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Exploring the Neo-Colonial Influence of Chinese FDI and Western Power on the Evolution of Labor Market Policies in a Developing Country

Julius Nyiwung¹ , John Geary², and Mandiefe Piabuo³

¹School of Business, Maynooth University, Dublin, Ireland, ²College of Business, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, and

³World Bank, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Corresponding author: Julius Nyiwung (Julius.Nyiwung@mu.ie)

(Received 19 January 2022; accepted 21 March 2023)

Abstract

Despite the influx of Chinese FDI at the dawn of the 21st century and decades of neo-liberal, market-oriented economic policies in Africa, the pervasive nature of institutional voids (particularly in the labor market) has been constantly flagged as an impediment to socio-economic development in the continent. This has prompted calls for more research into the ability of independent African states to pursue viable labor market policy options, from a business system perspective. While institutional theory (specifically the notion of institutional voids) suggests the use of market-supporting and contract-enforcement structures and processes to enable the efficient functioning of the economy, it does not address the effect of strong external ‘powers’ on weak local institutions in developing countries. This study qualitatively explores how the shifting geopolitical landscape (power) from Western to Chinese sources of FDI shaped the nature and evolution of labor market institutions in Cameroon. The findings show that an entrenched parochial and crony Cameroonian institutional context was at the mercy of transnational forces playing a pivotal role, rather than coherent national socio-economic policy options, in shaping labor market institutions in the country. In an act of political complicity, the dynamics that flowed from Chinese FDI have engendered a regressive turn toward the failed nationalistic labor market policies pursued by Cameroon after independence. This article contributes to revealing the debilitating role of Chinese and Western FDI, and the ensuing dynamics, in the creation and sustenance of labor market institutions in a parochial developing economic context characterized by regressive institutional voids.

摘要

尽管中国直接对外投资在 21 世纪初大量涌入非洲，尽管非洲也已实施了几十年的新自由主义市场导向经济政策，但是体制真空的普遍性（特别是在劳动力市场上）一直被视为阻碍该大陆社会经济发展的障碍。很多学者因此呼吁从商业系统的角度更多地研究独立的非洲国家追求可行的劳动力市场政策选择的能力。虽然制度理论（特别是制度真空的概念）建议使用支持市场和执行合同的结构和过程来实现经济的有效运转，但它无法解释强大的外部‘势力’对发展中国家脆弱的本地机构的影响。本研究采用质性研究的方法探讨了从西方力量向中国的直接对外投资的地缘政治格局变化，如何塑造喀麦隆的劳动力市场机构的性质和演变。研究结果表明，在喀麦隆，根深蒂固的地方性和任人唯亲的制度背景受到跨国力量的支配，而不是深思熟虑的国家社会经济政策，塑造了该国的劳动力市场制度。在政治上共谋的行为中，从中国直接对外投资中流动的动态，已经导致了对喀麦隆独立后采取的失败的民族主义劳动力市场政策的倒退。本文揭示了中国和西方对外直接投资及其随之产生的动态，对于一个具有制度性缺陷的地方性发展经济背景下，创造和维持劳动力市场机构中所起到的破坏性作用。

Keywords: Cameroon; colonial and neo-colonial legacies; FDI; institutional voids; labor market policies

关键词: 劳动力市场政策; 制度真空; 喀麦隆; 殖民和新殖民主义遗产; 中国; 西方; 外商直接投资; 和跨国力量

Introduction

The most prominent events that impact Africa's socio-economic development are arguably geopolitical shifts and their ensuing dynamics. In particular, the availability, for the first time, of alternative investments from China, the structural adjustments in response to the 1980s debt crisis, and the decolonization and post-colonial restructuring of the mid-20th century (Geary & Nyiawung, 2021; Hamann, 2020). On the heels of capitalists-engineered, neo-liberal labor policies and practices, the influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Africa from new alternative sources (especially China) over the last two decades has led to significant economic development and attracted much attention due to their implications for work and employment in the continent (Abodohoui, Su, & Da-Silva, 2018; Bräutigam, 2020). In this regard, Kamoche, Chizemab, Mellahic, and Aloysius (2012) and Jackson, Louw, and Zhao (2013) have called for more research on the impact on labor market policies in Africa following the recent shifting geopolitical landscape engendered by Chinese FDI.

We respond to this call by examining the case of Cameroon (whose largest trading partner is China), where the effectiveness of the state to create, transform, or enforce rules had been ostensibly weak since independence (Dickerson, 2007; Geary & Nyiawung, 2021). The influx of Chinese investments into the country has taken place against the backdrop of the professed Cameroon's business system which has gravitated from a socialist (independence in the 1960s to 1988) to a Western-imposed capitalist (recession of 1989 to 2006) and back to a socio-nationalist orientation (2007 forward) (Akwaowo, 2013; Forje, 2008). However, one of the most significant challenges in the country relates to weak labor market institutions, particularly work and employment policies and practices (Aloumedjo, 2018; UNCTAD, 2017). Researchers have highlighted that the roots of these problems cannot be explained by domestic political structures and processes alone (Hamann, 2020: 284). Instead, they also require a consideration of the external influences that shaped labor market policy options and development in post-colonial Africa (Busse, Erdogan, & Mühlen, 2016).

