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## Zambian Bureaucratic Practices in Chinese-Financed Digital Projects

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**Drawing on interviews with Zambian officials, bureaucrats, and both Chinese and Zambian professionals in the digital sector, this policy brief examines how Zambian actors have engaged with Chinese-financed digital projects across two administrations: the Patriotic Front (PF) government under Edgar Lungu (2015–2021) and the United Party for National Development (UPND) government under Hakainde Hichilema (2021–present). It argues that the transition from the PF to the UPND widened bureaucratic room for manoeuvre in managing Chinese digital projects, yet these gains remained limited and sometimes fragile, as they were partly offset by personnel reshuffling and relatively weak institutional continuity.**

China's growing digital presence across Africa has triggered renewed debates about how African states negotiate external partnerships in their development trajectories. Particularly since the 2015 launch of the Digital Silk Road – a component of China's signature foreign policy initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Chinese engagement in telecommunications, e-governance, and surveillance technologies has raised increasing concerns in media, scholarly, and policy debates on digital dependency, digital neocolonialism, and authoritarian diffusion,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that China's digital engagement with Africa already began back in the early 2000s. While much of the existing work contributes to a macro-level understanding of China's strategic intentions and the structural risks, less attention has been paid to how African domestic politics has shaped these engagements from within. This policy brief thus shifts the focus to how African domestic politics informs and structures engagement with China in the digital sector, focusing on bureaucratic practices across the Lungu and Hichilema administrations within changing political, fiscal, and foreign-policy contexts.

Zambia is a particularly interesting case when it comes to examining how domestic politics, including changes of government, can influence the negotiation, implementation, and outcomes of Chinese digital projects. Firstly, China has become the dominant external actor in Zambia's digital and telecommunications sector. Over nearly two decades, Chinese companies, supported by loans from Chinese policy banks and more recently by more market-driven approaches, have constructed much of the country's major digital infrastructure.

<sup>1</sup>Willem H. Gravett, "Digital Neocolonialism: The Chinese Surveillance State in Africa", *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 30, no. 1 (2022): 39–58; Mandira Bagwandeen, "The China Factor in Africa's Pursuit of Digital Sovereignty", *The Africa Governance Papers* 1, no. 3 (2023); Chibuzo Achinivu, *Digital Authoritarianism in Africa: Chinese Strategy or African Legacy* (University of Delaware, 2024).

The concentration of Chinese finance, contractors, equipment, and technical systems has created a high degree of dependency on Chinese technology, experts, firms, and standards. Secondly, the change of government in Zambia was widely associated with shifts in governing style and fiscal priorities. Thirdly, Zambia's engagement with China is embedded in a broader foreign policy, in which citizens are increasingly concerned about the government's response to rising geopolitical tensions between the West and the East (China in particular). There are also concerns that the Hichilema government's ties to the West are a regional security threat, undermining the country's long-held policy of non-alignment.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese presence in the country has also historically been politically sensitive due to populism, domestic contestation, and more recently the rising debt pressure.<sup>3</sup>

This policy brief focuses on bureaucratic practices under these two administrations and how they have shaped the negotiation, management, and implementation of two major Chinese digital projects. In this context, bureaucrats are understood broadly as state officials, civil servants, and technical or administrative actors working within the public sector apparatus.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on an analysis of public documents, interviews with Zambian government officials, bureaucrats, and both Chinese and Zambian professionals in the digital sector during multiple field visits to Lusaka between 2017 and 2023, this policy brief explores how the change of government reshaped bureaucratic room for manoeuvre in Zambia's engagement with Chinese digital projects.

