This paper steps in precisely to fill the missing link in the literature on the BRI and poverty: through examining the lived realities of poverty alleviation in three major BRI corridors in Africa, the paper can assess the degree to which the TAZARA Railway, the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, and the Port of Djibouti have met their promise of inclusive development. It explores tangible results, such as jobs and incomes created, as well as less direct impacts, ranging from mobility enhancement to empowering local actors and structural transformations in the local economies. By highlighting these aspects, this paper shifts the focus from overall economic indicators to community effects. It thus sheds light on the unexploited potential of infrastructure as a force not only for trade and geopolitical advantage but also for justice and sustainable development. However, this article discusses that while adopting the BRI concept allows China to create an appearance of alleviating poverty via building long-distance travel infrastructures such as railways and ports, these lengthy projects in essence fail to deliver direct and sustainable mitochondrial improvements in the lives of the poorest populations. Although macro-level benefits from trade and connectivity are evident, the import and export benefits are usually short-lived and mostly end up benefiting powerful politicians and local elites, foreign contractors, and the developed urban centers. In Africa, the rural poor and marginalized groups who would be expected to benefit from these wealth-generating and poverty reduction policies usually remain mostly absent from decision-making processes, and their efforts towards achieving these goals are undermined by a lack of connections to the resources, such as money, that could help them out. That being said, many of these projects do not work for flipping these inequalities or creating new ties of dependency that could lead to new projects staying with poverty.

This paper integrates the pro-poor tourism and development literature, reports at regional levels, and recent policy discussions, in order to scrutinize the existing gap between what the BRI delivers in theory and in actual practice. It not only confirms the best ideas incorporated in actual investments but also reveals that the prevailing structural obstacles to equity are still in place and retain global investment reform capacity. While placing the discussion within the case studies of TAZARA Transport Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia railways, and the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway and Port of Djibouti, this analysis demonstrates that if the unequal historical and institutional contexts are ignored, mere technical infrastructure can easily magnify these inequalities. Critical discussions are conducted on both cases where pro-poor concerns are subordinated for the purposes of efficiency, debt servicing, or geopolitical leverage, and the situation where pro-poor concerns are lacking from the projects. This paper, therefore, maintains the stance that all future BRI projects should be redesigned so as to bring poor communities meaning and not only mention them in brochures printed in English, but involve them mechanistically. The recommendations that are offered have their emphasis on the development of governance systems, participation of people, vocational training, and the institution of clear accountability mechanisms. These functional levels alone can allow infrastructure investment to be the real controller in the positive and long-term development of the regions affected by the endemic poverty if its orientation is done in this way. Therefore, the research question for this paper is: "To what extent do China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) transportation infrastructure projects in Africa directly contribute to poverty alleviation among the most marginalized communities, and what structural or governance barriers hinder their effectiveness?"

Most poverty-reduction studies maintain that with proper planning, infrastructure can be pro-poor and act as a stimulus in the fight against poverty, provided that it is associated with more markets, better access to employment, and increased mobility of people and populations who need it the most. According to Ashley et al., "while tourism and infrastructure development should be witnessed by the poor, by virtue of their sufficient nature, these sufferings should stimulate local livelihoods and spatial poverty traps." In a similar context, the Asian Development Bank [1] says, "the presence of physical infrastructure, especially in the transport sector, provides the fundamental requirement for the development of the private sector, agriculture, and trade at the community level," and these are the areas of poverty alleviation.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

China's BRI has seen considerable scholarly attention pour into its manifold dimensions, especially on the issue of exporting the development by financing infrastructure. While a number of studies admit BRI's chances for economic boost, connectivity, and visibility of trade, there are increasing doubts about the BRI's power to directly tackle poverty, especially in African countries with systemic inequality and political fragility. This study engages this debate by examining the effects of BRI transport infrastructure in combating poverty through a multi-dimensional approach drawing on literature from Pro-poor Policy and Pro-poor Development Economics Literature.

The development policy supports the idea that infrastructure can be a significant driver of poverty alleviation by facilitating access to markets, providing the opportunity for more mobility, and reducing restrictions of isolation. As a World Bank report mentions, transport infrastructure has high potential for poverty reduction only if it is coupled with accessibility points in rural areas, supportive feeder service, and inclusive pricing. The importance of complementarity of investments and social policies is necessary for such resources to reach the intended beneficiaries; otherwise, these investments will remain bypassing the very people they are intended to help.