The state's influence on labor market institutions (policies and practices) remains quite significant in all nations. However, the level and mechanisms of intervention are generally understood to be underpinned by the model of the national business system which varies from one nation to another (Cooke, 2014; Fainshmidt, Judge, Aguilera, & Smith, 2018; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 2005). Labor market institutions broadly fall along a continuum whereby the state is a central driver of economic activity to adopting a more hands-off role to enable and facilitate the free operation of market forces (Hannon et al., 2011; Surender, 2019). Relatively little research of the determinants and evolution of states' labor market policy options has been undertaken in Africa to date. While the strength of work and employment governance systems in developing countries is generally perceived to be endemically weak (UNCTAD, 2017), it is necessary to examine transnational determinants and their impact on the state's ability to enact and transform (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002) labor market institutions in an African context.

The objective of this study is to understand and explain how the shifting geopolitical landscape (from Western to Chinese sources of FDI) impacted labor market policy options and their development in an emblematically weak institutional setting, Cameroon. While we do not seek to explain the nature and functioning of labor market policies and practices in Cameroon, scholars such as Surender (2013) and Midgley, Surender, and Alfery (2019) emphasized that understanding present-day policy dynamics requires an appraisal of the past. So, this study is embedded in a historical contextualization, and contributes to revealing the link between geopolitical power, labor market policy options, and their development in a parochial African context characterized by regulative institutional voids.

Theoretical Background

International business (IB) and management literatures suggest that significant implications for labor market policy options emanate from the global institutional environment (e.g., from transnational forces such as FDI) on the one hand and a country's (national) institutional context on the other hand (Hannon et al., 2011). Considering the global institutional environment, the rise of Chinese investments in Africa are professed to have engendered profound shifts in the continent's economic

policy options (Bräutigam, 2011). Globalization and neo-colonialism have also had a significant impact on the nature and evolution of labor market policies in Africa (Kamoche et al., 2012). Regarding the national institutional context, North (1991) and Scott (2008) emphasized that the nature and functioning of a particular labor market is shaped by its institutions – refer to profound aspects of social structure which act as authoritative guidelines, enablers, and constraints of behavior. Thus, we adopt the institutional perspective in this study because of its dominance in literature when analyzing how global and national environments affect the economy, including labor market policies and practices (Dieleman, Markus, Rajwani, & White, 2022). The literature on institutionalism is vast. However, there are two main strands of institutionalism: organizational and comparative institutional perspectives.

Organizational institutionalism addresses many issues, including how institutions emerge; how organizations make sense of their complex institutional environments; how they actively position themselves in and out of organizational fields; how agency take place; whom is agency embodied in; what are the driving forces for organizational similarity and dis-similarity, and how organizations survive given the complex social constraints they face (Kostova, Roth, & Dacin, 2008: 1002). Comparative institutionalism emphasizes that organizations conform to normative adaptation and ‘cultural rules’: these are social rules embodied in institutional processes rather than mental constructs carried in people’s minds (Thompson & McHugh, 2009: 77). But such rules are derived both from formal and informal institutions that have evolved over long periods to inform styles of management (Geary & Hunek, 2019). The state, legal system, financial system, and family are key institutions, and considered in combination, such institutions constitute the distinctive social organization of a country and its economy (Whitley, 2001). These institutional structures and processes are historically embedded within their national context, are relatively slow to change, and influence a country’s ability to efficiently undertake certain kinds of production or economic activity (Edwards, Schnyder, & Fortwengel, 2019).

Comparative institutionalism encompasses several related approaches, including the dominant strands (National Business Systems [NBS] and Varieties of Capitalism [VoC]), that are concerned with the causes and consequences of differences in the organization of capitalist market economies (Hotho & Saka-Helmhout, 2016). However, both the NBS and VoC are often not well-suited for characterizing economies in developing countries, including those in Africa (Tarique, Briscoe, & Schuler, 2022). This is so because new brands of capitalism are operational outside of the OECD countries (*The Economist*, 2014: para 5). In developing countries, they are unique conditions wherein institutions either do not work well or are entirely absent – so-called institutional voids – thus undermining the function and workings of the system (Khanna & Palepu, 2010). Doh, Rodriques, Saka-Helmhout, and Makhija (2017: 297) argued that these conditions could characterize any country but are prevalent in emerging and developing economies. In this article, we focus on the institutional ‘voids’ concept because it helps to situate critical features of developing economies and provides greater clarity on how they differ from developed economies in terms of function and development (Doh et al., 2017). However, we reiterate that the concept of ‘voids’ has been mostly associated with the absence or weaknesses of formal institutions.