## China's Digital Engagement with Zambia

Since gaining its independence in 1964, Zambia has maintained close relations with China. Over the decades, China has also emerged as one of Zambia's most important partners. Since the 2010s, Chinese finance and firms have also become increasingly important to Zambia's infrastructure development. While digital cooperation between the two countries has not been the largest component of Zambia–China cooperation, it has been a substantive one, especially under Lungu. Based on the Boston University Global Development Policy Center's database, Zambia received 82 recorded Chinese loan commitments between 2000 and 2024, totalling approximately USD 9.52 billion.<sup>5</sup> Within this dataset, 10 projects were classified as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) projects, totalling approximately USD 961.9 million. Around USD 743.2 million of this amount was committed during the Lungu administration, which accounts for nearly 77 per cent of Zambia's recorded Chinese ICT loan commitments.

Throughout the 2010s, the PF, the then ruling party, pursued a "development through infrastructure" agenda by partially relying on loans from China. Infrastructure delivery was also used as a key tool for securing electoral support,<sup>6</sup> which later also contributed to the country's debt distress. Digital development formed a crucial part of Zambia's development agenda, which is often presented by the PF leadership as tools for modernization and administrative efficiency. Among various digital projects, the Smart Zambia National ICT

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Kamwengo, "Social media debates on Zambia's evolving relations with the West and East", *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief* 21, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Andrzej Polus and Hangwei Li, "Development Studies Meet Pierre Bourdieu: The case of Chinese Private FDI in Zambia", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 61, no. 4 (2023): 521–543.

<sup>4</sup> Frangton Chiyemura, Elisa Gambino, and Tim Zajontz, "Infrastructure and the Politics of African State Agency: Shaping the Belt and Road Initiative in East Africa," *Chinese Political Science Review* 8, no. 1 (2023): 111.

<sup>5</sup> Please see the following link for more information about the database: <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Zajontz, "The Chinese Infrastructural Fix in Africa: Lessons from the Sino-Zambian 'Road Bonanza'", *Oxford Development Studies* 50, no. 1 (2022): 14–29.

Development Project (also known as the Smart Zambia project) and the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) Migration Project<sup>7</sup> stand out.

In March 2015, the Lungu government and the Export-Import Bank of China (the Exim Bank) signed a concessional loan agreement for the Smart Zambia project. The project was awarded to Huawei as the main contractor. Phase I of the project (worth over USD 65 million) involved building a national data centre and an ICT talent training centre; Phase II (worth USD 333.2 million) focused on expanding the national broadband network and implementing e-government services, which involved deploying fibre optic cable, connecting businesses and households, and building a national data centre. Phase II also included the development of an e-customs system to improve customs operations and revenue collection.<sup>8</sup> The undistributed portion of Phase II was cancelled in 2022 as part of the Hichilema administration's broader efforts to reduce exposure to loan-financed projects amid debt reconstructing.<sup>9</sup>

In 2015, the Zambian Government also launched the DTT project. The project included the construction of the national digital TV centre, the transmission network platform, the digitalization of the provincial radio and TV buildings and TV stations, the construction of the state operation centre and business hall, and the digitization of all terminal receiving systems.<sup>10</sup> The DTT project was valued at USD 273 million and was also financed through a loan from the Exim Bank of China.<sup>11</sup> To reduce the fiscal burden on the national treasury, the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) and StarTimes Zambia established a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) to carry the loan for the DTT project. In 2016, as part of this arrangement, the two companies launched TopStar Communication Company Limited, a public signal distributor and Zambia's official digital migration agent, as a joint venture. This placed the Chinese partner not only in a construction role, but also in an operational role within the broadcasting distribution system in Zambia.<sup>12</sup> Smart Zambia and the DTT project thus provide two important cases for examining how Chinese-financed digital projects were negotiated, implemented, and reassessed across the Lungu and Hichilema administrations.