Literature on the inclusivity and equity concerns over BRI projects is reflected in a wide range of publications. China's investments received an overwhelming welcome in Africa because of their magnitude and speed. However, he noted that many poor communities did not benefit from their investments because of inadequate safeguards and low enforcement capacity. This divide, therefore, of infrastructure expansion and poverty alleviation is hindered by a lack of transparency and a lack of public participation. Given in particular the arguments made by Hillman, debt sustainability concerns, low transparency, and engaging only state-owned Chinese firms weaken local ownership and reduce the developmental significance of these projects. These critiques indicate that infrastructure under BRI may bring about a boost in GDP or trade volume, but without targeting often-low-income populations, and with no chance of sustainable development.

A nurturing setting for this is what is perceived as the “elite trap,” whereby elites, foreign investors, and urban centers become those that chiefly benefit from development projects [2]. This is one scenario in which development initiatives designed to benefit the poor unwittingly manifest as more support to those already positioned to benefit under circumstances where governance is weak, and corruption is an integral part of the development worldview [2], who assert that without full inclusion of locals, the reality of the unfair distribution of resources, which end up institutionalizing inequality is a common feature of tourism development. Such observations can be taken to highlight the need for including local communities in the decision-making process, and by extension, they highlight the vital role of participatory planning and community engagement as a basic building block of equitable infrastructure development.

Although BRI projects are known to be very ambitious, there are still considerable gaps in the literature in relation to how the poorest communities are affected by these projects in their daily lives. This is the gap Githaiga et al. analyzed by exploring the BRI trends across the African regions. They reveal that the infrastructural component of the BRI [3], although both transformative in scope and depth, lacks a mechanism for equitable share and long-term equitable development [4]. Similarly, as Foster and Briceño-Garmendia reminded us, there are limits to what infrastructure alone can deliver in terms of an inclusive society, for without policy interventions, the poorest people remain invisible from the main corridors of transport.

Importantly, all these studies reveal a common pattern: even though BRI’s focus on Africa’s landscape with its scale and ambition has most commentators praising it, the social aspects are rather mixed. Infrastructure is not a pro-poor tonic in its own right. Its ability to contribute to poverty reduction can be better guaranteed if such complementary infrastructure reforms are undertaken, besides a clear governance framework and community engagement. This paper follows this line of thinking to document and analyze three of BRI’s strategic projects—TAZARA, the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, and the Port of Djibouti to investigate how these initiatives help in alleviating poverty directly. Specifically, this paper will fill an existing gap by reversing the broad filter of academic work that looks at macroeconomic

indicators and moving toward an impact analysis at the community level.

3. Case studies and impact analysis

3.1. The Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA)

The Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), constructed between 1970 and 1975 with massive financial and technical aid from the Chinese government, was initially perceived as a gigantic infrastructure project that would promote trade linkage among the regions while liberating Zambia is no longer reliant on apartheid countries’ trade routes. The 1,860-kilometer railway that links Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia, with the port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, was pivotal in connecting the communities that use these countries as a trade route to the foreign markets. Locally, TAZARA fostered employment creation and offered rural farmers, who would otherwise have no access to markets, an opportunity to sell their produce, leading to agricultural diversification and small income generation. Rogerson claimed that transport infrastructure such as TAZARA [4], “diversifies rural economies and reduces poverty through linkages to markets, employment, and services,” particularly when it links people at the edges of disadvantage to the centers of growth.

TAZARA also acted as a catalyst for some local development, such as settlement creation, small-scale trading establishments, and the erection of utilities like water supply plants and mills. Thus, a bottom-up economic activities upheaval took place, which went well with pro-poor development expectations during the period. Nevertheless, the railway's transport capacity has been greatly limited due to chronic financial underfunding, poor mismanagement, and dilapidated infrastructure. However, Githaiga et al. maintained [3], "BRI-related infrastructure projects, while transformational in scope, often face sustainability concerns that compromise long-term developmental equity," leading to reduced reliability in services and freight movement, which constrained the functionality of TAZARA and was gradually making it irrelevant to the poor economy, especially to smallholder farmers and informal traders. This aligns with Hillman's critique that BRI infrastructure projects often lack transparency and long-term planning structures, which undermines their sustainability and weakens developmental outcomes.

