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The Impacts of "the Belt and Road Initiative" on the Development of African Countries: Case Study of the Republic of Mali

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Abstract: This article aims to take part to the debates which have been going for some time on China-Africa cooperation in general, on Chinese investments in Africa within the framework of "theBelt and Road Initiative" (BRI) in particular, by studying the potential benefits of this Initiative in the process of the development of infrastructure projects, with emphasis on roads and railways infrastructures. By focusing the study specifically on the projects, notably railway projects in the Republic of Mali, the main questions which emerge from the debates generally relate to the results in terms of profits, and the economic gains. These questions also relate to problems linked to costs, regard with the difficulties the said costs induce, in relation to the burden of debt that many African countries drag like a ball and chain. Finally, the questions relate to the way in which China and African countries would commit in the future to deepening Sino-African cooperation through the projects of the "Belt and Road Initiative", particularly in the areas of transportation. infrastructures. With specific reference to railways and roads in the Republic of Mali, this article has drawn on data from the accessible literature on road and railways transportation infrastructures in Africa, and Mali. The article also relied on interviews with Malian personalities, managers of Chinese companies in Mali, and ordinary Malian people concerned by the issue. The conclusions reached in the article show that the railways and roads built, under construction, or planned by China will generate the economic and social development of Mali, the West African sub-region, and Africa in generally, through the mobility of populations, services, goods, and merchandises. Taxes levied on the transport of people and goods will bring substantial revenue to the state of Mali, and to the governments of neighboring countries, thanks to better monitoring of markets which promote multifaceted exchanges. Railways and roads will help strengthen intra-country traffic, encourage sub-regional integration, and improve national, regional and continental trade.

The recommendations of the article are: To make the impacts of the "Belt and Road Initiative" more readable and the different projects more transparent, it is important to further involve all parties (states, businesses, local populations) concerned by the different projects. It is also important to examine financing mechanisms in order to make credits more accessible, more affordable and easily repayable within reasonable time frames.

Keywords: impacts, Africa, Mali, China, Belt and Road Initiative, economy, infrastructures, roads, railways, transport, development, trade, financing, projects, cooperation, populations, integration, African countries, African Union (AU)

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I. Introduction

Since 1978, when the "Reform and Opening Up" policy was launched, the People's Republic of China has developed a dynamic economy. The country has further opened up its economy and its foreign policy to the rest of the world[1]. The numerous reforms, particularly in the economic field, which have had remarkable successes, have generated extraordinary progress in all sectors of the development. This extraordinary progress has brought changes madding China "the factory of the world", the "locomotive of the world economy". After just over three decades of economic reforms, China has moved from internal reforms to a broader opening to the world, involving the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). Launched by Chinese President, Xi Jinping on September 2013, the "Belt and Road Initiative" has become a new model of global development, considered asa common public good of humanity. Ten years after its launch, the "Belt and Road Initiative" has gone from a concept to a key platform, whose effectiveness is remarkable on economic, political and socio-cultural levels. Since September 2013, the "Belt and Road Initiative" has also revealed itself as a true symbol of international cooperation, an important instrument of China's policy of broad opening to the world. The implementation of the "BRI" has proven to be crucial for the development of infrastructures, investments and trade for all countries all over the world, especially for developing countries, for African countries. It has proven to be crucial for African countries which do not have access to the sea. It has also proven to be of capital importance for the creation of jobs and the realization of the aspirations of African people to live a better life.

On the economic level, the "2022 report of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)[2] of the People's Republic of China, notes that in 2021, trade in terms of goods from China with countries which joined the "Belt and Road Initiative" amounted to more than 11.6 trillion Yuan. That represents a remarkable increase compared to previous years. The said report also notes that during the same year, direct investments from China to countries members of the "Belt and Road Initiative" totaled more than 138 billion Yuan. Direct investments from countries joining the Belt and Road Initiative in China reached $11.25 billion, surpassing the record of $10 billion for the first time. (NDRC report, 2022)[3].

On the political level, from 2013 to the beginning of the year 2023, China has signed more than two hundred (200) cooperation agreements under the "Belt and Road Initiative" with nearly 151 countries and 32 organizations all over the world. This massive membership has made it possible not only to expand the circle of China's partners within the framework of the BRI, but also and above all to certainly make this initiative the largest multilateral, multifaceted, and investment cooperation initiative proposed. by a single country. In this regard, some scholars and observers of the international cooperation predict that the total financing of the "Belt and Road Initiative" will reach nearly 1.3 trillion US dollars by the year 2027. Others estimate that on the longer term, that is to say, by 2049, the total financing of the Belt and Road Initiative will be between 6 trillion and 8 trillion US dollars.

As unique initiative the "Belt and Road Initiative" has come a long way on a global scale since its launch by President Xi Jinping. In this regard, China's involvement in the "Belt and Road Initiative" through numerous cooperation agreements, generally financed by Chinese financial institutions and Chinese investments, has led to the achievement of "more than 3,000 cooperation projects, to stimulate almost 1,000 billion US dollars in investments, to create more than 420,000 jobs for partner countries and to turn into reality the dreams of many people all over the world to have railways , roads, airports, ports, bridges, hospitals, schools, universities, and escape from poverty"[4]. Beyond this observation, the turnover of Chinese companies involved in the "Belt and Road Initiative" projects in the various member countries recorded more than 600 billion Yuan, or nearly 59% of the all-total Chinese projects processed abroad during the same period. Reading this figure highlights purchases of engineering and construction materials amounting to $500 billion (NDRC, 2022) [5]. At the end of 2021, around seventy-nine (79) zones of economic and commercial free trade had been built in twenty-four (24) countries members of the "Belt and Road Initiative". In this regard China has invested billions of US dollars, generating more than 4,000 job opportunities for the people of the host economies (Xinhua, 2022) [6]. Today, such a grandiose and unprecedented initiative in the history of the international cooperation has proven to be the most gigantic and ambitious project for global development in which neither the International Community nor China has ever been engaged before. All that, makes the "Belt and Road Initiative" one of the most discussed topics in debates on the evolution of the world, on the global economy, on the role of China in international relations in general, and in the global economy in particular.

In African continent, the "Belt and Road Initiative" offers different countries the opportunity to increase and energize the industrialization process. The industrialization process was well underway in many African countries following their accession to independence. That was the case of the Republic of Mali, a former French colony. Thanks to its cooperation with China, Mali had succeeded in establishing the basis of its economic development by building about twenty companies and industrial units between 1963 and 1970. This industrialization process has been undermined, destroyed by the policies of "structural reforms" (also call structural adjustments) imposed on developing countries and African countries by Western powers through international financial and economic organizations such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, being part of the Belt and Road Initiative allows African countries to initiate a new industrialization process and concretely begin the realization of "Aspiration 2 of Agenda 2063 of the African Union", the vision of African Union to create more infrastructural connections across African continent. That is also one of the fundamental reasons why, to date, 52 African countries out of 54, as well as the African Union Commission, have signed cooperation agreements within the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative".The Belt and Road" aimed at filling the infrastructure deficit of African countries, increasing foreign investment, developing trade, and reducing poverty. African countries began to join the BRI in 2015 with South Africa, Cameroon and Somalia. It was in 2018 that a massive membership of African countries was noted, when twenty height (28) African countries signed the partnership agreement of the "Belt and Road Initiative". In 2019 the Republic of Mali, which is at the center of our study, signed an agreement to join the Belt and Road Initiative.

The year 2020 has been marked by the advent and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation has disrupted activities and events of all kinds on a global scale. During this year 2020 no accession of African countries was noted for the simple reason that no memorandum of understanding relating to the Belt and Road Initiative has been recorded. During the year 2021, many countries such as; Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe have actively marked their membership in the Belt and Road Initiative. These memberships have contributed to the exponential development of the Belt and Road Initiative on African continent. Malawi has been the last country to sign the Belt and Road Initiative memorandum of understanding in March 2022. As of April 2022, only two (2) African countries, Eswatini and Mauritius, had not signed the memorandum of understanding relating to the Belt and Road Initiative (Xuewu, 2022)[7]. In 2023, the assessment of the situation of the Belt and Road Initiative at the level of African Continent shows that approximately 96 per cent of all African countries have signed the Belt and Road Initiative memorandum of understanding. The case of Mauritius is certainly linked to the fact that this country has already signed a free trade agreement with China in 2019. In this regard, the signing of a memorandum of understanding relating to the Belt and Road Initiative can therefore part of a very probable process. It should be noted that the fact of having signed bilateral trade agreements does not exclude the signing of the memorandum of understanding within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. The rich literature on the Belt and Road Initiative teaches us that numerous studies have been carried out on the impacts of the said Initiative on the infrastructure development in Asian and European countries. However, there are few studies on the impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative on the development of African countries. The few studies which exist on this topic do not shed sufficient light on the question relating to the impacts of BRI in terms of results, advantages, and gains. Also, the few existing studies do not shed light on the challenges of Belt and Road Initiative projects on the development of African countries.

