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# Perceptions of China's influence on Zambia remain positive, though on the decline

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 759 | Edward Chibwilli

## Summary

China's relationship with Africa generates never-ending debate. Proponents of this relationship classify China's engagement with Africa as deep, broad, and valuable. They point to the fact that China is Africa's largest trading partner and bilateral creditor as well as a critical source of infrastructure investment (Economist, 2022; Tsoka, 2020; Hanauer & Morris, 2014). In contrast, critics consider the relationship unequal and exploitative, motivated by China's quest for export markets and for natural resources to meet its growing production and consumption needs. They accuse Chinese investors of abusing and disrespecting local workers, turning a blind eye to human-rights violations, accepting a lack of democracy, participating in corruption, and pushing African countries into a debt trap (Binnatli, 2019; Hanauer & Morris, 2014).

Dating back to the pre-independence period, the Sino-Zambian relationship grew increasingly strong through the early 2000s, resulting in a wide range of high-profile Chinese-supported projects in Zambia. These include the Tanzania–Zambia Railway (TAZARA), Levy Mwanawasa Stadium, Heroes Stadium, conference facilities in the government complex, Levy Mwanawasa Hospital, a storage system for maize, the China–Zambia Friendship Farm, and massive road infrastructure development (Mwiinga & Wilma, 2019).

However, since the New Dawn government came to power two years ago, presidential references to China as an important friend have declined, as has the number of prominent Chinese-supported ventures or developments (Chatham House, 2022).

How do average Zambians see their country's relations with China? Findings from recent Afrobarometer surveys show China tied with the United States in positive assessments of their influence on Zambia. But Zambians' perceptions of both the extent and the value of Chinese influence have declined sharply over the past eight years.

Among the slim majority of citizens who were aware of Chinese assistance to Zambia, most believed their country had borrowed too heavily from China.

Between 2014 and 2020, the United States passed China as Zambians' preferred model for their country's development.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia, interviewed a nationally

representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 Zambian adults between 3 August and 7 September 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

## Key findings

- Four in 10 Zambians (42%) said the economic and political influence of China on their country is “somewhat positive” or “very positive,” matching favourable assessments of U.S. influence and surpassing those of Japanese (31%) and European Union (28%) influence. Only small minorities saw the influence of these foreign powers as negative, while large proportions didn't offer an assessment.
  - Favourable assessments of China's economic and political influence on Zambia have dropped by 30 percentage points since 2014.
- Half (50%) of citizens said China's economic activities have “some” or “a lot” of influence on Zambia's economy, a decline of 25 percentage points compared to 2014.
- In Afrobarometer's 2020 survey, more than half (53%) of Zambians were aware that their country received loans or development assistance from China.
- Among those who were aware of China's assistance, an overwhelming majority (87%) said Zambia had borrowed too much from China.
- Between 2014 and 2020, China's popularity as a model for Zambia's development declined by 10 percentage points, from 32% to 22%, while the U.S. model gained 8 points to claim the top ranking.