The absence of strong rule of law (Khanna & Rivkin, 2001) or limited government support for social programs (Carney, Gedajlovic, & Yang, 2009) is predominantly an institutional character of developing countries. Bothello, Nason, and Schnyder (2019) pointed out that this notion of institutional void is often used to characterize non-Western economies as contexts lacking ‘market-supporting and contract-enforcement institutions to efficiently enable exchange between organizations’ (also see Khanna, Palepu, & Sinha, 2005). Bothello and colleagues emphasized a key weakness of this notion of institutional voids as built on a narrow transaction cost conceptualization of institutions based on the regulatory ‘rules of the game’. This conceptualization of institutional voids does not pay sufficient attention to other forms of institutions, especially in non-Western countries. They also argue that this concept is replete with vocabulary that privileges Western institutions, particularly Anglo-Saxon economies, and it is a highly fragmented concept across disciplines.

Scholars are increasingly recognizing the presence of other institutions, particularly normative and cultural-cognitive, in emerging and developing economies, that may fulfill similar market-supporting roles (Liedong, Peprah, Amartey, & Rajwani, 2020). This upholds the treatment of institutions as 'regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that provides stability and meaning to social life', as weaknesses in institutions may be compensated for by alternative informal norms and rules in developing countries (Mair, Marti, & Ventresca, 2012). For example, the work of Doh et al. (2017) explained how firms used the processes of internalization, substitution, borrowing, and signaling as market-supporting institutions in emerging economies. In this regard, IB scholars have often neglected the key implication that any given 'voids' may impact firms differently – and even positively – based on other prevailing contextual factors (Doh et al., 2017: 296). Stephan, Uhlener, and Stride (2015) reinforced the idea that contexts characterized by underperforming formal institutions, in Africa for example, may be rich in informal institutional arrangements that serve as an alternative system of support for firms. A small number of studies (on which, see Fainshmidt et al., 2018) have considered institutional voids associated with strong informal institutions or the absence or underdevelopment of regulative, normative, and cognitive institutions prevalent in the African context. We also emphasize on another gap in institutional theory, in line with the work of Pierson (2004), that the notion of institutional voids pays little attention to the effect of strong external 'powers' in emblematically weak and parochial national contexts (e.g., Cameroon). Therefore, an examination of the influence of shifting geopolitical landscape on a mesh of weak formal and strong informal institutions in the labor market would help us to delineate the nature and development of policy options in Cameroon.

Turning now to Cameroon's institutional system, it is classified by Fainshmidt et al. (2018) as a 'fragmented with a fragile state' model where civil liberties tend to be relatively limited, and the state takes a very high active and direct role in the economic ordering of society. Although officially presented by Cameroon's minister of economy, Robert Nkili, as social market economy, formal institutional features in respect of education, training, the labor market, employment relations, and financial and corporate governance appear to exist and are overseen by the law and the courts, but a serious lack of implementation and enforcement is observed in practice (Fonchingong, 2005; UNCTAD, 2017). As such, there exist substantial formal institutional voids and the availability of human, financial, and social capital is relatively low – somewhat like the so-called fragmented business system by Whitley (1999). Personal relationships and political networks often serve as the mechanism through which economic activity is coordinated. For example, business contracts and employment opportunities are often won or lost based not on what a person knows, but on whom s/he knows (Dickerson, 2007). Nyiawung (2021) argued that informal institutions in Cameroon include personal relationships (whereby authority is based on personal trust between peoples); clientelism (a form of protective relationship of mutual benefit between persons [patron] occupying a higher place in the social hierarchy); corruption (the misuse of public office for private gain); and 'Big-Man' presidentialism (whereby regardless of constitutional arrangements, power is personalized around the president) (Forje, 2008).

These dominant informal institutions interact with and sustain the weak formal institutions (on which, see Bratton, 2007). Firms embedded in this type of system tend to organize their economic activities in silos using internal accumulated wealth and without coordinating with labor (Fainshmidt et al., 2018). These networks tend to monopolize and sustain power, introducing predatory elements to the state. Family ownership and management are present, but are frequently closely tied to the state, hence reinforcing its dominance. Financial capital is mostly provided by private and state-owned banks and formal economic policy development is relatively weak and inert (Forje, 2008). In this Cameroonian institutional system, there is a changing geopolitical landscape following the availability and flow, for the first time, of significant Chinese FDI into many economic sectors (Tsopmo, 2019). Chinese FDI is concentrated in natural resources, infrastructure, power generation, mining, and timber production (Chen & Landry, 2018). So, the complexity of Cameroon's institutional system, coupled with this shifting geopolitical landscape, makes an understanding of the forces that shape labor market policies intriguing, thus, warranting an in-depth examination. Hence, this study's research questions are:

- 1) How has the shifting geopolitical landscape influenced labor market policy options and their development in Cameroon?
- 2) How has the Cameroonian state, mindful of its institutional system, responded to these external influences to create and transform labor market institutions?