In view of all of the above, this article aims to study the advantages and potential economic impacts that the development of road transport and rail transport projects can bring to African countries by focusing on the case of the Republic of Mali, a large landlocked country of 1,241,000 km2, located in West African region, without access to the sea. This article thus intends to contribute to enriching the ongoing debates on the question of whether China's investments relating to the construction of infrastructure within the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative" in African countries are really beneficial for African populations or not at all. The most frequent and widely debated questions concern: **do road and railway projects bring real benefits?Do these projects have real economic impacts for Africa and Mali?** Other no less important questions also relate to the economic challenges presented by the construction of infrastructure (roads, and railways) in view of the urgent problems facing the Republic of Mali. These problems are linked in particular to security, energy, and the burden of debt. This situation largely contributes to the way in which China and Mali would engage in the future to deepen China-Mali cooperation in the "Belt and Road Initiative" projects. As noted above, the document draws on secondary data from existing and accessible literature on infrastructure on the African Continent with specific reference to the case of the Republic of Mali.

At the current stage of the debates, the main question on the agenda is: **Why is China so committed to the construction of infrastructure in African countries?** The People's Republic of China's commitment to the development of African countries is not new. This commitment is neither new nor circumstantial. The **"China Ya-Fei-La"** policy, which literally means **"Asia-Africa-Latin America",**has been designed since the 1960s under the leadership of the Chinese President Mao Zedong with the aim of promoting the objectives of developing countries. in a new world order[8]. Since then, China has played an active role in promoting South-South cooperation, with China-Africa cooperation forming an important part of this equation. China's commitment dates back concretely to the construction of the railway line linking two East African countries, namely; Tanzania and Zambia, commonly called "TanZarail" or "Tan-Zam". This long railway line spanning 1,860 km, which runs from Dar-es Salam in Tanzania to the Port of Zambia on the Indian Ocean, is the first major project that New China has carried out on the African continent. This major rail transport infrastructure was financed and built at a time when the People's Republic of China was itself facing economic difficulties. Indeed, China had just emerged from almost a century of foreign domination, division, exploitation, and humiliation. TheWorking on the infrastructure began in 1970 and has been completed in 1975. The finished infrastructure has been delivered to the government authorities of Tanzania and Zambia in 1976. At the time, the total cost of the railway line Tanzania-Zambia (TanZail) has been valued at the sum of one billion RMB, as an interest-free loan to the two East African countries. It should be noted that around 50,000 Chinese workers participated to the construction of this gigantic work. At this period in the contemporary history of China and African countries, the creation of such a large-scale infrastructure on the continent was certainly part of the vision that Chinese President Mao Zedong had of China-Africa relations. It is undeniable that ideological sentiments underlay this commitment by China. However, it should be noted that this commitment was also an expression of China's loyalty to the resolutions made by the Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, known as the "Bandung Conference" or " Non-AlignedConference" which brought together twenty-nine (29) countries from Africa and Asia including China. The resolutions of the Bandung conference adopted the firm commitment of the participating countries to encourage the socio-economic development of Africa-Asia region. Finally, China's commitment could also reside in the spirit of brotherhood which united Chinese Leaders and African Leaders with regard to the adventures of colonial history. This spirit has been manifested on October 25, 1971, when the People's Republic of China assumed its rightful place within the United Nations (UN), following the vote on resolution 2758. Of the seventy-six (76) votes cast are expressed in favor of this resolution, twenty-seven (27) came from African countries. At the same time, the People's Republic of China became a member of the United Nations Security Council. It also appears clearly that the "TanZarail" railway was intended to offer a transport route to African countries, particularly those in East Africa to avoid them to cross the Republic of South Africa which lived to the era under the yoke of the apartheid regime.

Today, the remarkable involvement of the People's Republic of China in the construction of infrastructures in African countries, although sometimes seen as commercial, responds perfectly to the popular proverb from the rich Chinese culture according to which: " to achieve wealth, you must first build the road." The philosophy of this Chinese proverb seems to have largely contributed to orchestrating the extraordinary progress of China's economy which is becoming urban and improving year after year with the implementation of five-year plans, but above all of "political wide opening", an important element of "modernization with Chinese characteristics". This Chinese proverb also seems to perfectly meet the needs of African countries in transport infrastructure. Indeed, a study conducted by the "African Infrastructure Development Program (PDIA)" under the aegis of the "African Development Bank (AfDB)," which recognizes the urgency of implementing priority projects, indicates that the rate of Average annual growth of African countries' economies will be around six percent (6%) between 2012 and 2040. The study notes that 37 of 53 African countries economies are expected to post an average annual growth rate above 5% between 2013 and 2040 (PIDA, 2010) [9]. Many experts and observers of the world economy note that in terms of growth, Africa has quite significant potential. However, African countries must move up the value chain in the natural resource processing sector. This phase of transformation is necessary for African countries to enable them to unleash all their potential in terms of natural resources. The economic potential of African countries is considerable enough to quickly lead them towards a high level of emergence and development, strongly desired by the African populations. However, one of the main and even crucial factors slowing down the evolution of African countries towards emergence, development and access to the global value chain undoubtedly remains the deficit in the field of infrastructure.

The history of African countries dramatically reveals that during the colonial period, infrastructures, particularly those of transport across African countries, were not at all designed for the interest of African populations. In the sector of road transports and railway transports, the colonial powers, built infrastructures to respond primarily and as a priority to the needs for the evacuation of products (natural resources of indigenous populations) to maritime ports and then to Europe and America. Today, transport infrastructures in African countries are so poor that in terms of mileage only less than one million kilometers out of almost three (3) million kilometers of the road network in sub-Saharan Africa are asphalt. It should be noted that only half of all paved roads are in good condition. A study made by "Export-Import Bank of India", published in 2018, notes that "the road/population ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at 27 km per 10,000 people". A comparative study of the rate of access to road infrastructures in African countries with other regions of the developing world shows that "the rate of access to road infrastructures in these developing regions is nearly 50% while it is less than 34% on African continent. The cost of transport is 100 times higher in Africa than elsewhere. The inadequacy, let's say the lack of transport infrastructure in general, road transport infrastructure in particular, and the poor state of the infrastructure that exists seriously affects many companies that engage in activities on the African continent. In this regard, procedures for completing customs formalities, border formalities and other administrative formalities in the context of the movement of people and goods in Sub-Saharan Africa take 60 to 80% more time than in other countries. other countries, particularly those in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Furthermore, the cost of administrative formalities for exports from Sub-Saharan countries is almost twice the cost of Latin America and the Caribbean regions. Reports from the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the Export-Import Bank of India note that inadequate transportation increases the costs of goods traded between African countries by about 30 to 40 percent. Inadequate transportation therefore considerably increases the total cost of exports from African countries. It should be notedfrom this situation that the availability of adequate and modern infrastructure constitutes one of the indicators that can help any country in the world to improve the confidence of entrepreneurs, to promote innovation, productivity, to reduce transaction costs, to facilitate trade in goods and services and also to generate technology transfer. In this regard, infrastructure should be considered as "the central pillar" that keeps every society and economy sustainably alive in modern times. This leads to the observation that if all economies around the world reduced barriers in the supply chain by developing transportation, particularly rail transport, the global gross domestic product (GDP) could be significantly improved. Reducing obstacles in the production chain would have more notable effects on African economies than the elimination of all import customs duties. By placing particular emphasis on regional and continental integration, African leaders could begin to look beyond development within the borders of individual countries on the continent. African countries would be able to examine how they could provide comprehensive connectivity between national, regional and international networks, to place the regional economic circuits of African Union, to link the regions' highways to seaports.

1.a- The situation of the road network in the different Africa regions in 2020

Theroad network in Africa in 2020 is as follows:

- Central Africa region: 345 083 Km ;
- East Africa region :860 710 km ;
- Austral Africa region : 999 334 km ;
- Ouest Africaregion: 640 982 km. (Source:EXIM Bank of China 2020)[10]

Deadlines for border formalities by region in the world in 2020 are as follows:

Estimated export time per hour:

East Asia and the Pacific: 55.9;

Europe and Central Asia:28.0 191;

Latin America and the Caribbean: 62.5;

Middle East and North Africa: 62.6 (Source: World Bank, 2020)[11]

The infrastructure problems in African countries mentioned above can be linked to several factors including; road conditions, road congestion, poor quality of service. This situation requires quite significant funding not only to renew, but also to modernize the sector. On the subject of financing, the continent's deficit in this sector is estimated at nearly 107 billion US dollars per year. Infrastructure needs are estimated between $130 and $170 billion per year (ADB, 2019)[12]. Currently, countries on African continent devote very little of their GDP to the infrastructure sector. It is noted that by 2040, the infrastructure sector will require a total investment of approximately US$4.3 trillion, or US$174 billion per year (EXIM Bank, 2019)[13]. Consequently, this means that there is a very significant infrastructure deficit in Africa. Considering current trends for the continent by 2040, we note that the estimated investment needs are higher than the planned investments. Concerning the different sectors, investment needs in the roads and energy sectors represent more than half of the total infrastructure needs on the African continent. These estimates expose the essential needs of the Continent in infrastructure to support growth, the economies of African countries, modernize what exists in terms of infrastructure that the former colonial powers would have liked to leave in the former colonies.