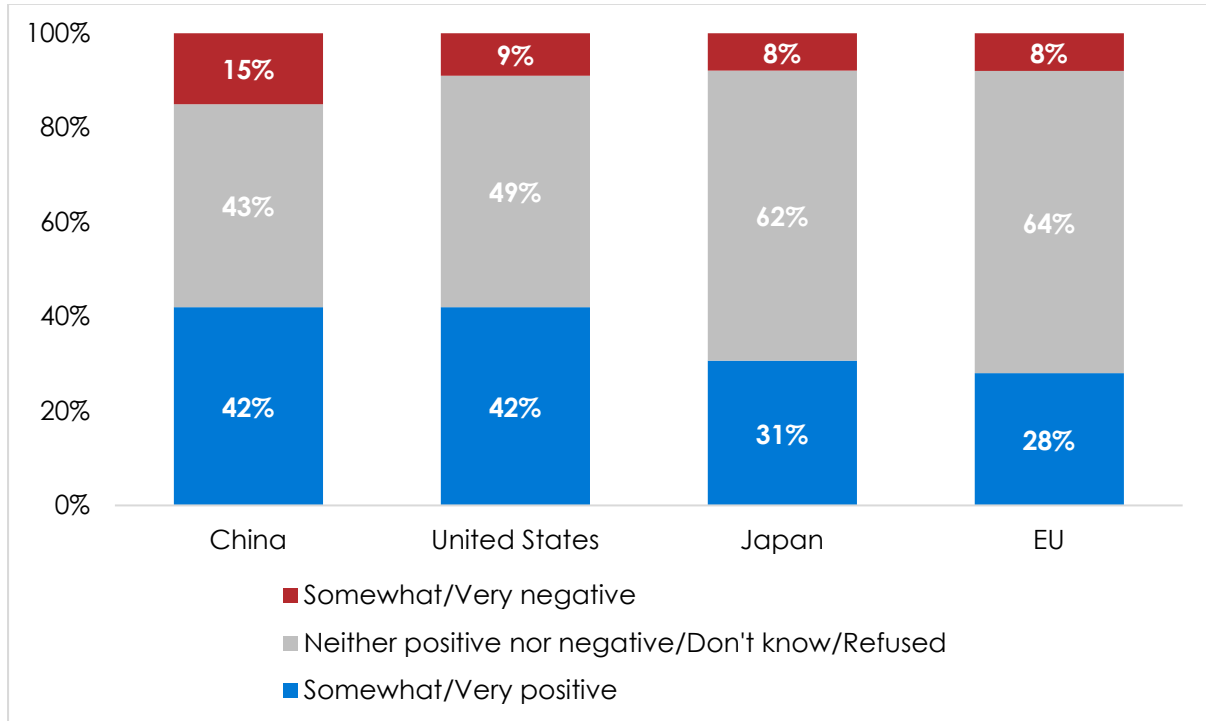
## China's influence on Zambia

Overall, China and the United States were more widely seen as having a positive influence on Zambia than were Japan and the European Union (EU) (Figure 1). Four in 10 Zambians (42%) said the economic and political influence of China on their country is “somewhat positive” or “very positive,” the same proportion offering favourable assessments of U.S. influence. Somewhat fewer welcomed the influence of Japan (31%) and the EU (28%).

Negative assessments were higher for China (15%) than for the other foreign powers (8%-9%). Large proportions (approaching two-thirds of respondents for Japan and the EU) saw these foreign influences as neither positive nor negative or said they “don't know” or refused to answer the question.

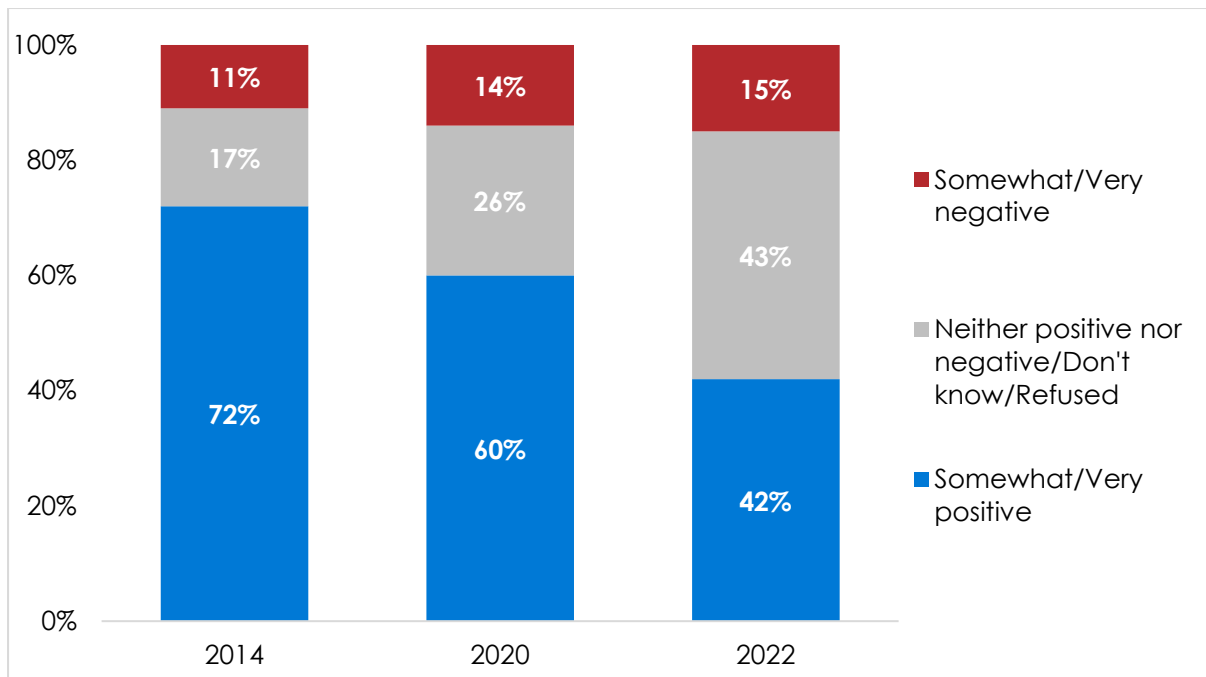
The perceived benefit of China's influence has declined sharply: The share of Zambians who saw China's economic and political influence as positive dropped by 30 percentage points between 2014 (72%) and 2022 (Figure 2). Negative assessments increased slightly, from 11% to 15%, while the share offering neither positive nor negative assessments has seen a major increase, from 17% to 43%.