Key Geopolitical Shifts in Africa and Cameroon's Labor Market Policies

In the recent history of Africa, three key geopolitical forces have profoundly shaped socio-politico-economic life on the continent (Geary & Nyiawung, 2021; Hamann, 2020). First, there was an influx of investments from new sources, particularly China. According to the World Bank in 2020, China has become a major economic partner of African countries and provided relatively unconditional financial and technical assistance over the last 20 years. This engagement has provided an alternative – to traditional Western – source of FDI in Africa which has significantly improved growth performance (Busse et al., 2016). In 2021, the World Bank reported that Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita grew by an annual average of 1.8% between 2014 and 2020. Other factors such as noticeable improvement in institutions, decrease in conflict and macroeconomic distortions, and enhanced education and infrastructure have also contributed to Africa's growth performance. The role of Chinese investments in this economic trajectory has attracted a lot of praise and criticism (Tawiah, Zakari, & Khan, 2021). Chinese FDI has been singled out to negatively affect the environment, corporate social responsibility, workers' pay, working terms, and conditions (Liu, 2021; Seriki, 2020).

While a review of the impact of Chinese investment is beyond the scope of this article, China's FDI flows, mostly state-led, to Africa have grown at an average annual rate of 40% since 2000, overtaking the market-led United States (US) FDI in 2013 (CSIS, 2021). In 2020, Chinese FDI flows to Africa reached \$2.7 billion. In Cameroon, the availability of alternative sources of investments from China is lessening the age-old dependence on investments from its colonial masters: France and Britain (Cabestan, 2015). This has had profound implications on the political economy of Cameroon (Tsopmo, 2019), including the shaping of labor market policies which this article is focused on. Amidst the substantial Chinese investment, corruption has become more rampant in Cameroon. Cameroon dropped two basis points on the corruption perception index from 2015 to 2017 to remain ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world at position 144 out of 180 (Transparency International, 2021). Chinese engagement with Africa is changing the geopolitical landscape to the extent that Western governments are concerned, and negative reports abound (Bräutigam, 2019; Jackson, 2013). However, the unique nature of China's interactions with Africa has also been professed to respond better to the continent's developmental needs than the colonial and post-colonial engagements with western countries (Abodohou et al., 2018).

Second, the current phase of Africa–China relations which has also been portrayed to reflect a story of globalization (Bräutigam, 2019) started on the heels of another geopolitical flux which was the structural adjustments in response to the 1980s debt crisis in the continent. As many sub-Saharan countries (including Cameroon) faced an economic downturn just two decades after independence, structural adjustment programs were imposed in the 1980s and 1990s by international financial institutions which engendered economic reforms along a neo-liberal trajectory, particularly the retrenchment of the public sectors, a privatization drive, and labor market adjustments (Kelsall, 2018). When public and monetary sectors faced increasing financial difficulties and the outright threat of insolvency, some Sub-Saharan governments were obliged to accept drastic austerity measures imposed by the Bretton Woods Institutions in return for much-needed loans (IMF, 2019). The funds from international lending agencies were conditional on the implementation of deep-cutting macroeconomic reforms, the promotion of transparency initiatives, and to liberalize the economy. For Cameroon, a new labor code was enacted in 1992 to replace the 1974 Act. Cameroon also privatized public enterprises to multinational firms, and continues to incentivise foreign investors, but unemployment (at 32%) and informal labor (at 80%) persisted.

Third, the decolonization and post-colonial restructuring in Africa embedded a system of Western dominance and subjugation (Frenkel, 2008). Sub-Saharan economies and institutions were weakened

or undermined as they came to rely solely on inward investments from former colonial powers (Fambon, 2013). The institutional landscapes that were created following independence treated the new African states as little more than appendages of the colonizers (Fonchingong, 2005). For example, French policy in its colonial and post-colonial territories was assimilationist, suppressing both traditional and indigenous structures (Chiabi, 1997). Also, following independence, many African Presidents presided over political systems which maintained close ties to their colonizers, secured by a series of detailed cooperation agreements covering economic, financial, cultural, legal, and several additional matters including treasury relations, civil aviation, and military missions (Moncrieff, 2012). In Cameroon, labor market policies were formed in the image of French programs even though the government created the National Commission for the Cameroonisation of Employment (NCCE) in 1977 to pursue labor market policy options that favored indigenous solutions to local problems.

The Cameroonisation of Employment (CoE) policy encouraged the adoption of local work practices such as recruiting mainly Cameroonians and paying local rates and benefits by all firms in the country. The policy was mostly pursued informally (because of the lack of implementation instruments and their undermining by Western MNEs) by the government to tackle the problem of unemployment in the country (MINEFOP, 2017). Despite formal independence, domestic decision-making had limited bearing on many African countries' labor policy dynamics in the development of viable autonomous institutions (Gough, 2004). So, structural pressures on national economies might arise from the influence of historical processes, such as colonization and other shifting hegemonic forces. In sum, while Cameroon's recent socio-economic development has been characterized by knee-jerk efforts to liberalize the country's economy, it is worthy to also note that Chinese investments have been used by the authorities to rebalance, rather than for major economic policy shifts, relations with the West and to entrench a corrupt political class (Cabestan, 2015).