## Zambian Bureaucratic Practices under Lungu's Administration (2015–2021)

Scholars contend that the PF-led government of President Lungu exhibited a trend of democratic backsliding and growing authoritarianism.<sup>13</sup> Over time, this political environment narrowed the scope for bureaucratic input, as presidential directives and political priorities increasingly shaped administrative decision-making. Scholarly work on Zambian bureaucratic capacity in this period also highlights weak enforcement mechanisms due to various

<sup>7</sup> DTT migration refers to the transition from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting and was part of a wider international commitment under the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)'s Geneva 2006 Agreement, which set 17 June 2015 as the end of the transition period for most ITU Region 1 countries. Zambia's own Digital Migration Policy explicitly framed the project as a response to this ITU deadline.

<sup>8</sup> UNCTAD, "Republic of Zambia: Rapid e-Trade Readiness Assessment," 2018, accessed 9 Aug 2025.

<sup>9</sup> More details about the Smart Zambia project can be found here: <https://china.aiddata.org/projects/53093/>.

<sup>10</sup> StarTimes, "Zambia National Digital TV Migration Project," Nov 22, 2020, accessed 9 Aug 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, "Ministerial Statement: Digital Migration Project Implementation," 25 Oct 2018, accessed 30 Apr 2026.

<sup>13</sup> Matías Bianchi, Nic Cheeseman, and Jennifer Cyr, "The Myth of Democratic Resilience", *Journal of Democracy* 36, no. 3 (2025): 33-46.

factors, including limited technical expertise, a lack of funding, and insufficient staffing.<sup>14</sup> During the Lungu administration, many bureaucrats across government institutions were not paid on time, with delays of several months in some cases.<sup>15</sup>

Under Lungu, bureaucratic practices were shaped by a highly centralized political environment in which executive preferences frequently overrode technocratic review. This did not eliminate bureaucratic influence altogether, but it significantly narrowed bureaucrats' room for manoeuvre, especially when it came to questioning project costs, procedures, and implementation terms. The Smart Zambia and DTT projects were politically championed and endorsed by President Lungu and driven more by a "get it done" mentality than adherence to due process. Bureaucratic expertise and input were not effectively incorporated into project decision-making. The two projects were also implemented with minimal public consultation and little or no transparent procurement. For instance, the contract for the Smart Zambia project lacked clear delivery timelines and installation schedules.<sup>16</sup> The Zambia Public Procurement Authority (ZPPA) was only brought in after the contract had been signed to retroactively approve the decision that had already been made. Some bureaucrats were also aware that the costs proposed by Huawei for the Smart Zambia project were inflated, but they argued that "[t]here is not much we can do, as this is a project the President wanted to pursue."<sup>17</sup> An example they gave was the nearly USD 2.5 million email system intended for only 12,000 users.<sup>18</sup> As one official from the Ministry of Finance noted, "I believe our own providers, such as Zamtel, could do the job at a much lower cost."<sup>19</sup> However, due to political constraints, these concerns were not formally raised. Several interviewees suggested that Lungu's strong interest in Smart Zambia reflected both electoral incentives and patronage interests. On the one hand, the project was seen as a pre-election legacy initiative that could showcase state modernization, potentially helping Lungu's campaign for the 2016 election; on the other hand, alleged informal commission fee arrangements involving senior ministers may also have helped push the agenda forward.<sup>20</sup> This highlights the fact that strong executive preference can limit bureaucratic autonomy even when technical expertise identifies more cost-effective alternatives.

Despite the fact that presidential directives carried significant weight in these projects, bureaucratic practices still mattered in shaping how they moved forward. Bureaucratic reservations, however, were primarily rooted in fiscal and governance concerns, such as cost inflation, debt sustainability, and weak procurement oversight rather than normative opposition to the technology itself. Even with top-level political backing on the Smart Zambia project, the full deployment of surveillance infrastructure under the project had stalled by 2019–2020 and was never rolled out nationwide beyond limited pilot zones. Following Zambia's 2020 debt default and warnings from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) regarding debt distress,<sup>21</sup> Zambian bureaucrats also came under increasing pressure to review and slow down some of the Chinese-financed projects, including the Smart Zambia project and the DTT project.

