Authors: Hendrik Oye, University of Oxford
Title: Negotiating Development: Togolese Agency in German and Chinese Development Projects and Finance

China’s growing engagement in Africa is an increasing cause of concern for numerous scholars, practitioners, policy-makers, and the wider public in the field of international development. While Western governments have reduced their budgets for development cooperation, Chinese financial support to African countries, particularly for infrastructure projects, has increased sharply under turnkey projects such as the widely debated ‘Belt and Road’ initiative. However, there is little knowledge how these projects are negotiated and as of yet, there are no comparative studies that examine how African countries navigate and negotiate Chinese development projects and finance in comparison to traditional donors. This paper addresses the gap in the literature through a comparative study of four Chinese and German development projects in Togo with original data based on more than 20 interviews with Togolese civil-servants as well as donor-representatives. Togo has been selected as an extreme case, because of its small economic and geographic size and similar characteristics of the four selected projects (agricultural technology and urban infrastructure).

This research is significant for it shows, in contrast to previous works, that despite a structurally weak negotiating position that small African countries are still able to negotiate favourable agreements with China and traditional donors. The evidence suggests that this is largely a result of competent and committed Togolese civil-servants who remained fully engaged throughout the negotiation and implementation. Surprisingly, I found no differences between the Chinese and German projects in both outcome and observed agency, despite differently managed relations and procedures. However, the sector significantly affected the intensity and observed agency of Togolese actors. This indicates that political priority, project size, and salience, are important factors in determining the process and outcome of aid negotiations. I therefore argue that existing aid negotiation models neither sufficiently account for recipient agency nor the role of civil-servants that are involved in the negotiation and implementation. However, by fully accounting for these factors, the ownership and sustainability of development projects can be significantly improved. Finally, it underscores the need for further research and the importance of bureaucratic agency to facilitate sustainable development outcomes beyond China-Africa relations and aid negotiations.