However, the benefits of TAZARA's economic linkages were not well spread. Urban concentrations and individuals who had capital to invest or connections to those who could help them benefited more than the majority of people in the disconnected rural areas, who remain disconnected from the decision-making processes. They also remain cut off from the downstream benefits. This is in support of De Beer and De Beer's argument that, without inclusive Planning [5], infrastructure projects may become "vehicles of exclusion rather than empowerment," offering dividends to the privileged people while the marginalized, poor, and sick remain at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid.

Appreciating its strategic importance as well as symbolism, but more importantly, as a path to people-to-people integration, China, Zambia, and Tanzania signed a trilateral agreement in September 2024 to revamp the TAZARA Railway and travel. Their plan to modernize the railway entails transforming the railway corridor into an important rail-ocean transport corridor in East and Southern Africa. If the project is implemented, it signals the revival of regional transport linkages and supports economic recovery. However, its poverty-reducing potential can only be realized if accompanied by committed governance reforms, local employment quotas, and rural servicing integration. Ashley et al. warned that infrastructure alone cannot suffice. "It must be embedded in broader pro-poor strategies for the 'poor' to be active participants in the process of development rather than passive recipients." Should the TAZARA Railway be bereft of integration with such poverty eradication, it may once again not be able to deliver on its promise of poverty reduction.

3.2. Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway

The Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway is an electrified standard-gauge railway, commissioned in 2016, which stands as a flagship BRI initiative in East Africa. Covering some 752 kilometers in a direct line between Addis Ababa and the Port of Djibouti, the main port of entry and exit for over 95% of Ethiopia's imports and exports—the railway dramatically slashes transit times from several days to around 12 hours. This improvement in transit time leads to lower transportation costs for traders and farmers, especially for those within the corridor. The 2007 Asian Development Bank emphasizes that "transport investments have a strong pro-poor impact when they improve rural connectivity and reduce market isolation," which the railway ultimately achieved by allowing people and goods to move more freely.

Independent of these poverty-alleviating prospects, the corridor has promoted small-scale tourism and agriculture-related seasonal work mobility by providing better accessibility between urban and peri-urban areas.

The mobility improvements made possible by the corridor also presented opportunities for the growth of informal trade, local hospitality enterprises, and a rising tide of interregional labor migration. Spenceley et al. argued that "access to infrastructure is often a critical enabler for local entrepreneurship, especially when supported by complementary policy and training measures." But these conditions have not been systematically created along the Addis Djibouti corridor.

Thus far, however, the railway's poverty-reducing benefits have remained limited and patchy. The key difficulty for Ethiopia is in assuming a massive debt burden because its self-financed centerpiece was taken out through loan contracts with China. Githaiga et al. noted that "while the promise of BRI infrastructure may hold out long-term rewards [3], there is a rising worry that debt sustainability is the key issue in assessing BRI development legitimacy in Africa." Furthermore, the Chinese contractors and engineers who dominated the project's building and early functioning left only small numbers of local workers to do low-skill tasks, resulting in minimal capacity-building prospects. Dollar highlighted that the absence of local capacity-building in many BRI projects leads to missed opportunities for economic Empowerment [6], particularly when high-skilled roles are filled by foreign firms.

Foster and Briceño-Garmendia similarly argued that infrastructure must be embedded in complementary local systems like feeder roads and local labor policies to generate pro-poor outcomes.

Accordingly, although the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway reduced trade costs and presented options for regional economic diversification, its role in poverty alleviation has been indirect and ephemeral, with little longer-term empowerment of Ethiopia's poorest communities. An encompassing governance mechanisms, highlighting local employment, skills transfer, and pro-poor orientation of interventions is crucial for this infrastructure to deliver on its revolutionary promise.

3.3. Port of Djibouti

Located at the point of convergence of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the Port of Djibouti, a regional maritime platform for Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, connects the three sectors. China, in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, has strongly committed to the renovation and enlargement of the port capacity and, simultaneously, the adjacent facilities of the Doraleh Multipurpose Port and Free Trade Zone. Changes have improved the port's position as one of the top-level Africa logistical centers, boosting cargo turnover for Djibouti and landlocked Ethiopia. Hence, the site becomes an unrivaled venue for regional commerce. Chin and Gallagher argued that such placements as "China's strategy in Djibouti is not only about trade efficiency, but about embedding itself into the architecture of global connectivity through logistics and finance" [7].