<sup>14</sup> Polus and Li, "Development Studies Meet Pierre Bourdieu", 521–543; Hangwei Li, Dominik Kopyński, and Ian Taylor, "China and the Troubled Prospects for Africa's Economic Take-Off: Linkage Formation and Spillover Effects in Zambia", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 861–882.

<sup>15</sup> Multiple interviews, Lusaka, April 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Lusaka Times, "PF Government Single Sources Huawei in a US\$ 65.5 Million Scam for National ICT Project," 5 Jan 2015, accessed 8 Jul 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a staff member at the Ministry of Finance, Lusaka, 10 July 2016.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Multiple interviews with senior Zambian government officials, journalists, lawyers, and civil society representatives, Lusaka, Feb 2017, April 2019, and Dec 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Hangwei Li, "Chinese Economic Engagement with Zambia: Loans, Investment and the Future", in *The Economic Transformation and Political Economy of Zambia*, ed. Stephan Chan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 83–95.

Moreover, during Lungu's term, there were also clear examples of inter-ministerial coordination, demonstrating collective bureaucratic efforts to shape Chinese-financed digital projects. In 2019, for example, the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Home Affairs collaborated in the deportation of the CEO of TopStar, who was also the StarTimes representative in Zambia. The official reason for the deportation was that the Chinese CEO had used "derogatory and abusive language, not only towards employees of TopStar but also towards government officials on multiple occasions."<sup>22</sup> However, interviews suggest that the major underlying reason was that the Chinese CEO was considered too "assertive" and "strong" in connection with the collaboration between StarTimes and the ZNBC.<sup>23</sup> Zambian authorities, in particular the Ministry of Information, were dissatisfied with the power dynamics within TopStar and requested that the Chinese side replace the CEO. The Ministry of Information also contacted the Ministry of Immigration, which terminated the visas of another 10 Chinese staff members.

## Zambian Bureaucratic Practices under Hichilema's Administration (2021–Present)

Hichilema's election in August 2021 was often seen as creating a degree of democratic opening after a period of backsliding under the Lungu presidency.<sup>24</sup> In administrative terms, this initially created greater scope for technocratic review and bureaucratic input. However, over time, there have also been growing concerns over the fragility of this opening, especially considering the shrinking civic space, the use of legal and administrative tools against political opponents, the use of laws by the executive to manipulate institutions in order to achieve partisan goals, and the uneven realization of the government's promised democratic reform.<sup>25</sup> As a result, bureaucratic practices under the new administration reflected two trends. On the one hand, democratic opening created greater scope for bureaucratic input and technocratic expertise to shape top-level decision-making. On the other hand, bureaucratic action was not simply freed from political constraint, as executive priorities and the pressures of political competition (especially partisan politics) continued to shape administrative decision-making.

With regard to the economy, due to the large-scale borrowing under the previous regime, Hichilema's administration had to prioritize the restructuring of its public debt since defaulting on Eurobonds and accumulating debts from both bilateral and commercial creditors. Upon assuming power in August 2021, the UPND-led government initiated a comprehensive debt review. These fiscal pressures reinforced the need to reassess major Chinese-financed projects, especially those associated with high costs, which include the Smart Zambia and DTT projects.

In this context, bureaucrats within the Ministry of Finance, along with civil servants from other ministries, played a key role in advising Hichilema's office on the economic and strategic implications of continuing certain digital projects. Smart city surveillance expansion plans for Lusaka, initiated under the Lungu administration, were seen as politically risky

<sup>22</sup> Lusaka Times, "Chinese CEO of TopStar deported," 14 Sept 2019, accessed 9 Aug 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Multiple interviews with managers from Topstar and the Ministry of Information and Media, Lusaka, Aug 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Marja Hinfelaar, Lise Rakner, and Nicolas van de Walle, "Zambia: Backsliding in a Presidential Regime" in *Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention*, ed. Carl LeVan, Joseph Olayinka Fashagba, and Edward R. McMahon (Oxford University Press, 2022), 187–211.