**Figure 1: Influence of foreign powers on Zambia | Zambia | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on Zambia is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

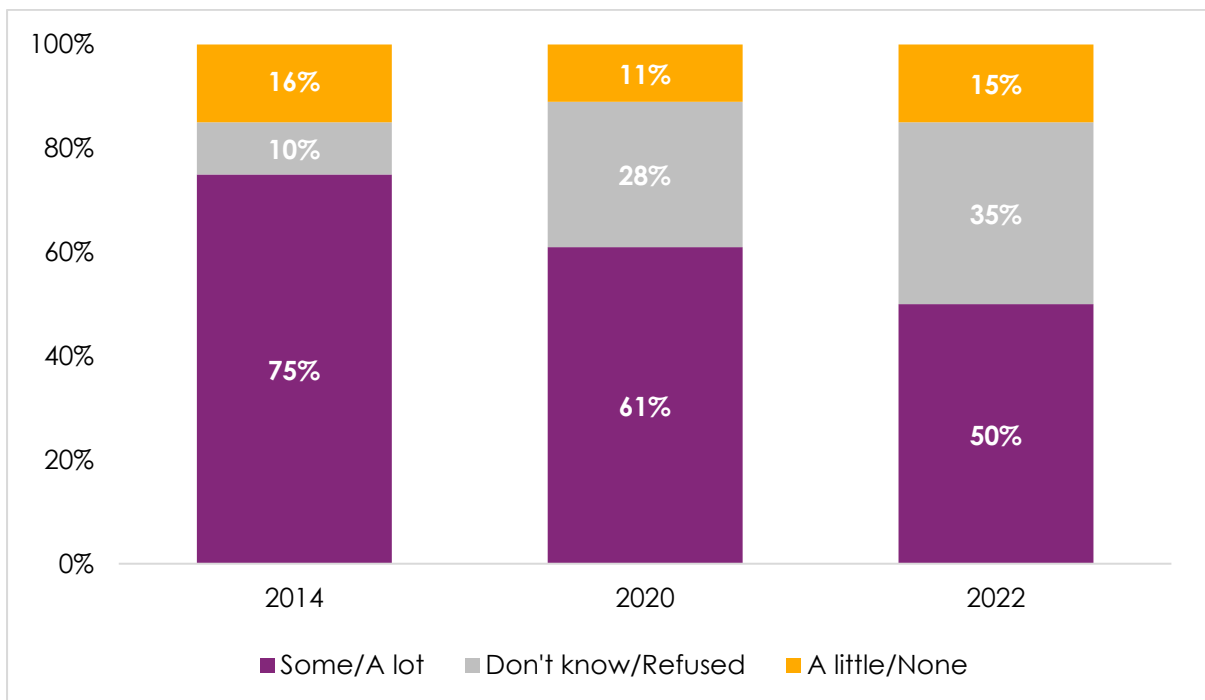
**Figure 2: China's economic and political influence: Positive or negative? | Zambia | 2014-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** In general, do you think that China's economic and political influence on Zambia is mostly positive, or mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Similarly, the extent of China's perceived influence on Zambia's economy has declined over the past eight years. In 2022, half (50%) of survey respondents said China's economic activities have "some" or "a lot" of influence on Zambia's economy, down from 75% in the 2014 survey (Figure 3). The proportion of citizens who saw China as having just "a little" or "no" impact on Zambia's economy did not increase (15%). Instead, far more respondents said they "don't know" enough about the issue to offer an assessment (35%, vs. 10% in 2014).