1.b- The differences in investment in infrastructure by region of the world from 2016 to 2040 are as follows:

America Continent: 47%;

Africa Continent: 39%;

Asia Continent: 10%;

Europe Continent: 16%;

Oceania Continent: 10%; (Source: EXIM Bank of China, 2018)[14]

For years, China has been building infrastructure in all sectors of development, particularly transport, as part of Sino-African cooperation, and as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. China-Africa cooperation has consistently recorded remarkable successes since the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing in 2000. Therefore, China's activities on African continent, which are largely coordinated in a pragmatic, results-based policy concrete, are increasingly integrated into the gigantic and ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative" since the accessof African countries from 2015. It is established that at this moment, on African Continent, infrastructure is mainly financed through channels such as: Official Development Assistance (ODA), investors from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or other actors, notably the Arab Gulf States, India, and the People's Republic of China. China remains by far the largest donor in Africa. In recent years, China has contributed to the completion of more than 200 infrastructure projects on the African continent. This includes multiple projects carried out within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative; Chinese companies have carried out various projects in many African countries. The completion of these projects contributed to increasing and modernizing approximately 30,000 km of highways and 2,000 km of railways (Zhang, 2018) [15]. We note that even if African governments continue to finance a large part of the projects, particularly in the roads and railways transports sector, China's contribution to the economic and development activities on African continent has taken on fairly significant proportions due to the fact that China is the source of financing at least one project out of five on the continent. Therefore, China is undoubtedly considered the largest financier in the infrastructure sector in African countries. It far exceeds the group made up of the African Development Bank (AfDB), the European Commission (EC), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank (WB), the seven most developed countries (call G7) and the European Bank of Investment (EIB).

China being recognized as the largest financier in the infrastructure sector on African continent.The funds intended to finance said infrastructure from this country are mainly carried out by the Chinese Bank named “EXIM-Bank of China”. “EXIM-Bank of China” acts as an export credit agency and offers loans on a bilateral basis. Also, it should be noted that before granting loans, “EXIM-Bank of China” carries out an assessment of the concession level by considering the nature of the project in question. The appeal of “EXIM-Bank of China” essentially lies in the fact that loans are offered at subsidized and relatively low interest rates. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Bank generally grants a maturity period of 15 years and sometimes more. In November 2013, EXIM Bank of China reported that by 2025, China will have provided the African continent with financing of nearly 1,000 billion US dollars. This financing mainly includes direct investments, commercial loans, and reduced rate loans. One of the competitive advantages that EXIM-Bank of China grants to borrowing countries that do not have sufficient financial guarantees is the fact that these countries can use their natural resources as guarantee for the construction of infrastructures. Internationally, this financing model is known as the “Angolan Model” or “resource versus infrastructure agreement” or even “exchange formula” (Ehizuelen Michael, O, 2020) [16]. This financing model makes subject to serious criticism from many observers of international relations, cooperation specialists and Western economists. Some researchers believe that using resources as a guarantee of financing contributes to reinforcing what is called the “resource curse” of recipient countries (Brookings, 2020)[17]. In addition to the Chinese bank EXIM-Bank of China, the China's commitment to building infrastructure in Africa also involves mechanisms such as the "South-South Fund", the "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB) of the BRICS (chaired by Mrs. Dilma Russell, former President of Brazil), the Infrastructure Fund of the African Development Bank (FI-ADB), and Contingency Reverse Agreement (CRA).

In view of China's financial commitments through the financing mechanisms mentioned above, African countries should give absolute priority to collaboration with China in the infrastructure sector, particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. The participation of African countries in the Belt and Road Initiative can help African economies quickly take a remarkable position in the global economy by building well-oriented infrastructure to bring better lives to people, support businesses, and competitive sectors of the economy, particularly in industrial parks and export processing zones that are linked to global markets. Judicious use of the continent's resources in the infrastructure sector to encourage new investments is an important factor that could help all African economies take advantage of industrial and commercial zones to attract light (small) industries from countries whose economies are more advanced. For African countries, it is a question of doing what China and countries in South East Asia did during the 1980s and 1990s. By attracting foreign investments and foreign companies, African countries, including those who’s the poorest economies will be able to improve their trade logistics, increase the knowledge and skills of African entrepreneurs. African economies will thus gain the trust of partners, national and international buyers, and will make African companies increasingly competitive internationally.

The construction of railways which connect the different regions of the country to seaports in neighboring countries is of great strategic importance for the Republic of Mali. This is a major area of strategic cooperation between China and Mali. The construction of railway infrastructures will gradually position Mali as a modern economy on a sub-regional scale. The China Railway Construction Corporation (CREC) has been involved in the construction of multiple infrastructure projects across the country. The achievements have brought enormous economic value to the establishment of the foundations for the development of Mali[18]. The main projects under construction or on hold include the railway line linking Kidal, the capital of the Northern region to Bamako, economic and commercial center par excellence and a transport hub between Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger and Burkina Faso.

II. Chinese Investments in transport infrastructure in Mali

The transport sector, particularly the sector of railways, has played an important role in the socio-economic development of countries all over the world, since the industrial revolution. That has been the case both for the transportation of people and for the transportation of goods, and services. The Republic of Mali, a landlocked country, suffers from the lack of adequate transport infrastructures. This reality constitutes a major economic obstacle for the development of industries and the exploitation of the country's export sectors. High transport costs have a negative impact on the competitiveness of products and goods.

This section of the article aims to contribute to the existing literature on the impacts of China's infrastructure investments in Africa through roads and railways construction, with a focus on the Bamako-Dakar railway line. and the Bamako-Conakry railway line (long-standing project), exploring the benefits and challenges of the different projects.

In the Republic of Mali, the existence of rail transportation dates back to the colonial period. During this period, the French colonial administration worked with the objective of connecting the Niger River in Mali to the sea in Senegal. To this end, the project for the construction of the Dakar-Niger railway line was developed by General Gallieni at the end of the 19th century. For the record, General Galliéni was at the time the Governor of the colony called French Sudan, which became the Republic of Mali on September 22, 1960. The objective of this project was to connect the Niger River which crosses the country over a length of 1200 km, to the seaport of Dakar in Senegal to allow the transport of raw materials to France by sea. The construction of the railway line will be completed at the beginning of the 20th century. The part going from the town of Koulikoro on the Niger River to the town of Kayes will be inaugurated in 1904. In 1924, the entire railway line going from the town of Koulikoro on the Niger River 60 km from Bamako to the city of Dakar, capital of French West Africa, will be inaugurated. It connects the river port of Koulikoro on the Niger River in Mali to the seaport of Dakar via Bamako, the capital of Mali. Thus, travelers and goods could be transported from the North and the center of Mali, that is to say from Gao, Timbuktu, Mopti by river to be transported to Bamako, then to Dakar via Kayes, Tambacounda and Thiès on Senegalese territory. The Bamako-Dakar railway line is a long line covering 1287 km. It is dotted with more than thirty stations. During the period of its full activity (1950-1980), this railway line employed more than 1,200 employees in total in the two countries. It was a real vital artery which made it possible to open up Mali by connecting the interior of the country to the port of Dakar in Senegal.

The history of the Dakar-Niger railway line teaches that in 1949 in order to obtain the same rights as the railway workers of France, African workers of the Dakar-Niger railway launched an important and long strike. This strike will last from October 11, 1947 to March 19, 1948. As a result, African workers will obtain a 20% increase in African wages. However, the strike will be marked by the imprisonment of union leaders and the dismissal of many workers who participated to the strike. About this strike, the Senegalese writer named Ousmane Sembène published in 1960 the novel entitled: “Les Bouts de bois de Dieu”. He also made a film about the clashes between African railway workers and French colonial forces. This film was known under the title “Les pirogues des Hautes Terres”[19].