<sup>25</sup> Nic Cheeseman, "Zambia's Cautionary Tale of Democratic Opening", European Democracy Hub, 31 Mar 2025, accessed 10 Apr 2026; Sishiwa Sishuwa, 'How President Hakainde Hichilema is using lawfare to subvert democracy in Zambia', *Mail & Guardian*, 13 Jun 2024, accessed 10 Apr 2026.

and financially questionable. Their technical evaluations and fiscal assessments shaped the range of policy options presented to decision-makers and contributed to the government's adoption of cancellation and reassessment measures, including the cancellation of Smart Zambia Phase II and efforts to cancel or renegotiate the undisbursed balance associated with DTT Phases II and III. Yet these decisions also involved diplomatic and political trade-offs. Halting or reducing Chinese-financed projects allowed the Hichilema government to signal fiscal discipline and reduce exposure to undisbursed Chinese loans, but it also risked complicating relations with Chinese lenders at a time when China was central to Zambia's debt restructuring. Domestically, it could reinforce opposition narratives that Hichilema was distancing Zambia from China and aligning too closely with the West. This illustrates the fact that bureaucratic input and technocratic review had a great impact on high-level policy choices, especially where fiscal concerns were critical, but their influence depended on how their recommendations aligned with the administration's broader debt strategy and foreign-policy calculations.

Moreover, bureaucratic practice under the new administration extended beyond policy advice to more assertive negotiation through inter-ministerial coordination. In October 2023, senior bureaucrats from the Ministry of Information and Media, the Ministry of Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development, and the ZNBC travelled to Beijing to renegotiate a better deal in order to resume Phases II and III of the halted DTT project. During the visit, the Zambian delegation explicitly requested debt relief for USD 590,000 owed from DTT Phase I and USD 12.5 million from DTT Phases II and III, citing unsustainable financial terms under the original agreement. In response, StarTimes committed to considering the debt write-off and pledged to complete the remaining infrastructure within 13 months upon conclusion of formalities.<sup>26</sup> This example of inter-ministerial coordination and negotiation illustrates how Zambian officials sought to reshape the financial and operational terms through diplomatic and contractual bargaining when it comes to digital cooperation with China.

However, it should also be noted that while the 2021 political transition under Hichilema created opportunities to reassess Zambia's digital cooperation with China, it also led to disruptive personnel turnover. Since assuming office, Hichilema has executed a comprehensive reshuffle of Zambia's ministerial and permanent secretary positions, which also affected key institutions that are involved in the country's digital development, including the Ministry of Information and Media, the Smart Zambia Institute and the Ministry of Technology and Science. Many newly appointed bureaucrats admitted to lacking systematic knowledge of the Smart Zambia and DTT projects. Bureaucrats in these ministries shared common struggles, such as inadequate project documentation and poor inter-ministerial knowledge transfer, which posed a serious obstacle to policy continuity and oversight.<sup>27</sup> This pattern is also reflected in broader governance assessment. Estimates in 2024 suggest that the UPND government had removed over 300 civil servants from their positions, including 76 directors.<sup>28</sup> While not all incoming officials were external political appointees, the scale of turnover nevertheless weakened institutional memory and generated tensions between the UPND and bureaucrats.

This suggests that political transitions accompanied by a degree of democratic opening can expand the scope for greater bureaucratic review and technocratic input, but these gains remain limited where such openings are fragile. Under the Hichilema administration, growing political polarization and partisan competition have continued to shape bureau-

<sup>26</sup> Lusaka Times, "Zambia, China hold talks to resume digital migration," 27 Oct 2023, accessed 10 May 2026.