**Figure 3: Influence of China's economic activities | Zambia | 2014-2022**



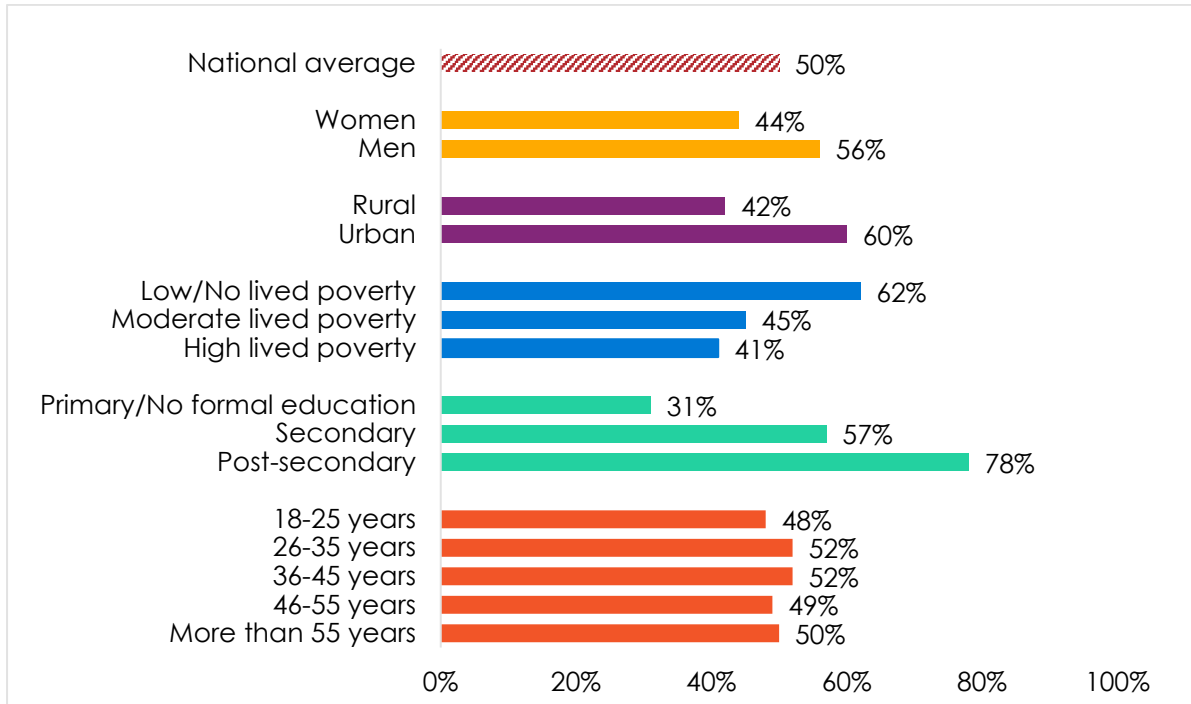
**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Zambia have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Men (56%) and urban residents (60%) were more likely than women (44%) and rural residents (42%) to see China's economic activities as influential (Figure 4). This view increased with respondents' education level, ranging from 31% among citizens with primary or no formal schooling to 78% among those with post-secondary qualifications. It also increased with citizens' economic status, ranging from 41% among those experiencing high lived poverty to 62% among those with low or no lived poverty.<sup>1</sup>

"Don't know" responses regarding the influence of China's economic activities were particularly common among women (42%), rural residents (43%), the poor (47%), and citizens with primary or no formal education (55%) (Figure 5).

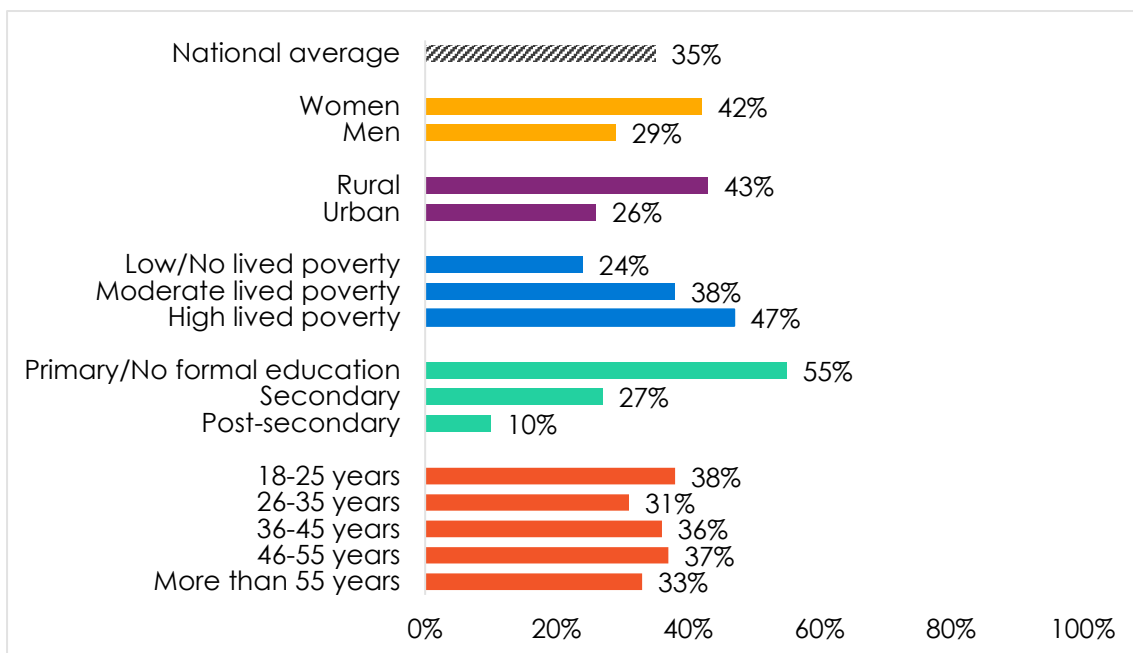
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

**Figure 4: China has some/a lot of influence on Zambia's economy**  
 | by demographic group | Zambia | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Zambia have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "some" or "a lot")