Methods

The article aimed to understand and explain how the shifting geopolitical landscape, in a weak institutional system, impacted labor market policy options in an African country. The study proceeded by way of a case study which is most suited when exploring an understudied phenomenon as this one being investigated (Yin, 2018). This article forms part of a wider study (from 2017 to present) on work and employment practices, nationally, in Cameroon. This is a case study of a country, Cameroon, that is a good example of a larger set of developing, institutionally weak, African countries that are witnessing geopolitical flux to a greater extent due to the sheer amount (among the top 10 destinations) of Chinese FDI in recent years (Chen & Landry, 2018). Chinese FDI and the dynamics which flow from it continue to attract huge attention, generally (Bräutigam, 2020). So too, the institutional system in Cameroon is still evolving and is an ideal proving ground to study aspects of its development (Hamann, 2020). The focus on labor market policies was due to the deficiencies in human capital and human resource management practices in Cameroon. Also, acute unemployment and underemployment have been consistently flagged (over the last 30 years) in Cameroon as a major impediment to socio-economic development (Aloumedjo, 2018).

Data Collection

The data collected in Cameroon was of two kinds.

Primary data

Participants were recruited from the first and third authors' personal and professional networks, through a purposive sampling. These two researchers have studied organizations in Cameroon and had access through informants from previous fieldwork. This purposive sampling strategy (Merriam, 1998) permitted the recruitment of diverse participants across organizations and sectors (see Table 1). We only recruited participants who had at least 20 years of experience, occupying senior positions in work and employment or related roles in firms (of American, Cameroonian, French, German, Nigerian,

Table 1. Interview participant details

Organization	Sector	Position	Duration (min)	Interview language	Interviews	
ChinaCo1	Oil and Gas	Heads of HR and Recruitment	51 and 60	English (both)	2	1 FGD
ChinaCo2	Mining	Operations Director	48	English	1	
ChinaCo3	Hydropower	CEO and HR Director	65 and 36	English (both)	2	
GhinaCo4	Construction	Regional Director	53	English	1	
Cam1	Forestry	Compensation Manager	70	English	1	
Cam2	Communication	Directors of HR and Operations	42 and 63	French and French	2	
Cam3	Banking	Branch Manager	57	English	1	
Cam4	Transport	CEO and HR Director	61 and 45	French and English	2	
Cam5	Oil and Gas	Government Liaison Officer	40	French	1	
Ministry1	Vocational Training	Policy Chief and Adviser	43 and 50	English and French	2	1 FGD
Ministry2	Youth and Employment	Regional Head	55	English	1	
Ministry3	Economy	Director	60	French	1	
France1	Oil and Gas	HR and Regional Directors	44 and 63	English and French	2	1 FGD
France2	Communication	Employee Relations Manager	38	French	1	
France3	Banking	Chief Operation Officer	50	English	1	
USA1	Insurance	Recruitment Manager	55	English	1	
USA2	Banking	Head of HR and Recruitment	62 and 67	English and French	2	
Trace Union1	Construction	Secretary and Section Manager	68 and 50	English (both)	1	1 FGD
Trace Union2	Transport	President and 2 Secretaries	41 and 62, 50	French and English (2)	3	
Trace Union3	Oil and Gas	President and Secretary	56 and 60	French (both)	2	
Trace Union4	Banking	Section Manager	50	English	1	
NGO1	Forestry	Director and Field Officer	55 and 42	English (both)	2	
NGO2	Oil and Gas	Director	40	French	1	
NGO3	Social services	Regional Manager	60	French	1	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Organization	Sector	Position	Duration (min)	Interview language	Interviews
Germany ¹	Community Development	Director	65	English	1
South Africa ¹	Communication	Heads of HR and Social Insurance	56 and 40	English	2
Nigeria ¹	Banking	People and Risk Managers	66 and 60	French and English	2
					Total → 41 and 4 FGDs

Note: FGD, focus group discussion.

and South African origin), NGOs, trade unions and government ministries so that they could provide the relevant information. The aim was to gather a broad range of experiences dealing with the researched issues from diverse protagonists to consider the role of external and internal factors in shaping labor market policies in Cameroon.

A semi-structured protocol was used to foster consistency across interviewees while also allowing the researchers to explore unique emerging phenomena. The participants and organizations were assured of confidentiality (we used pseudocodes) to encourage participation in the study and to ensure their data protection and anonymity. Participants were asked a series of questions (see [Appendix I](#)) exploring the influences on labor market policies from the past, the relationship between the influences, other social actors and policy makers, the rationale and trajectory of labor market policies, the impact of Chinese investments on labor market, and the underpinnings of Cameroon's economic policies. Except for informants of the Chinese firms who were not asked historical questions relating to 'their' influence on historical labor market policy developments due to 'their' relatively recent arrival in the country, all participants were posed similar questions for consistency and internal validity of the data collected from interviews as well as to allow for further probing of the sequence of events (Yin, 2018: 114). There was a 'co-construction of experience and meaning as we immersed ourselves in the data to capture the narratives of the participants' (Charmaz, 2000). Additionally, there were four focus group discussions (one each with government ministries' officials, the Chinese MNEs, the French MNEs, and trade union officials), only for those who participated in the initial interviews. The focus group discussions enabled data triangulation, using multiple sources of evidence (Plakoyiannaki, Wei, & Prashantham, 2019), and were mainly avenues to seek clarity and validate key observations and contentious issues identified from analyzing the interviews. For example, some participants brought up issues of complicity with foreign power by institutional keepers and they were differences on which influences (external or internal), in their views, were more pronounced. Clarity on these and others was established through focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were not recorded, but field notes were taken following the advice of Win and Kofinas (2019). Thus, by comparing the responses from different groups of respondents which is recommended to increase validity, we also ensured unit triangulation (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004).