<sup>27</sup> Multiple interviews, Lusaka, Aug and Dec 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2024 Country Report, p. 29.

cratic work, including through reshuffling and institutional reorganization. Consequently, knowledge management related to the governance of Chinese digital projects has remained weak due to the lack of systematic institutional learning, and the institutional memory needed for effective governance was therefore not preserved either.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As demonstrated above, bureaucratic practices in Zambia have shaped Chinese-financed digital projects at various stages, even within a highly asymmetrical relationship and under enduring structural constraints. Put another way, Zambian bureaucrats are not merely passive recipients of Chinese digital infrastructure but instead exert meaningful influence through various tactics, such as bureaucratic negotiation, inter-agency coordination, project oversight, and, at times, the deliberate delaying of projects.

However, the case of Zambia also shows that bureaucratic practices cannot be understood in isolation from broader political and economic logics. The trajectory of Chinese digital projects has been shaped not only by the technical merits of bureaucratic arguments, but also by political priorities, fiscal pressures, and China's place in Zambia's foreign relations and domestic debates. Bureaucratic influence has therefore depended on the extent to which technocratic recommendations aligned with wider presidential priorities, foreign-policy calculations, and economic-policy goals.

Under Lungu, bureaucratic room for manoeuvre was constrained by democratic backsliding, reflected by top-down presidential directives, opaque procurement processes, and limited institutional capacity. However, even within these constraints, Zambian bureaucrats found opportunities to actively shape the design and implementation of both projects, employing tactics such as delaying implementation and challenging the power asymmetries embedded in joint ventures such as TopStar when they were dissatisfied with the collaboration. Their actions, such as withholding funds, demanding renegotiations, and facilitating the deportation of a Chinese executive, reveal forms of bureaucratic resistance and procedural control that challenge depictions of African digital governance as entirely externally dominated.

Hichilema's new administration created scope and opportunities for Zambian bureaucrats to play a more assertive role in technical advice, negotiation, and everyday engagement with Chinese digital partners. This was reflected in more active bureaucratic involvement in project evaluation, increased scrutiny over costs and procurement processes, and a greater willingness to revisit or halt previously approved projects. However, the broad reshuffling of ministries and senior civil servants that accompanied the transition has made it difficult to critically, objectively, and systematically review some of the projects' earlier phases and to pass on lessons that previous officials or departments had learned. Many newly appointed bureaucrats lack first-hand knowledge of the projects' origins and implementation, undermining institutional memory and weakening oversight. The UPND period thus demonstrates both the enabling and constraining effects of a change of government: it expanded the scope for review and renegotiation, but it did not automatically generate better knowledge management, experience sharing, documentation, and institutional continuity needed for sustained oversight.

## Policy Recommendations

The case of Zambia shows that changes of government, especially when accompanied by a democratic opening, can create important opportunities to reassess and renegotiate digital projects that have become fiscally and administratively contentious. However, these opportunities do not automatically translate into stronger governance and remain fragile if they are not supported by bureaucratic capacity and institutional continuity. For Zambian policy-makers, it is important not only to enhance bureaucratic capacity and institutional strength, but also to create an enabling political and administrative environment in which bureaucrats can actively shape project outcomes without fear of political repercussions. Ensuring greater protection for technocratic input and reducing political interference in administrative decision-making will be critical. This also provides lessons for countries undergoing political transition. It is reasonable for incoming governments to appoint officials in order to reduce the influence of previous political networks, but bureaucratic reshuffling should not come at the expense of institutional experience. In particular, technical positions linked to procurement review, contract monitoring, and project implementation should not be subject to wholesale turnover, especially when projects are technically complex or dependent on accumulated institutional knowledge for effective oversight.

As Europe expands its digital investments in Africa through initiatives such as the Global Gateway, it is operating within an increasingly competitive landscape, as actors such as China bring distinct legal frameworks, financing models, and technological standards. The capacity of domestic institutions is becoming a key factor shaping how such external offers are assessed, negotiated, and implemented. For German and other European policy-makers, capacity building should not be seen as a way to secure better terms for European actors. Rather, it is a way to make European digital cooperation more credible and sustainable while strengthening African partners' ability to evaluate and oversee projects provided by all external partners.

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