**Figure 5: Lack of knowledge about China's influence on Zambia's economy**  
 | by demographic group | Zambia | 2022

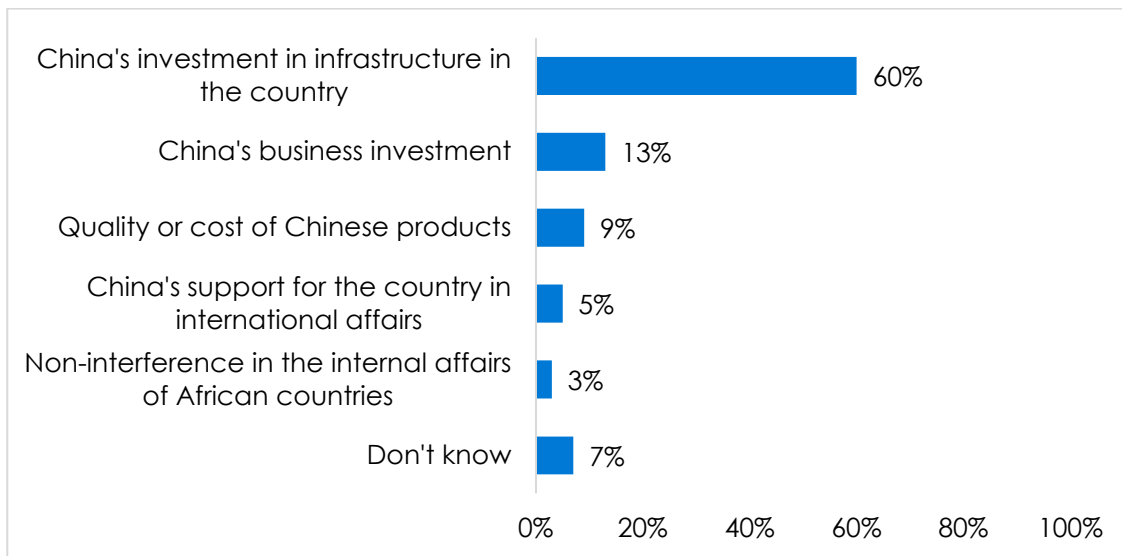


**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Zambia have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "don't know")

Afrobarometer explored factors contributing to China's image in its Round 6 survey in 2014. The main reasons for China's favourable image were its investments in infrastructure (cited by 60% of Zambians), its business investments (13%), and the quality or cost of its products (9%) (Figure 6).

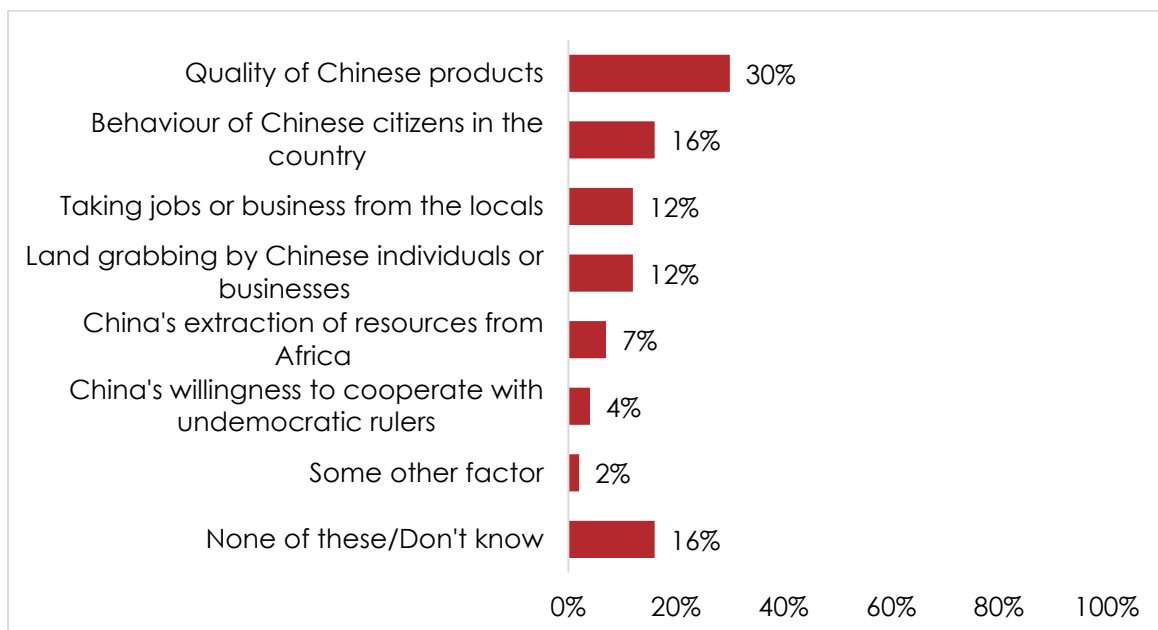
The most commonly cited factor contributing to a negative image of China was the quality of its products (30%), followed by the behaviour of Chinese citizens (16%), land grabbing (12%), and the perception that Chinese take jobs or business away from locals (12%) (Figure 7). These questions were not asked in later survey rounds.

