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Title: Challenges for China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Indonesia and Cambodia

Abstract: In 2015, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all member states of the United Nations, aimed at providing guidance for human prosperity in the long term. Among those ambitious goals, goal 9, infrastructure, appears both as an explicit goal and as an implicit means to implement and achieve other SDGs, for example goal 1, the elimination of extreme poverty. In 2013, China’s president Xi proposed “The Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which aims to strengthen Beijing’s economic leadership through a vast program of infrastructure building across the Asia, representing the largest infrastructure initiative ever launched by a single country. Infrastructure is a stated priority in both the SDGs agenda and in China’s BRI. In this study, we used the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ as a framework for assessing how China’s infrastructures investments (roads, railways, bridges, ports, airports and hydropower) via the BRI framework might benefit local people. The data was collected from June to July 2017 in Indonesia and Cambodia. We convened focus groups and conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with representatives of local communities and government officials from Indonesia and Cambodia. We also consulted representatives of think tanks, research institutions, universities and workers from Chinese state-owned enterprises.

Our study found that in Indonesia and Cambodia, the political trust between China and both countries has shaped their perceptions, particularly among the governing elites, towards China’s newer foreign policy initiatives including BRI. The extent to which countries have implemented BRI projects has been significantly linked to their economic dependence on China. Thus, the performance of China’s BRI, especially in promoting economic development and poverty reduction in recipient countries, remains unknown. Land use, labor issues and environmental risks are common concerns for infrastructure construction in most developing countries. The success of China’s BRI largely depends on the trust and support of people in recipient countries. That trust and support will be won only through the delivery of real benefits.