From an economic perspective, the financial resources allocated for the construction and development of the logistics and ancillary services stimulate some level of income generation for the locals. Similarly, the prospect of more cruise tourism with better port access has piqued the interest of foreign investors, and this has offered an opportunity for development in the hospitality and service industries. As Winter observed, "heritage tourism infrastructure linked to BRI logistics platforms could become a strategic tool for inclusive economic participation, provided it is locally anchored." Despite such scenarios, the impact achieved in poverty reduction remains minimal.

However, one major concern area is the deep linking of the local economy with the port industry. Most of the activities and control in the port are dominated by the Chinese state-owned enterprises, with hardly anything transferred from the Chinese setup to the Djiboutian community vis-à-vis training or ownership. This situation led to a state of dependency while depriving the nation of the value capture. De Beer and De Beer stated that "external control over strategic assets can inhibit community agency and prevent equitable development" [5], which may be the case with Djibouti as well. This shows the structural concern raised by Dollar and Hillman [6], who both mention that BRI projects often replicate dependency rather than foster autonomy, especially when ownership remains external and governance opaque.

As for the money already spent on the port extension, mostly debt financing through the Chinese loans, it has caused disputes on the issue of financial sustainability. Githaiga et al. [3] stated that "geopolitical entanglements and debt dependence may ultimately undermine the sovereignty of small African states under BRI," in reference to Djibouti being more exposed to the Chinese strategic power.

On the one hand, the Port of Djibouti has considerably improved macroeconomic statistics and connectivity of the region. However, these effects are only superficial as long as no institutional changes are initiated that give labor access to local communities, transparently govern the system, and share the benefits equally. As to BRI projects, for leveling up the reduction of poverty, the initiative must go beyond the tangible infrastructure and reach the intangibles of personal development, social participation, and economic independence.

4. Key challenges identified

Although the development of transport infrastructure within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has a significant potential to alleviate poverty in African countries, serious difficulties still prevent its effective implementation in similar environments. Equally important, the lopsided focus on technical aspects in planning has deprived local communities, particularly vulnerable groups, of their legitimate roles in the decision-making processes concerning prioritizing projects. Subsequently, this scenario leads to the practical consequences of investments in infrastructure are being oriented outwards and being dominated by foreign or even national actors, who are not in tune with the developmental needs of the area. As De Beer and De Beer contended [5], if the deprived people are excluded from the planning procedures, "development is going to be something that happens to them rather than with them," and due to that they become more dependent instead of being empowered.

Another principal issue is the distribution of the advantages; they are not equally shared among all members of society. Some infrastructure investments, which lack adequate social frameworks, are skewed in favor of political elites, urban centers, and foreign companies that may be taking on construction and operations. In this sense, the situation has been observed through all three cases, in such a way that high-skilled jobs, procurement contracts, as well as governance influence, were in many cases largely reserved for Chinese firms or local elites at the expense of poor communities. In the view of Rogerson [4], only deliberate pro-poor orientation would alleviate the prevailing imbalances, while envisaged infrastructure can end up intensifying the existing disparities.

One more crucial obstacle is the question of debt sustainability, which is the main concern when financing BRI projects. Most African states have incurred intolerable debts, which are required to be settled in time; these, in turn, weaken the country's financial capacity to expand other areas such as healthcare and education. Githaiga et al. warned that "high debt exposure is linked to BRI participation... diverts... public funds away" [3], especially in the event of defaults on loans being prioritized over internal spending. On the one hand, this can serve as the structural pillar for governments to be trapped in and, in the end, unable to implement protectionist policies or effectively deal with local development issues.

In conclusion, these difficulties show the relevance of changing the approach to building infrastructure, involving the community, and striving for economic growth, which will countermeasure poverty alleviation among African nations.

5. Recommendations

For BRI transportation infrastructure to fulfill its role in poverty alleviation across Africa, it is necessary to adopt a more inclusive and socially responsible implementation. First, infrastructure investment should be linked directly to poverty alleviation goals through job guarantees, local procurement requirements, and civil works programs/ Community Development. Provided that railway line areas and ports of call are favorable, disadvantaged populations must be the primary focus when operating and planning projects, especially when these projects generate meaningful economic opportunities. Infrastructure that can only be reached by connecting people to markets and services will not improve living standards without these policies, which were designed to target marginalized communities.