**Figure 6: Reasons for China's positive image | Zambia | 2014**



**Respondents in Round 6 were asked:** Which of the following factors contributes most to a positive image of China in Zambia, or haven't you heard enough to say?

**Figure 7: Reasons for China's negative image | Zambia | 2014**



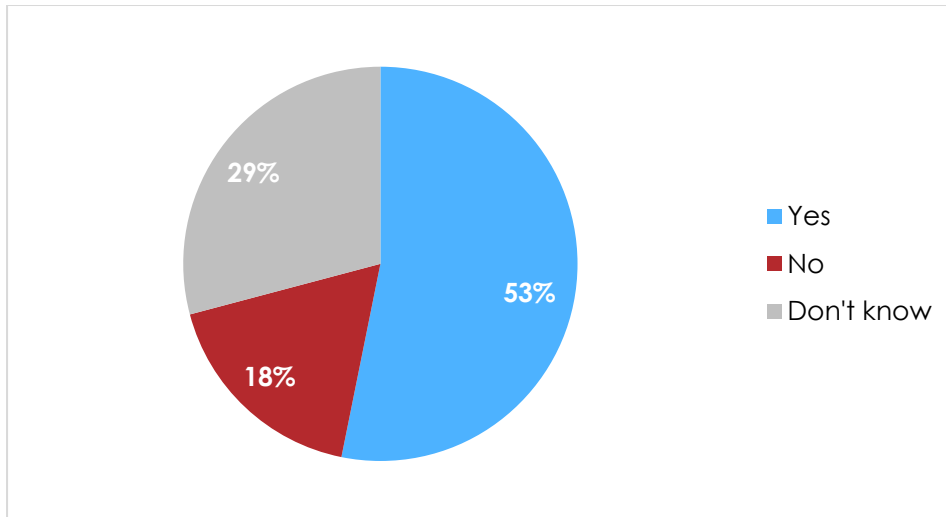
**Respondents in Round 6 were asked:** Which of the following factors contributes most to negative image of China in Zambia, or haven't you heard enough to say?

## Development assistance from China

In earlier survey rounds, Afrobarometer also explored Zambians' views on development assistance from China.

In Round 8 (2020), a slim majority (53%) of survey respondents were aware that Zambia received loans or development assistance from China (Figure 8).

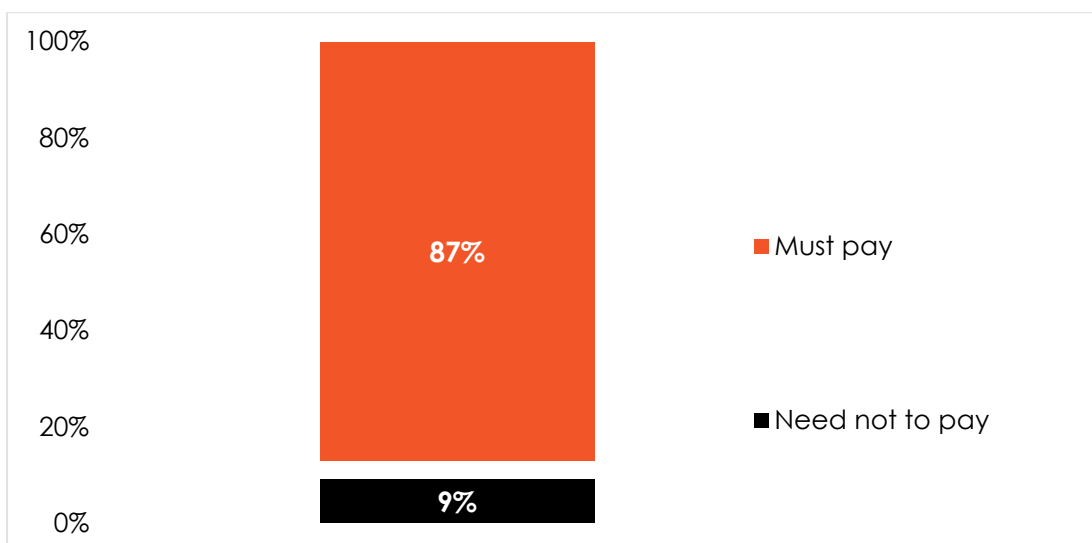
**Figure 8: Awareness of China's development assistance | Zambia | 2020**



**Respondents in Round 8 were asked:** *To your knowledge, does China give loans or development assistance to our country's government, or haven't you had a chance to hear about this?*

Among those who were aware that Zambia received development assistance from China, almost nine in 10 (87%) also knew that the country generally has to repay loans (Figure 9).