Following the breakup of the Mali Federation (initially constituted by the Republics of Sudan and the Republic of Senegal), the Republic of Sudan declared its independence on September 22, 1960, and took the name of the Republic of Mali. The Niger-Dakar Railway company, which was called the “West African Railway Authority” under French colonization, became the property of Mali and Senegal. It will be divided into two different national companies; the “Régie des Chemins de Fer du Mali (RCFM)” and the “Régie Sénégalaise des Chemins de fer (RSCF)”. In 1962, the two countries, the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Senegal, signed a cooperation agreement which will determine the form of joint operation of the line by the two Malian and Senegalese national companies.

2. a- Privatization imposed by the Western, a failure

In the 1980s-1990s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) imposed taxes on developing countries, particularly African countries. As part of this imposed privatization policy, Mali and Senegal decided in 2003 to privatize the Dakar-Niger railway by granting the Franco-Canadian company “Transrail SA” a full concession for a period of 25 years. Through this concession, the company Transrail SA undertakes to take charge of the maintenance and operation of the Dakar-Niger railway line and to invest in the renewal of the infrastructure. The result of this concession will be a real failure to the extent that Transrail SA will not respect its commitments. Infrastructure wears out and deteriorates. Accidents will increase, creating dangers for passengers. This situation will not allow railway activities to continue. From 2010, this situation caused the cessation of passenger transport. In 2015, the two countries, Mali and Senegal, decided to end the concession which was initially expected to end until 2028.

2. b- Creation of the “Dakar-Bamako Ferroviaire” (DBF)

Following the failure of the company Transrail SA, the two countries, Mali and Senegal, took the decision to create a transitional management organization called “Dakar-Bamako Ferroviaire” (DBF). The “Dakar-Bamako Ferroviaire” (DBF) takes over from the concessionaire Transrail SA with the objective of making the transition towards the rapid relaunch of activities on the Dakar-Niger railway line. Instead of the total reconstruction of the 1,287 km of the Dakar-Niger line to ensure the total resumption of railway activities, the “Société Dakar-Bamako Ferroviaire” (DBF) proposed to Mali and Senegal an emergency plan relating only to the renovation of the railway line. This renovation was estimated at around 20 billion CFA francs. In this regard, experts noted that the total reconstruction would have cost three times more.

The deterioration of the railway network has significantly impaired transport efficiency. This situation has led to an increase in transport costs. It often caused delays in the movement of people and goods. From then on, economic growth was affected and slowed down. Consequently, the modernization of rail transport in Mali proved necessary. To this end, the construction of new railway lines, particularly the SGR, was necessary in order to respond to concerns. This mega infrastructure project is an example of a strategic project involving the Chinese government, having major implications in the economy of Mali but also in the economy of the West African sub-region. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Malian State has not properly maintained the existing rail system. Consequently, after decades of mismanagement and poor maintenance, the government of Mali has developed a strategic vision covering the short and medium term in order to modernize the railway network. This vision, translated into a project-program, was re-examined again in 2015. The railway modernization initiative plan aimed to rehabilitate and develop existing railway routes while allowing the operation of modern trains on the railway network towards higher capacity standard gauge tracks, and to connect large cities and economic centers with new railway lines. Thus, the multi-billion US dollar project was awarded to the Chinese company “China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) and marked the beginning of the initiative and Mali's entry into the Belt and Road Initiative.

The project has not yet been implemented due to funding problems. Indeed, since the institutional changes, it is difficult for Mali to finance its rail transport infrastructures, because Malian economy is to a certain extent a mono-economy which only depends on a single source of foreign capital. Thus, faced with the gradual abolition of the initiative in favor of heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) and a reduction in official development assistance, Mali seized the opportunity offered by the more concrete results of China and economic growth continues to explore new sources of financing. It is in this context that China proves crucial because, thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative, it arrives at the right time, that is to say the moment when Mali has a crucial need for development infrastructure and improved business opportunities regionally, continentally and globally. China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, has invested massively in infrastructure on the African continent. The 1287 km long SGR line will be financed by Chinese lines of credit at a cost estimated at several billion US dollars. The Chinese Bank “EXIM Bank of China” will provide a large part of the financing in the form of a concessional loan for the railway project in question. The rest will be provided by the governments of Mali and Senegal. The Bamako-Dakar railway line is among the most important projects for Mali's economy as this line connects the capital of Mali to the rest of the world by sea.

The Bamako-Dakar Railways offer services to thousands or even millions of passengers and close many chapters of dependence on infrastructure dating from the colonial period and therefore several decades old. They also constitute an essential section of the construction of interstate railways in West Africa. Other ongoing standard gauge line projects include the Bamako-Conakry and Bamako-Kidal lines. Other transport infrastructure projects are planned. These include road projects such as Bamako-Ségou, Bamako-Kayes and Mopti-Gao. The Bamako-Dakar railway line shares several characteristics and political and economic objectives with railway lines in East Africa. The government of Mali plans to manage logistics by having railways link the country's main economic, commercial and commercial cities to encourage exports of different local industries.

The achievements of the various railway projects constitute important stages in Mali's objective of having a modern railway network. China's investments are modernizing the routes that provide Mali with ports for foreign trade. This presents significant potential that could help promote the industrialization of Mali and help the Malian government promote the diversification of the Malian economy. The commitment displayed by the Chinese government to carrying out the projects mentioned above within the set deadlines despite the non-participation of other foreign actors in the financing of the projects is often cited by the two Chinese and Malian parties as a symbol of their sincere, pragmatic friendship and China's firm commitment to Mali. The construction of the railways will serve as a model for other future large-scale Chinese projects in Mali. The Chinese government's investment in upgrading the railway line helps the Malian and Senegalese governments reduce travel time between Bamako, the capital of Mali, and Dakar, the capital and seaport of Senegal. These mega infrastructures projects are particularly vital because they are national visions of two developing countries unlike the earlier railways built by the colonial power in the 19th century. The scale and cost of the two railway projects were designed to improve logistics efficiency, increase passenger and freight transport capacity and generate comprehensive benefits for local economies along the railways.

The railway construction project is entrusted to two Chinese civil engineering companies, namely “China Railway Engineering Corporation” and “China Railway Construction Corporation”. The China Railway Engineering Corporation is responsible for the construction of the entire new standard gauge line (SGR) which connects Bamako to the port of Conakry. The railway line between Mali and Guinea covers a length of approximately 920 km. The cost is estimated at eight (8) billion USD. Improving transportation in Mali will encourage both foreign and domestic investors to explore resources that are larger and more expensive to transport than gold, such as iron ore, bauxite and uranium, etc.

III. Challenges related to investment in standard gauge railways (SGR)

While Chinese infrastructure investments on the continent have helped many African countries overcome their reliance on often conditional foreign aid, a frequent criticism is that such Chinese projects have only produced few real benefits for local economies. These projects have contributed to increasing the debt burden of African countries. However, it is noted that investments in infrastructure, associated with the construction of special economic zones (SEZ) in several African countries could reap positive benefits and unlock the economic potential of value-added industries across the continent. Although China's trade practices have helped stabilize raw material prices and increase exports from African countries, there is a downside to these practices. The downside is that high demand for raw materials and energy from China has not automatically led to a reduction in demand for manufactured goods from countries on African continent. African countries should accelerate their industrialization in order to produce cheap manufactured products from elsewhere, particularly China.Currently the challenge for China is to ensure that countries are sufficiently resourced and that projects are sufficiently operational so that China can recover repayments and on time within the agreed deadlines.

IV. The economic benefits of investing in standard gauge railways (SGR)

It has been established that the main reason for colonial powers to build transport infrastructures in Africa, particularly railways, was the search for economic gains. The colonial powers knew that to obtain economic benefits in the colonies, it was first necessary to install basic infrastructure in the areas where it was necessary. The French government that colonized Mali knew how important infrastructure development, particularly the railway, was to achieve maximum political, social and economic position in the West African sub-region. In this regard, Africa's economic development in terms of infrastructure can be summed up in one word: "Transport". This truth, confirmed by numerous specialists in the field, shows that transport systems have proven to be effective means of control. Transport also constitutes an important sector of the economy of African countries. They play a crucial role in the fight against poverty and the fight for sustainable development. Transport is propelling the success of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. (ZLECAF), one of the flagship projects of the African Union's Agenda 2063. The development of transport infrastructure improves access to goods and services for businesses and consumers and provides the means for emerging markets to integrate into the continental, global economy and make substantial progress in all areas.