During focus group discussions, participants were encouraged to speak freely from their own perspective. A series of prompting questions were used to encourage discussions. It was also observed that authority relations and social networks between key informants determined the depth and richness of the participants' responses. During focus group discussions for example, when a more senior informant provided a view, it was hardly contested by junior organization members even when the latter views were repeatedly asked in different ways about the same issues. For some informants who looked disinterested or were not talking much during the focus groups, a follow-up email was sent to get their views. Their views were generally in accord with the dominant views expressed in the focus groups. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted face-to-face in the participants' workplace and lasted between 36 and 70 min. With the participants' permission, all 41 interviews (in English and French) were audio-recorded and transcribed in recorded languages to avoid translation issues. Two of the researchers are bilingual. The analysis is reported in English for the target audience.

Secondary data

The primary data was supplemented with secondary sources (see [Appendix II](#)) including previous academic studies, material provided by Cameroon Industrial Development Corporation (CIDC), companies' historical employment policies and labor market policy documents from the Ministries Employment and Vocational Training, Youth and Employment, Industry and Technology Development. This provided data was also used to corroborate that collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Secondary data further provided us with historical and contemporary ways by which the state approached work and employment issues, policies, and its labor market responses to the influences.

Data Analysis

We followed a team-based approach (see MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998) to examine the evidence and delineate codes and aggregate themes from the collected primary and secondary data,



Figure 1. Codes and themes from the analysis

with reference to the literatures. Regular team meetings and discussions were held by the authors to review the key themes and codes that depicted the trajectory of and influences on labor market policies options and practices in Cameroon. Following from Braun and Clarke (2006), first, we engaged in open coding, abductively and no software was used, to develop the initial categories of information by giving each relevant piece of the data a label. We developed first-order labels of codes by reading and re-reading the secondary and transcribed interview data, paying close attention to informant's responses to external and internal influences on the dynamics and nature of labor market policy options in Cameroon from a historical perspective. Second, we identified useful utterances, extracted

pertinent information, and grouped them according to the labels, and to reflect the study aim (Esmaeili, Ali Cheraghi, & Salsali, 2014). Third, we collated the labels through tagging and naming the chunks of text within each data item. Fourth, we grouped the first-order codes to identify second-order codes, which were then axial coded to identify the relationships between them. Fifth, we further grouped these to derive aggregate themes or dimensions. Sixth, overarching themes and codes (see Figure 1) of the influences, responses to them and their relationships were sorted. Finally, we iteratively revisited the data to confirm the categories and relationships identified and to ensure coding involved all significant data. Below, we present the findings under specific periods which defined labor market policies in Cameroon.

Findings and Analysis

In this section, we first present the evidence relating to Cameroon's labor market policy dynamics from 2007 to 2020. This period witnessed large annual increases in Chinese investments and efforts made by the government to re-establish a social market economic model in the country. It is followed by the key influences on labor market policies during the recession and structural adjustments from 1989 to 2006. We end this section by showing how labor market policies were put in place in Cameroon after independence in the 1960s and how the state engaged in a 'knee-jerk' endeavor to develop and implement its own initiatives thereafter. We note that labor market institutions in Cameroon have been shaped mainly by critical events emanating from beyond the state rather than coherent national policies options. The connivance of the political elites also largely determined their trajectories than conscious domestic politics or a particular NBS model. We further note that the influences on the labor market policies were interrelated, although discussed as stand-alone features, for clarity.

The Chinese 'Complicity' and the Social Market Economy (2007 forward)

Following the marked arrival of significant Chinese FDI in Cameroon in the late noughties, the abysmal failure of the imposed economic liberalization policies by the Bretton Woods institutions in the country became apparent. Buoyed by the influx of Chinese investments, the government began to refocus attention toward an indigenization approach to socio-politico-economic management, including labor market policies and practices. The government began to enact a series of legal instruments to encourage and boost FDI inflow to foster economic growth. Accordingly, one of the central tenets of the government's long-term national development program (NDP) was to effectively build human capacities necessary to aid Cameroon to become an emerging economy by 2035 (MINEPAT, 2010). This new path to economic growth was and is being massively aided by investments from China which have significantly diluted the once dominant Western investments and influence in the country. Thus, the turn toward indigenization, again, after it had failed decades ago was mainly due in part to the availability of huge (competing with the West) Chinese FDI in many sectors in Cameroon. This Chinese FDI which helped, to an extent, to stabilize the economy. An inspector of the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training remarked thus:

Colonial powers have lost their leading role both in providing funds and investments opportunities in Cameroon. China and other emerging countries' investments have basically drowned, say Western dominance. We can now get finance from these new partners with very little restrictions, and they are not only willing to invest but are also transferring their technologies to sectors that the others had never done – I don't think they were ever going to do it, anyway. You also see a country like China engaging with us as partners and not as a formal colony. (Interviewee 27-Goc)