It is also imperative to provide local capacity building through vocational education and technical training. One of the main criticisms of the case studies, particularly the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, is the failure to transfer any significant technical information to the local workers. However, when a host country spends time and resources on workforce development and training, it can be assured that new infrastructure projects will bring about not only temporary jobs for local people but also long-term employment and management opportunities for them. Beyond that, it increases the sustainability of new infrastructure projects and reduces dependency on overseas operators. As Dollar noted [6], without local skill development and labor participation, infrastructure investments risk becoming isolated from domestic economic empowerment.

Further, the principles of governance transparency and independent evaluation should be introduced at all stages of project planning and implementation. Data collection of social and economic indicators, such as job creation, income growth, and essential services, with financial indicators, should be integrated into the monitoring systems. The infrastructure projects can thus be regulated by independent bodies, ideally with the participation of local civil society organizations, to ensure that they serve the local population instead of only the interests of politicians and big corporations. This is consistent with Hillman, who said that the absence of accountability, transparency, and oversight has undermined the developmental value of many BRI projects.

And lastly, the collaborative partnership approach is a primary strategy that should be adopted. Through the involvement and participation of governments, NGOs, development agencies, and local communities in all decision-making processes, and in what they get as a benefit, almost everything can be accomplished. As Chin and Gallagher observed [7], inclusive frameworks not only add to the effectiveness of development but also scale up its legitimacy. Similarly, Rogerson and De Beer and De Beer both stress that participatory governance and bottom-up planning are essential for infrastructure to truly support marginalized groups and avoid elite capture [4,5]. Additionally, by introducing the possibility for joint responsibility, the future BRI initiatives will be more likely to concern themselves with overcoming the problems of poverty and achieving the fair development of all regions of Africa.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I undertake a critical assessment of how much, if at all, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) transportation infrastructure efforts in Africa. TAZARA Railway, the Addis Ababa Djibouti Railway, and the

Port of Djibouti play a direct role in alleviating poverty for the continent's most disadvantaged and poor groups. Even though transporting goods and people across the BRI countries has been hailed for its vast scale and trade potential, there are still many instances where the BRI's outcomes are not pro-poor or inclusive. According to the results reported in this study, there seems to be a gap between the infrastructure sector development and the real-world conditions of the poor and informal economies of rural Africa.

On a different but related note, these big transport infrastructure projects, notwithstanding their mandate of trade facilitation and regional migration, have continuously neglected the low-income segment in the communities in their design, implementation, and long-term management. The TAZARA Railway, hailed as a symbol of liberation and economic integration, has unfortunately fallen victim to a lack of international support and the marginalization of rural populations. Nevertheless, while the Addis Ababa Djibouti Railway has helped to lessen the travel time and bolster trade, it was mainly built and operated without the establishment of the local workforce development and knowledge transfer. In the same way, even if the Port of Djibouti transformed into a major logistical ground, but it could not definitely prove to be a key factor in effectively improving the economy or alleviating poverty in the neighboring areas. In these three cases, decision-making processes and economic benefits have reached mainly the foreign firms, the urban elites, and the state actors.

Infrastructure alone is not automatically pro-poor, as the examination of the literature added further evidence on this matter. The suitability of transport systems to tackle poverty can only be achieved through the connection of these systems with other complementary policies comprising rural access roads, vocational training, local procurement mandates, and participatory governance. A group of researchers such as Dollar [6], Hillman, and Foster & Briceño-Garmendia particularly emphasized the role of social measures, mapping out impressive inclusive planning and accountability.

As for the future of BRI infrastructure projects in Africa, it is recommended that they adapt from the current top-down, state-to-state model to a people-centered approach. Such transformation, in particular, should encompass incorporating community needs into the planning and budgeting process, ensuring local representation in decision-making, and establishing tracking and monitoring mechanisms. This can include not only connectivity for long-term local ownership and capacity building but also equitable access. BRI's BRI campaign may end up being a replication of the inequalities that it claims to combat if it does not reform these systems.

The bottom line is that if BRI is to be a real driving force of inclusive development in Africa, then it has to render more than just linkages. BRI should ideally not only provide connectivity but also empowerment, equity, and sustainable transformation on the side of the continent's poverty.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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