As one of the safest and most reliable modes of transportation, rail transportation has always played a catalytic role in socio-economic development in almost every country in the world. It contributes immensely in facilitating the movement of passengers and goods. Rail transport is undoubtedly the most affordable, cost-effective and energy-efficient means of transport when traffic density is high enough. Furthermore, when railways are correctly integrated with other modes of transport, economic levels of traffic can be consolidated. So, the railway makes it possible to offer efficient services for the movement of people and goods in terms of transport over relatively long distances, including high volumes of goods or agricultural products. Rail transport is one of the indices used to assess the level of macroeconomic development of a country. Researchers and economists note that the progress of any country depends on the development of its rail transport system. There is no doubt that rail transport contributes to the socio-economic development of countries on the African continent by facilitating access to markets, access to employment, access to health care, access to education and other activities for human development. Also, rail transport plays an important role in social and economic development, as it promotes the low-cost transport of goods and passengers. It contributes to the growth of economic sectors such as mining sectors, agricultural and industrial sectors.

The deficit, or even the absence of railways in the transport system of many African countries, including Mali, has serious consequences on other modes of transport, such as roads and river or lake routes. Consequently, the development of rail and road infrastructure has been highlighted in the “Belt and Road Initiative” generally on African continent and more particularly in Mali. However, initially in the transport system in Mali, the main reason for the construction of railways was primarily administrative. This was to provide a means of connection between towns in Mali and between towns in Mali and towns in neighboring countries, particularly coastal countries in the South. This reason was also motivated by economic considerations. This included improving the evacuation of agricultural products, livestock products and mineral resources from the hinterland to the South, and to seaports to then ship them to foreign markets through the world. However, recently, contrary to the main reasons given, China emphasizes the contribution of the “Belt and Road Initiative” to shared development, safeguarding peace and fighting against poverty. This by promoting shared development, progress and prosperity which emanate from the connectivity of economic and commercial activities. Railways occupy an important place in this vision of national, regional and global development. The remarkable advantages of railways over road networks lie in their economies of scale. Railways require less frequent maintenance. Maintenance in this sector is faster and more efficient over very long distances. Which makes it an inexpensive and very advantageous option for the traffic of goods, people and merchandise while offering enormous commercial potential. It is evident that connecting Mali's cities, inland areas with sufficient wealth in terms of natural resources, to the country's consumer markets, to countries in the sub-region, to port areas could bring enormous gains. Transport costs within the country cause enormous difficulties for agriculture and industries. Reducing these costs could considerably improve the competitiveness of Malian companies in terms of imports and could potentially promote the export and trade of Malian products. New economic centers could also help attract investments and positive migration towards areas that display attractive elements for the development and well-being of populations.

The development of railway activities also has notable benefits on complementary industries in manufacturing supply chains, such as construction materials. It promotes significant demand for retail trade and related services which generate job creation. Furthermore, it should be noted that a central railway line would contribute to opening up everything linked to the agricultural industry, the mining industry and the manufacturing industry in all regions of Mali. Likewise, the development of the Bamako-Dakar railway line would benefit the livestock and leather industries of which Mali is the leading producer in the West African sub-region. Operators in this sector are currently at a disadvantage compared to cheap imports due in particular to the exorbitant cost of transport. In addition, the Bamako-Dakar railway has a positive impact on local economies through the support of local businesses and the creation of multiple business opportunities. Areas along the line, around railway stations are open to increased commercial activity. This includes the creation of markets, hotels and an increase in the movement of people, transport and commerce. These various activities positively modify the standard of living of the populations living along the railway line. When businessmen, entrepreneurs, producers, and traders are assured of finding adequate markets in a timely manner, the creation of processing infrastructure easily occurs generating even more employment opportunities for local populations. . For example, during our interview with a head of a family who is the father of six children and has been operating a shop near the Kati railway station for some time, he said: "Since I established my business here, I can properly ensure the studies of my children, provide for the needs of my family by doing business near the railway station. Without the railway station I would not be able to provide a decent life for my family”[20]. Many people working or making business to the train station told the similar declarations. The railway station has positively changed the lives of all those who carry out commercial activities along the railway line. The railways have also brought a notable improvement in living conditions to all populations living near the line.

Macro-economic studies have provided compelling evidence that villages and towns which are located along the railway lines benefit from more choice in transportation and communication options. These means have considerably stimulated the marketing of agricultural products and brought about a remarkable change in the livelihoods of local populations. Opinions expressed by local populations suggest that the reduction in costs generated in transactions has led to higher income gains for farmers. The reduction in transaction costs has also facilitated the integration of local products into the national market system. It has also very often linked them to international markets.

For companies and businessmen operating in landlocked areas of Mali, the use of the seaport of Dakar will become much more viable. In this regard, the President of the Association of Shippers of Mali, declared: “the railway establishes an end-to-end logistics supply chain with goods now transported by rail from the quay of the port of Dakar directly to the inland container depot in Bamako. From Bamako, they can be distributed effectively to other regions of the country and to other neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger”[21]. Likewise, the two railway lines Bamako-Dakar, Bamako-Conakry can improve the efficiency and profitability of railways in transporting goods. They help to shorten travel times between the cities they serve. The economic impacts of inter-regional connections always bring development to the regions and improves the commercial structures of the economies of the immediate surrounding areas. It is obvious that when the movement of goods and services is hampered by poor transport infrastructure, there will be a direct impact on the local economy. An increase in prices will be noted. Sustainable public transport offers many economic benefits to the country by delivering goods and services where they are most needed. The Bamako-Dakar railway line, which was put into service in July 2023, was well received by local populations and users. It was observed that thanks to the Bamako-Dakar railway, the movement of goods and services increased considerably and attracted small-scale commercial activities in the affected localities. Not only does the railway provide safety and comfort to travelers, the Bamako-Dakar railway lines improve business and trade between Mali's cities. This constitutes a remarkable contribution to the economic development of the country. The growing number of Malians who spend money on train travel (tickets, food and other services) are now part of the means that generate substantial revenue for Mali's economic services.

In terms of the many expected benefits, railway stations contribute to the creation of economic centers and special economic zones (SEZ), or industrial parks like that of Bamako for logistics and another in Koulikoro for manufacturing industries. Indeed, along the Bamako-Dakar line, for example, several important factories including an oil mill in Koulikoro, a cotton processing factory in Kita, a cement production factory in Diago located 30 km from the capital Bamako as well as that the special economic zone (SEZ) planned in Kayes constitute some advantages among many others. Likewise, the Kita and Toukoto stations could contribute to the creation of economic centers and special economic zones (SEZ), or industrial parks like the Diamniadio industrial park in Senegal. The Diamniadio industrial park, strategically located on nearly 200 hectares of land in the industrial zone near Dakar near the station, promises to be a development pole capable of strengthening the essential presence of the private sector, motivated by the activities of entrepreneurs in the country. When fully established and operational, special economic zones or industrial parks will provide employment opportunities for local populations and promote the development of trade and industrial activities. Investments made in the infrastructure sector, coupled with special economic zones (SEZ) and industrial parks, undoubtedly constitute a factor in boosting many African economies. Said investments could also promote positive spin-offs and unlock the economic potential of value-added industries throughout West Africa thanks to the complementary nature of infrastructure. The Chinese model of industrial parks, which has had remarkable success in China, and many countries all over the world should also stimulate industrialization in Mali. Companies could reasonably reduce the cost of supplying inputs. Thus, the overall cost of commercial activities will be revised downward. This will promote businesses to remain competitive in national, sub-regional and even continental markets. The rapid implementation of railway lines therefore constitutes a challenge in relation to the positive development in favor of the business world in general and societies in particular.

Regarding employment in the local environment, it should be noted that local employment involves the practice of hiring workers from countries that benefit from investments from the “Belt and Road Initiative”. In this section of the article, local hiring refers to the employment of Malian workers on the Bamako-Dakar railway line. According to many experts, promoting local trade and boosting the purchase of local equipment by the mining industry and others contributes to improving the employment of local workers. It is also a relevant factor when evaluating investments, as hiring locally exposes local workers to the skills required to start their own businesses. This situation contributes to the creation and development of local businesses. As Africa is the least developed continent in the world, and therefore the poorest, improving employment opportunities on the continent is particularly of paramount importance for several reasons. The first reason is that nearly forty-five percent (45%) of African population under the age of heighten (18) essentially depends on the income earned by their parents to meet their needs, ensure their existence and ensure their development as a human person. At the same time, more than forty-one percent(41%) of the population lives in poverty. Young people who are born and live and develop in such a context are exposed to risks and consequences which can cause lasting physical, moral and social damage. These young people may also suffer from a lack of quality education and opportunities to build their lives. They may also not live long enough due to malnutrition, disease, social unrest and deviant behavior. The second reason is that Sub-Saharan Africa is recognized as the region which has fairly high fertility. Sub-Saharan Africa has the fastest growing working population in the world. Every year, many young people are dumped onto the job market. Most of these young people have difficulty accessing the most vital means of subsistence. The third reason is linked to a lack of sustainable economic growth. Sustainable economic growth is necessary to finance investments that help build stronger and more resilient economies. This requires constant improvement of labor productivity in all sectors of the economy and development.