A director in the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development noted as follows:

The policies of the Bretton Woods institutions and Western-style capitalism failed us and more so during the recession. The Presidency had come to realise that those prescriptions set from abroad

do not consider Cameroon's reality. We had to come up with long term strategies that fit our situation and can boast socio-political and economic development. We then embarked upon the new NDP – so-called Cameroon Vision 2035 which is being implemented since 2010. Its core principles rest on trying out Cameroonian solutions to Cameroon problems rather than using countless inappropriate imported solutions. (Interviewee 35-Goc)

The loan conditions imposed by lending institutions (IMF, World Bank, and Bourse de Paris) and the recession that followed also led to alterations in the 1992 labor code. This severely also weakened the adoption and relevance of local practices in the wider economy. However, on the renewed uptake of Cameroonian practices following the arrival of Chinese FDI, a senior HR manager in a Chinese firm noted thus:

We are not that long here and have been implementing most of what is contained in collective agreement. We adhere to Cameroon's socio-cultural norms and values when managing our workforce. As I know, within the sector, other companies are trying to catch up with us in this area... the collective agreement is mostly for the employees, who will be more motivated by it. (Interviewee 19-Cc)

Despite this cheerful outlook and portrayal of the benefits to workers of Chinese investments in Cameroon, reports of poor labor standards and damage to the environment are abound of Chinese companies in Cameroon (Cabestan, 2015; Chen & Landry, 2018; Nguelpjouo, 2017). A director of an NGO in the oil and gas sector remarked thus:

They treat workers very badly: long working hours, refusal to pay workers coupled with low pay, pollution of the forest near their mines in the south of the country and discharge of untreated water into rivers.....people have died as a result. They do not give top positions to Cameroonians. They mostly speak their language in some workplaces and our people cannot understand what is going on. (Interviewee10-Ng)

During interviews, while some NGOs were extremely critical of the practices of Chinese companies, others adopted a conciliatory tone by comparing two evils – the Chinese and the West – and the need to have a job in a challenging economy was more important. In parallel with these developments, the informal economy remained dominant constituting 80% of the overall size of the economy. Informality is still the dominant way of life in Cameroonian society which is also composed of and values ethnic diversity (Emmanuel, 2013).

Leveraging the alternative source of investments and unconditional finance from the Chinese, the government moved toward further trade liberalization, attracting other FDI. But even with the FDI, Cameroon faced challenges, which had persisted since independence, of developing the economy, and institutions including labor market institutions (UNCTAD, 2017). The government had looked up to the Chinese model of political economy to drive its policies. An official in the Ministry of Youth and Employment noted:

We have had several meetings in Beijing over the last decade to learn from them: the economy, politics, and youth development. But we have also realised that the Chinese are as bad as the Europeans their interests first. We are working to establish a system that is ours and not a copy of another country. We have the Chinese on our side, for now, to thwart any undesirable influence from the West which many times work for their interest and not ours as they sometime undermine some of our regulations. (Interviewee32-Goc)

The move toward the once-failed identification and development of local solutions was driven by the realization that Chinese investments could be pitted against western investment. But with the level of secrecy and corruption in Cameroon over the years, it was hard to see how Chinese investments

have enhanced, in aggregate terms, economic development, skills, employment opportunities, and labor standards. The transparency international's corruption index of 2021 shows that Cameroon lost ground, and stayed at the bottom of most corrupt countries, during the era of Chinese investments than during the period of the structural adjustments program. A director in a French oil company and an NGO official noted:

Since Chinese loans are unconditional, and the discussions between the two (China and Cameroon) are secret, corruption, and transparency in the way the government enact policies have changed. There is too much secrecy everybody pretends to know nothing within government circles when you demand for something, even information is hard to come by ... without conditions and allowing the Cameroon government to go unchecked is complicity by the Chinese. (Interviewee17-Fr)

The Chinese are helping the government to become more authoritarian and to undermine all the gains made under the structural adjustment programmes. The government talks about an economic model, but they can't measure up to the Chinese model ... it is naivety, as the Chinese are also weakening our rules. (Interviewee15-Ng)

These developments should also be understood through the backdrop of the oscillation of economic policies in Cameroon from colonial to Western-imposed neo-liberal and back to socio-nationalist have had implications for labor market institutions. The institutional foundation (NBS) of labor market policy development and implementation seems to be inert in Cameroon. This is also seen in the fact that there has been no major new labor market policy in the country in 30 years since the 1992 labor code. Geary and Nyiawung (2021) noted that the government has rather promoted the use of collective bargaining and agreements (e.g., in the oil and gas (2015) and transport (2016) sectors) to promote its CoE policy.