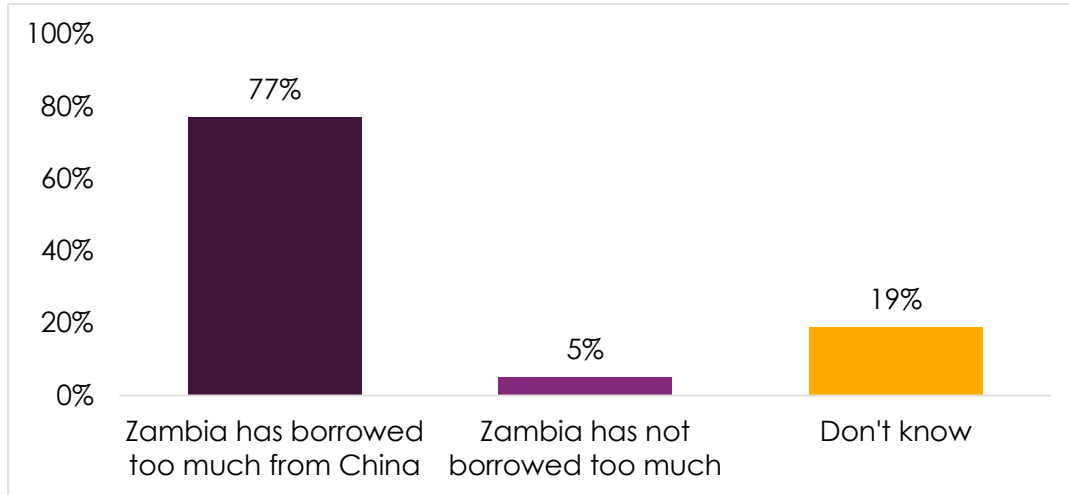
**Figure 9: Does Zambia have to repay Chinese loans? | Zambia | 2020**



**Round 8 respondents who were aware that Zambia received loans or development assistance from China were asked:** *Do you think that our government is required to repay China for the loans and development assistance it provides to Zambia, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Zambia.)*

And more than three-fourths (77%) of those who were aware of Chinese assistance said Zambia had borrowed too much from China. Only 5% thought the country was not too heavily indebted to China, while 19% said they did not know (Figure 10).

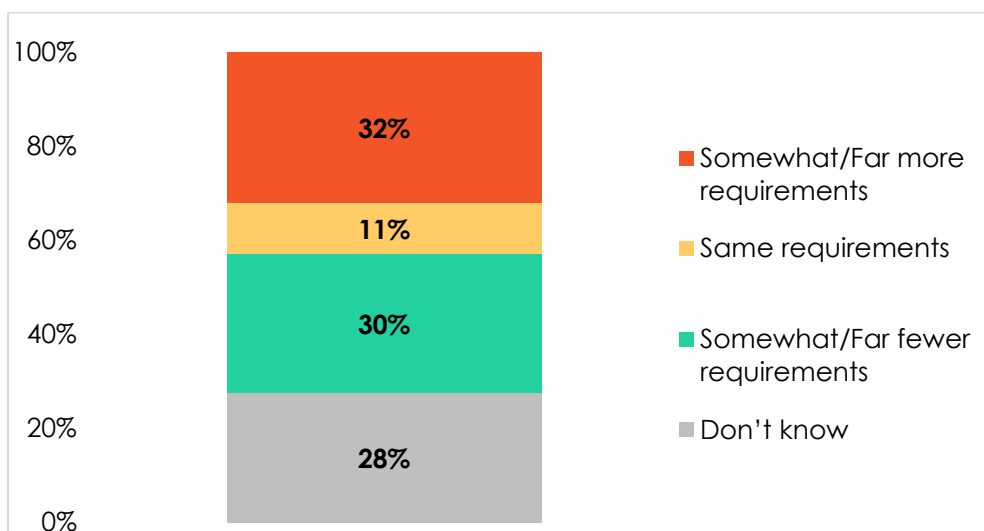
**Figure 10: Has Zambia borrowed too much from China? | Zambia | 2020**



**Round 8 respondents who were aware that Zambia received loans or development assistance from China were asked:** Do you think our government has borrowed too much money from China, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Zambia.)

As for conditionalities attached to China's development assistance, Zambians who were aware of such aid were divided as to whether China attaches fewer (32%) or more (30%) requirements to its loans and assistance than other development partners (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Conditionalities of development assistance: China vs. other development partners | Zambia | 2020**