The main expected result can be translated as: “produce and sell more by employing many people in a more productive and sustainable way”. It is also about taking advantage of new emerging opportunities in a globalized world. All this without succumbing to the risks that sustainable growth could cause. In view of all these reasons, decision-makers in African countries have highlighted the improvement of employment opportunities among the essential objectives of the various development strategies. If the achievements of China's infrastructure projects, particularly rail and road infrastructure, are praised for their contribution to job creation in African countries, Chinese companies are often accused of employing Chinese workers in instead of employing African workers as part of the execution of projects for which they are responsible under contract, in particular projects related to infrastructure and mines (Dollar, 2016, pp. 73-75)[22].

At this stage it is important to analyze the local employment situation in order to determine whether the infrastructure built by China as part of the various projects has contributed to job creation in Mali or not at all. It should first be noted that during its work on the roads linking Bamako to Ségou, Bamako to Koulikoro, the Chinese company “China Railway Construction Corporation” (CRCC), proposed in its various investment plans a chapter relating to the employment of local workers, thus promoting the employment of local workers during the work and after the completion of the projects. This strategy makes a remarkable contribution to the fight against unemployment and the fight against poverty. The projects underway across the country will undoubtedly lead to job creation. Contrary to allegations that Chinese companies import their own labor, the strategy of the "China Railway Construction Corporation" reports a ratio of majority of Malians to a minority of Chinese depending on the skills between local workers and Chinese workers. The “China Railway Construction Corporation” estimates that the construction of the roads has created more than hundreds of local jobs and that currently hundreds of Malians are employed in the operation of the Bamako-Dakar railway line. As for the Bamako - Conakry line during construction, many Malian workers will be employed in the project, compared to only around ten Chinese workers. It is estimated that the Bamako-Kayes railway line (SGR) will create more than 5,000 direct jobs for Malian professionals and non-professionals and 10,000 indirect jobs during its execution. When completed, the operation, maintenance and management of the railway is also expected to create thousands of permanent jobs. Among the 10,000 direct jobs, 4,000 jobs will be intended for professional managers: engineers, foremen, operators, craftsmen, etc. and 6,000 to non-professionals.

The employment aspect of major projects should take into account the local rules inherent in the contractual agreement which would be in preparation between Mali and China. Currently, the Malian authorities do not appear to have developed regulations to allow foreign companies to encourage, if not prioritize, the employment of local workers. To date, studies carried out on Chinese investments on the African continent generally reveal that Chinese companies are, most of the time criticized for their propensity to call on Chinese workers instead of hiring local workers. The conclusion of this article shows that in Mali, the Chinese company “China RailwayConstruction Corporation” contributed to the creation of many jobs during the implementation of the various projects, but also during the operation and maintenance of the works. The contribution of Chinese companies to local employment is important due to the need for African countries to generate enough jobs for the ever-growing African youth in the continent's job market. It should be noted that although the “China Railway Construction Corporation” has hired local staff for the various construction sites in Mali, the local workers for their part express their dissatisfaction with the salaries and the quality of treatment granted to them by the Chinese business leaders. These remarks reveal that local employment strategies carried out by companies were more focused on job creation, but not necessarily on work remuneration. This aspect is so important that it deserves quite specific examination.

Concerning local employment, particularly on planned railway and road construction projects, the "China Railway Construction Corporation" noted in its investment plan, its firm commitment to training local workers and transferring the operation and maintenance of the works to local Malian companies when the various projects are carried out. Malian authorities have granted Chinese companies operating and project monitoring contracts under terms that take into account the situation of trained and competent Malian employees. In this regard, work by Western academics presents arguments noting that projects led and carried out by Chinese companies on African continent present high costs for little benefit for African populations. These academics say that transfers of technology and jobs from Chinese companies and Chinese investments to African countries are very limited. However, transport and other infrastructure projects in Mali prove that these assertions are not only erroneous, but also tendentious. In fact, the heads of Chinese companies in Mali declare that they are required to follow to the letter the content of the specifications relating to the various projects. They also claim that they have very often had to initiate and lead programs relating to the employment of local workers. At certain times, they set specific dates for the transfer of technologies, operations and maintenance of works to Malian workers or local companies. In the short or long term, these technology transfers can help strengthen local expertise in the relevant areas of infrastructure. These technology transfers will thus promote the development of local employment, the reduction of unemployment and the development of local populations and businesses.

Despite concrete actions made by Chinese companies, the lack of capacity at the local level in the field of engineering requires that the Chinese side continue to be involved in the ongoing management and maintenance of the works carried out. Chinese companies have been proactive in taking initiatives in the context of training and technology transfer for technicians and other local Malian workers. These companies provided training on the maintenance of structures, communication systems, etc. In addition, certain Malian employees of certain structures were sent to China to follow training in areas related to their jobs and their area of expertise. Malian technicians were trained in China for the maintenance and operation of the Kabala Technical Center built by China near Modibo Keita airport in Sénou, near Bamako. It is planned to open institutions intended for research and development of human resources in several sectors for Malians. These various initiatives should undoubtedly mark a new stage in Mali's economic growth. They should promote socio-economic development and improve the educational environment in this large landlocked country in West Africa. The transfer of technologies and skills requires a significant and often medium- or long-term investment in capacity building. This reality will lead to the prolonged participation of Chinese companies in activities in Mali. China's support for Mali in the construction of industrial, transport and other infrastructure (roads, planned railways, factories, etc.) will actively contribute to the potential modification of trends in trade, communication, existing agricultural economy and investment, mostly inherited from the former colonial power, as well as the living conditions of local populations.

V. Socio-economic Challenges linked to investment in transport infrastructure:

For centuries, rail transport has remained in many regions of the world one of the most important, safest, most frequently used (especially home-to-work) and economically profitable modes of transporting goods and people. The various railway projects launched by the government of Mali are therefore highly appreciated by the Malian populations, because they will significantly contribute to facilitating the movement of people and goods across the country and between the regions of the country and the countries. neighbors. The high rate of insecurity, notably accidents, robberies of passengers on the country's roads, and arson of vehicles are factors that make rail transport a real necessity.

Since the beginning of commercial operation of the Bamako-Dakar railway line, many people who feared the activities of criminals and brigands have expressed their relief. The road was and still is known for its insecurity.

The train is practically a refuge for many travelers. On the train, travelers feel comfortable and safe with the presence of security guards on board the train. However, the Bamako-Conakry railway is one of the most anticipated projects in Mali. It was not without criticism typical of accusations leveled against other Chinese megaprojects on the rest of the African continent. Other criticisms and remarks concern the economic viability, the cost, the debt, corruption, the opacity of the contracts and the financing methods of the project. The rapid expansion of infrastructure projects in Africa and Mali is supported by debt-based financing. This reality raises questions about the growing debt levels of African countries, notably Mali, and their sustainability. Also, the Bamako-Conakry railway project has sparked comments, particularly in its Guinean part, regarding the impact of construction on the livelihoods of local populations. Comments were made by local populations regarding job opportunities. In some cases, local populations wanted their citizens to be the only employees as soon as the project was adopted by the authorities of the regions where they live. Remarks also developed around land ownership, specifically concerning the question of payment of compensation. This financial aspect galvanizes the populations, putting them face to face with both local authorities and Chinese entrepreneurs. Disputes over wages, land compensation, supply contracts and environmental impacts are also sources of tension within local populations, but also between local populations, local authorities and Chinese business leaders. As for the environmental aspect, Chinese companies do not report any environmental investment proposals in the context of the construction of the railways concerned. Although Mali's official documents on environmental impact assessment require all projects to carry out environmental impact assessments as well as feasibility studies before projects are awarded to companies, railway construction was granted without a feasibility study being carried out. This assertion indicates that Malian government authorities have not clearly established specific environmental standards for the implementation of the various projects. Although neither Chinese companies nor Malian government authorities have set environmental requirements for the construction of railway and road infrastructures.Studies indicate that, to date there have been no complaint regarding the environmental practices of Chinese companies.

Although the negative environmental impact that infrastructure, particularly railways, could have remains unclear, the projects are likely to contribute positively to Mali's economy and even the environment. The development of a rail line from Bamako to Kayes is helping to significantly reduce traffic in towns along the route. The railway line offers an alternative to automobile transport. This reality makes the railway line a very energy-efficient means of transport, therefore more sustainable. As a result, the railway contributed to the reduction of pollution generated by automobile traffic in the cities concerned. Thus, the Bamako-Kayes railway in Mali and Kayes-Dakar in Senegal offer a transport system contributing to the improvement of the environment and participating in the secure transport of goods and passengers. In terms of the use of local natural resources, the Chinese companies concerned did not specify in their investment proposals their plan for supplying materials for the construction of the railway lines. Therefore, it is not clear whether Chinese companies import construction materials or buy everything locally. The railway line required access to land, most of which is state property. According to stakeholders, State ownership of land used for the various projects was a key factor in the success of the Bamako-Dakar railway line. Indeed, there was no problem of land grabbing and appropriate monetary compensation for the local populations.

VI. Role of Infrastructures in strengthening China-Africa and China-Mali cooperation

Following the "Ten major cooperation programs" and the "Eight major initiatives" jointly formulated and implemented by African countries and China within the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), investments in agriculture-industries, infrastructures, manufacturing, mining, industrial parks and other economic sectors have experienced exponential development for the benefit of African populations. For example, in Mali, with the support of China, many road projects, highways, airports, hydropower and telecommunications projects, as well as economic and trade cooperation zone projects have been built, are under construction or on hold across the country. This situation contributes to energizing and bringing significant transformation to the economic and social development sectors of Mali. Trade in Malian products on the Chinese market has grown exponentially. This trade mainly concerns cotton and handicraft products.

With the construction of the railways, a new era of China-Mali cooperation will have truly begun. Indeed, as a country located in a strategic position in the heart of West Africa, Mali needs investment in infrastructure. The commitment of China, the second largest economy in the world, to invest in infrastructures in Mali, particularly in roads and railways, aims to open up the rapidly growing sub-regional market and gradually integrate Mali into the transport circuit. regional and continental trade, but also global investments. Infrastructure development is one of the most important elements of China-Mali cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. Thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative, the movement of passengers and goods has been improved. Infrastructure development has been recognized by many economists and academics. The multiplicity of global infrastructure financing initiatives, such as the BRI, the European Union (EU), Global Infrastructure Investment Partnership, has been seen by Malian authorities in recent years as an important booster of economic growth in the fight against poverty and in the struggle to achieve the social and economic stability that the country so muchly needs. The multiplicity of global initiatives is also seen in Africa as an important factor in the fight against poverty but also as the cornerstone of all economic development activities for many emerging economies (Kabiru 2022)[23], with the declared objective of “mobilize several billion dollars by 2027 in global infrastructure investments. Therefore, as a notable infrastructure financing initiative and as far as Mali is concerned, the Belt and Road Initiative aims not only to boost industrialization, to help the Malian government solve the shortage problem appropriate and reliable means of transport, but also to build an emerging society.

Therefore, the recent development of railway projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) constitutes a unifying factor not only for Mali but also for all countries in the West African region, and the Organization of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The railway is considered as an important instrument which helps promoting harmony between populations by strengthening interdependence and minimizing conflicts (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2019)[24]. In line with Mali's vision to become one of Africa's emerging countries in the short term, railway infrastructure is part of the country's flagship megaprojects focused on strengthening the national framework for infrastructure and economic and social development. In this regard, it is important to note that the construction of the railway and other Belt and Road Initiative projects encourages Malian government authorities to coordinate the country's economic policy for broader China-Mali cooperation, more in-depth and at a higher level.

To deepen their win-win cooperative relations, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China and African countries must together create an open, inclusive and balanced economic cooperation mechanism which will benefit to all parties. Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative will further strengthen relations of trust and sincere and pragmatic friendship. It will help to draw particular attention more quickly to possible problems that may appear at any time. It will help significantly reduce costs, build stronger institutional ties and remove potential obstacles to cooperation between African countries and China. To deepen relations under the Belt and Road Initiative, China and African countries commit to creating synergy between the Vision 2035 of China-Africa Cooperation, long-term goals China's 2035 Agenda, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the African Union Agenda 2063. This common commitment thus outlines the long-term plan for pragmatic China-Africa cooperation. Such a cooperative relationship is important for China and African countries. Indeed, the conduct of the “Belt and Road Initiative” demonstrates that African countries receive significant investments from China, but also adequate aid from this country. At the same time, China has access to vital natural resources, export markets and global political support in international organizations for issues that China considers sensitive, including the “one-China policy”. However, relations between China and African countries could be better balanced to the benefit of both parties. Specialists and other observers of international relations affirm that China remains the privileged partner of African countries because of the history the two parties share, China's financial capacities, but also and above all the principle of "non- interference”, to which China is attached, respect for the initial commitments and the laudable intentions displayed by China. The White Paper published in 2022 on China-Africa cooperation, published by China, notes that China's objective in Africa is to “give more and take less, give before taking and give without asking for anything in return”[25].

However, even if within the framework of the BRI there are laudable sentiments for the deepening of Sino-African relations, the said initiative continues to attract praise, but also criticism from those who are pessimistic. Belt and Road Initiative projects have in some places sparked accusations of lax environmental and labor standards, as well as risky lending. Critics say China has imposed debt levels on governments with weak or mid-tier economies that are too high relative to their gross domestic product (GDP). Critics view China through the prism of the Belt and Road Initiative as an exploitative corporation, a corporation that is absorbing Africa's resources in order to fuel its own rapid industrialization, but which is also destroying Africa's development potential. This is to the extent that African countries have no chance of reaping the maximum benefits from such an unbalanced relationship (The Economist, 2022)[26]. Beyond the accusations noted above, other critics assert that “The Belt and Road Initiative” is a “neo-imperialist project”[27]. Furthermore, allegations that China is trapping Africa in unsustainable debt deals have for a while occupied the center of debate on China-Africa relations in the Western media. Said allegations were generally linked to the usurious rates that China offered to partner members of the “Belt and Road Initiative”[28]. Some, like Westerners, have made virulent criticisms of the Belt and Road Initiative's projects. ICR by calling them “creditor imperialism” or “debt trap diplomacy” (Stones and Chazan 2020)[27]. Also, other observers have described the gigantic project of the ICR as a veritable “new Marshall Plan” for the world[29].

In 2018, the report produced by academic Deloitte (2018)[30] notes that with significant financing from China, the average debt/GDP ratio in Africa rose to 57%. In this regard, concerns have been expressed by many Western officials. Madame Christine Lagarde, former director general of the International Monetary Fund, asked China to prevent the “Belt and Road Initiative” infrastructure project from increasing the debt of African countries (Bloomberg, 2018)[31] Other critics say the main concern is that a US$8 trillion initiative would leave countries with "debt distress" that would hamper healthy public investment and economic expansion. It was noted that most East African countries have obtained better results compared to other sub-Saharan African countries (AfDB, 2018)[32]. Therefore, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has attracted attention on the fact that at least 40% of low-income countries on the African continent are either in debt distress or at high risk of becoming so. At the end of 2017, Eritrea, the Republic of Congo, Mozambique, South Sudan, Chad, and Zimbabwe were considered to be in a state of debt distress. In 2019, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Zambia were considered by the IMF to present a “high risk of debt distress” (IMF, 2019)[33].

On the other hand, there are “Sino-optimists”. They are very numerous in African countries. “Sino-optimists” perceive China through the prism of the “Belt and Road Initiative” as the great and ultimate savior who has the will and the ability to help African countries emerge from underdevelopment through the Belt and Road Initiative. “Sino-optimists” believe that the BRI aims to share the “Chinese dream” with African countries. It is a dream of peace, dream of development, dream of prosperity to share with African countries. Sino-optimists also argue that the Belt and Road Initiative exhibits "China's ascendancy on the international stage" through the provision of public goods in the form of capital and technical services to other countries. Aside from the assertion of “Sino-optimists,” China’s rising economic development indices (FDI) in Africa face growing risks and challenges. Analysts, particularly those in the United States of America, see huge problems that African governments and state-owned enterprises are hiding under the Belt and Road Initiative. The China-Africa Research Initiative report presented by the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies noted that China has signed one thousand one hundred and forty-one (1141) loan commitments worth nearly $153 billion with African governments and public companies. The results of the studies and surveys carried out note that some African countries are suspending or scrutinizing contracts with Chinese companies, most of which are part of the BRI, because they feel unable to repay their loans (Xuewu 2022)[34]. These assertions have fueled debates among “Sino-optimists” about the so-called “debt trap” into which China is allegedly luring other countries, including Africa for political reasons.

Many specialists, researchers, and academics believe that the so-called debt trap is unfounded. Investigations have found little evidence of a pattern that Chinese banks, acting at the behest of the Chinese government, are deliberately overlanding or financing loss-making projects to secure a strategic advantage for China. In turn this situation will lead to a "debt trap" among beneficiaries. The investigation by the China Africa Research Institute (CARI) at John Hopkins University found that Chinese loans are not a major contributor to debt overhang in Africa. The survey identified only six countries in which China, among many other financial partners, contributes significant borrowing.