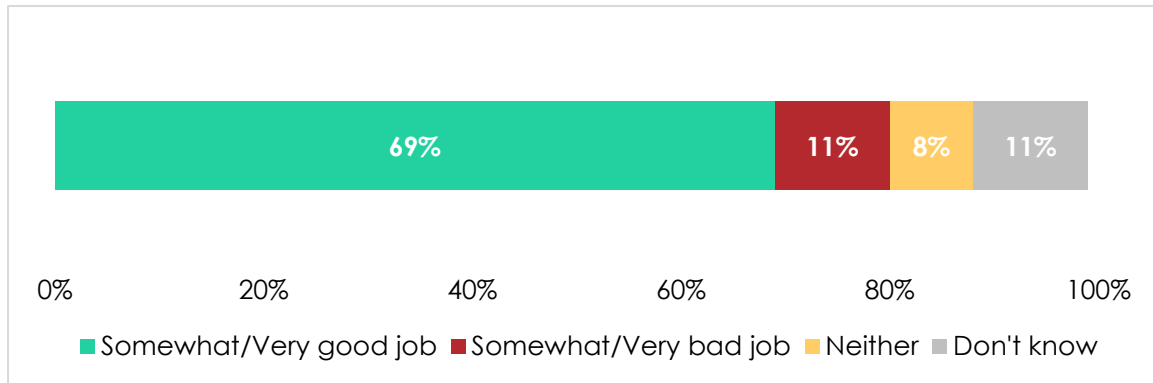


**Round 8 respondents who were aware that Zambia received loans or development assistance from China were asked:** When the government of China gives loans or development assistance to Zambia, do you think they put more requirements or fewer requirements on our government compared to other donor countries, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Zambia.)



In 2014, most Zambians (69%) said China's development assistance did a "somewhat good" or "very good" job of meeting Zambia's needs (Figure 12). Given major changes in perceptions of China's activities since 2014, this assessment may well have changed, too.

**Figure 12: Does China's assistance meet Zambia's needs? | Zambia | 2014**

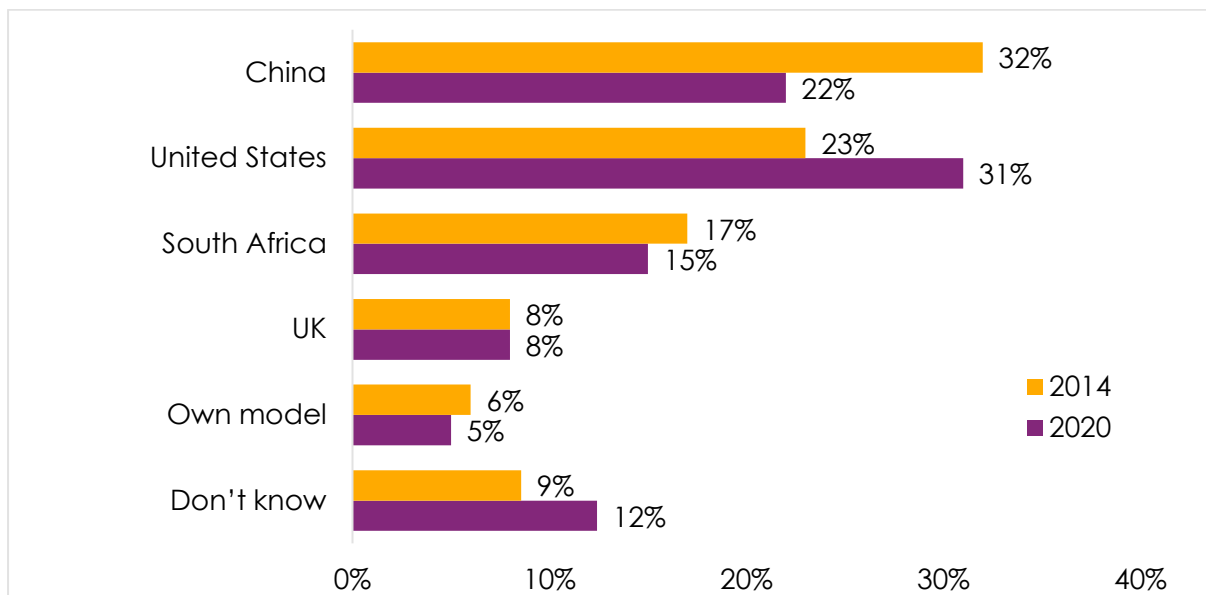


**Round 6 respondents who were aware that Zambia received loans or development assistance from China were asked:** In your opinion, does China's economic development assistance to Zambia do a good job or a bad job of meeting the country's needs, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Zambia.)

### Best development model

China's popularity as a model for Zambia's development declined by 10 percentage points between 2014 (32%) and 2020 (22%), while the share of respondents who preferred the United States as a model increased by 8 points (from 23% to 31%) (Figure 13). South Africa maintained its third-place ranking with 15% in 2020, followed by the UK (8%) and a home-grown model (5%).

**Figure 13: Best development model | Zambia | 2014-2020**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model? (Note: In 2014, the phrase "or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model" was not included in the question.)

## Conclusion

While their perceptions of China's economic and political activities remain far more positive than negative, Zambians' assessments of the extent and value of China's influence have declined significantly in recent years. Among citizens who were aware of Chinese assistance to Zambia, most considered their country too heavily indebted to China. In recent years, China has also lost its place as Zambians' most preferred development model to the United States.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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