Since 2000, in view of the difficult situation experienced by certain African countries, China has decided to make nine (9) commitments to cancel the debts of borrowing African countries. For countries that have not paid their debts within the originally agreed deadlines, China has proposed various debt restructuring options to help African countries overcome their difficulties, rather than resorting to asset seizures or other means to force borrowing countries to repay their debts. The China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University reveals that China restructured or refinanced approximately $15 billion of African countries' debt between 2000 and 2019, without carrying out "asset seizures." Western countries such as the United States of America have criticized this act as "debt traps". Although some contractual provisions provide for arbitration against borrowing countries for failure to repay debt on time, there is no evidence that China has actually resorted to judicial enforcement of payments or use penalty rate. Speaking of debt, during a press conference on the sidelines of the Summit of the Forum on Sino-African Cooperation held in September 2018 in Beijing, the President of the Republic of Senegal, Mr. Macky SALL declared: "We (the Africans), we know what we want in our cooperation with China...The debt we have with China is very well controlled. There is no shadow of doubt about that"[35].

Since its entry into force in May 2020, forty-eight (48) countries eligible for the debt moratorium, most of which are African countries, participated in the initiative before the end of 2021. Overall, borrowing was mainly from China, official creditors of the Paris Club, but also private banks and multilateral institutions. In 2020, the share of DSSI countries that borrowed from China increased from 2 percent to 18 percent. The share sold to European private creditors increased from 3 percent to 11 percent. The share of external debt owed to Paris Club creditors decreased by 28 percent in 2020. It is worth noting that China, with 18 percent of the total share of external debt, has become the largest country in debt relief as part of this initiative. It suspended more than $5.7 billion in debt repayments, contributing to more than half of the total global debt moratorium. Thanks to this action, 45% of the poorest countries' debts to China were suspended. On the other hand, during the same period, Great Britain did not suspend payments on its commercial loans. As a result, it recovered nearly $3.2 billion in debt from countries that requested the debt standstill initiative.

In order to enable African countries and Chinese entrepreneurs to continue to benefit from the dividends of infrastructure investments in Africa and to avoid a debt crisis in the countries of the continent, the meeting of the Forum on China-African Cooperation (FOCAC) held in Dakar, Senegal on 2021, explored new models of infrastructure development including private sector participation in the "Belt and Road Initiative" in Africa. In new infrastructure development models, China encourages BRI-funded enterprises to adopt models such as public-private partnerships (PPP) and BOT (build, operate, transfer) models to invest in infrastructure. African industry with a view to more localized production of African brands, made in Africa. China has expressed its readiness to provide more flexible and innovative infrastructure financing, such as PPP and swap formula, particularly if requested by African government authorities. It should be noted that the PPP model associated with China's swap formula could largely contribute to resolving the financial constraints of African countries, reducing the expenditure of said countries, and the dependence of countries on raw materials. (Ehizuelen M.M.O, 2020)[36]. The exchange formula appears to be truly innovative. Indeed, for the first time, Africa's resources could be directly converted into development projects. The implementation of the innovative initiatives mentioned above has led experts, economists to assert that debt trap diplomacy was a Cold War mindset. It seeks to demonize Chinese loans as generating economic dependence on China. Some experts and economists have also claimed that the "Belt and Road Initiative" helps countries escape the "non-development trap" rather than dragging them into the "debt trap" (Xiang, 2019)[37.]

Many academics who work on Sino-African relations have expressed their perplexity, their astonishment at the divergence of views, particularly in the face of virulent criticism. In this regard, it would be correct to observe the “Belt and Road Initiative” so as to place this major project from the angle of international cooperation rather than from the angle of competition or hegemonic politics. China's contribution to the development of many African countries has become the essential framework for the development strategies of these countries and even of African Union. Most of the Belt and Road Initiative projects on African continent address the crucial infrastructure needs of African countries: roads, highways, airports, railways, ports, hospitals, schools and energy. Therefore, it should be emphasized that China's loans are neither good nor bad as such. Loans from China will be whatever African governments want to do with said loans. It should therefore be noted that China's involvement with African countries goes far beyond the construction of roads, highways, airports, railways, ports, hospitals, etc. schools and energy. China's involvement in Africa goes beyond the loans granted, the purpose of which is seen as leading African countries to exaggerated debt levels. China's engagement with African countries aims to offer these countries the development model which has been successful in China and even in Southeast Asia. Despite the criticisms expressed here and there, China's development model finds favor with most African countries, particularly those in East Africa which have, for some time, adopted characteristics of the Chinese development model.

African countries have much to win from the Belt and Road Initiative. African countries would have even more positive advantages in the BRI as China-Africarelations would be positioned within a win-win framework. Above all, the Belt and Road Initiative must be seen quite simply as a global project proposed by China and designed to advance the major development strategies of each country. In this regard, the challenges for African countries consist of clearly identifying the points where their interests converge with those of China, but also the points where said interests diverge. The challenges of African countries also relate, among other things, to how areas of convergence can strengthen win-win cooperation between China and Africa. China should further help African countries to free themselves from their inhibitions and distance themselves from their position as the commercial periphery of the world. It is important that at this stage of the BRI's evolution that African countries work with China at all levels (bilateral, regional and continental and international) in order to effectively determine where the interests of the different parties might lie. countries in the following reserved for financing the “Belt and Road Initiative”. It should be noted that while it clearly appears that China has an African policy on cooperation and investment, African countries and African Union (AU) do not, on the whole, have a clearly defined common policy outside of the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. The non-visibility of African trade policies towards China, particularly with regard to African investments in China, plays into the field of negotiations for Africa in its cooperation with China. On 2023, we note that the presence of African products in China markets increase significally. The non-visibility of clear African trade policies towards China may provide fertile ground for opportunistic and predatory African officials to take advantage of their positions to satisfy their personal needs.

VII. Conclusion

It is almost unanimously admitted that African countries experience a significant infrastructure deficit. It is also recognized that the investments of the “Belt and Road Initiative” contribute largely to closing the infrastructure deficit in African countries. In this regard, the accession of African countries to the “Belt and Road Initiative” amounts to expanding China's presence in international development on African continent through financing and the implementation of infrastructure projects. at the country level, at the regional level and at the continental level. The railway projects covered in this article are mega infrastructure projects which are part of large-scale projects which will be supported by China in Mali in the context of the “Belt and Road Initiative”. There is no doubt that modern railways will contribute to the socio-economic development of Mali. In the long term, modern railways would contribute enormously to stimulating economic growth and promoting trade nationally, and regionally in West Africa within the framework of the Economic Community of African States. West (ECOWAS). The implementation of railways, roads and other infrastructures projects by China contributes enormously to helping African countries overcome the fundamental obstacles they encounter on the path to the industrial development of the Continent. The Bamako-Dakar, Bamako-Conakry, and the Kidal-Bamako railways will provide the valuable connection between Mali and neighboring West African countries, primarily Senegal, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau, and the Gambia. A vast era of exchange, commerce and investment will thus be opened. In order to maximize benefits and not fall into the trap of dependence and debt, it is desirable to recommend that African countries, including Mali, adopt a common position that would serve the common interests of all. This does not seem to be the case at this time when the world is experiencing tension whose outcome is uncertain, where the global economy is practically slowing down.

Furthermore, the financing mechanism for “Belt and Road Initiative” projects should be re-examined. In this regard, the financing of BRI projects should be placed in commercial form in favor of more concessional financing with lower interest rates and fairly long repayment periods. As part of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, African countries could easily borrow to finance infrastructure projects at more affordable costs. BRI infrastructure funding should not necessarily be guaranteed by national assets such as railways, roads, ports. Said financing should be guaranteed by other kind of agreement between government authorities. At the national level, Mali would benefit from formulating economic policies likely to improve the good results, potential gains and limit the potential negative effects of Belt and Road Initiative projects. This requires proactive engagement on the part of the Malian authorities to ensure and guarantee win-win cooperation with China. It must be mandatory for all Chinese companies wishing to invest in a Belt and Road Initiative project in Mali to strictly comply with the policy frameworks in force in the country. Under the BRI, Mali authorities should ensure appropriate engagement of all parties concerned when awarding markets and contracts. The government authorities of Mali should also carry out a diversification of the country's economic and commercial partnerships, so that any effect linked to the international situation, which could affect the economy of a partner (for example in the direction of slowing down growth of the economy of a partner) does not negatively and lastingly affect the economy of Mali. In 2017, China issued a guidance document on promoting the “Green Belt and Road Initiative”. These guidelines call for sustainable development and strengthening environmental protection. These guidelines also call for “small and beautiful” projects, which would appeal and better serve the needs of local populations. While country decision-makers and BRI project managers have made significant investments to improve project management over the past decade, the projects that will now be registered should benefit from the experiences gained accordingly. The decline should appear in this context as a real advantage not only for African countries, but also for Mali, and for all the partners of the “Belt and Road Initiative”. /.

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