A key change in the labor market policies in Cameroon during this period was the enactment of regulatory frameworks for specific professional training and establishment of educational centers for extractive industries. These training centers were funded, initially by the Chinese, to enhance the skillsets and knowledge of the local population. For the first time, training centers for such rare skillsets in the country were established, particularly in the mining, forestry, oil, and gas sectors. The Chinese funded the opening of four of the training centers in Garoua, Douala, Banjoun, and Maroua. The Chinese professed that their investments in Cameroon were equitable and of mutual benefits to both countries (Nguepjoou, 2017). An operations director in a Chinese mining company noted as follows:

.... we are employer of choice for Cameroonians and especially in train potential workers for the extractive industry. Closing the high skills gap by partnering with higher education institutions to train such competencies is very important for us and cherished by Cameroonians. (Interviewee 08_Cc)

The Chinese government also donated specialist training equipment to two universities in Cameroon. While China's motive was resource seeking, it was generally perceived as a marked departure from the neo-colonial agenda of Western engagements in Africa (see Bräutigam, 2011). That is, the Chinese also exploited Cameroon's resources but looked after some basic needs of the local population to cherry-pick business deals. The gains from such investments were disproportionately in favor of China as it was accorded more mineral and forestry exploitation licences by the government (Cabestan, 2015).

The Economic Downturn and the Structural Adjustments (1989 to 2006)

Despite the post-colonial hindrances, modest economic growth was observed following the start of oil production in Cameroon in the late 1970s and lasted only up to the early 1980s, before a fall in oil

prices engendered a two-decade long recession. During the recessionary period, sustained pressure from the Britton Woods institutions pushed Cameroon to adopt a free-market orientation, on paper, and privatization of public companies. A policy chief in the Ministry of Industry and Technological Development confided as follows:

The kind of adjustments they wanted us to do were alien and we did not even understand what they were all about. They did not align with our values and realities. The country was in a bad shape and needed to get out of the recession. We just had to enact whatever laws they wanted us to, but workers and some top government officials did not believe, in private, in those programmes. (Interviewee41-Goc)

So, while the adjustment programs were being implemented, the key state actors did not believe in them and the necessary economic model/institutions to support the capitalist-inclined orientations of the state were not only absent but also believed to be alien. Another setback for labor market reforms was the fact that following the economic crisis, the government embarked upon a series of unsuccessful liberal economic reform programs imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions (Asongu & Aminkeng, 2013). Many of these Western-style capitalist measures were extreme in their severity and extent; the government slashed civil service salaries by 65% in 1993 and reduced head count by 60% in the public service. Cameroon only emerged from the recession, after 15 years, by benefitting from the highly indebted poor countries initiative in 2006. However, the failure of all French African states (including Cameroon) to effectively develop their economies and manage themselves is usually attributed to the fact that they achieved nominal independence from their colonial powers (especially France and Belgium), who still control much of these countries' political economies through a 'slave-master' relationship (Moncrieff, 2012).

Through pressure from Britton Woods institutions, the state enacted a new (a marked departure from previous labor codes) labor code during the recession in 1992. Thus, it was an extension of the wind of liberalism that blew across Africa, and it aimed at enhancing the flexibility of the labor market and the competitiveness of companies. Following this code, was the modification of the law relating to trade unions which provided for negotiations on pay, terms, and conditions of work. However, most foreign companies exploited a loophole within the provisions of the 1992 labor code which allowed them to bring in expatriates on the pretext that such skills were unavailable in Cameroon. Also, foreign companies bribed government officials to turn a blind eye to the *conversion* of existing institutions (Forje, 2008). Some foreign companies had even argued that the human capital to even run certain operations within the state apparatus was absent. While a manager in a French banking firm defended why they turned to expatriate to fill vacant positions, a secretary of a confederation of trade unions in the transport sector explained the 'games' played by these foreign companies which disregarded the labor code as follows:

Our operations and the competitive nature of the business we are in require that we recruit the best talent. Such skills are rarely available here because the educational system is not very developed. We are forced to source such talents from outside the country, always, to meet up with strategic requirements of our company and state of the sector. (Interviewee12-Fr)

Foreign companies brought in expatriates and told us that the employees have some specific skills that are acquired only abroad. Managers in those companies went as far as notifying the responsible ministries ... but we knew that Cameroonians could perform most of the jobs that were given to expatriates ... even lied to us that we don't have the expertise money was always changing hands though. (Interview 30-Tu).

From the above, there was not only pressure from the Britton Woods institutions on Cameroon labor market policies and practices, but also the issue of corruption in and between foreign firms and the government. It was during this period that Cameroon's economic model started shifting from the

‘colonial’, Paris-driven, to a liberal market one. For the first time, nonetheless, the state also played and expanded its central role in the labor market by creating key institutions such as the ministry of labor, work, and social insurance (to develop policies, implement, and monitor all issues in the labor market). The state revamped national social insurance fund (NSIF) (look after health and safety at work, social insurance, and security of workers in both the private and public sectors), and the national employment fund (for managing unemployment through training programs aimed at facilitating access to employment). The problem with these institutions was and is still that they never live up to the expectations of workers due to corruption and the fact that governing elites are not so comfortable with the political-economic direction of the country (Dzimbiri, 2009). The general mode within government circle was echoed by a director in the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training and the regional manager of an NGO in the forestry sector, respectively, as thus:

The labour market institutions that were created were not supported by a proper economic model. We had the old system to support a new outlook ... The country was at a crossroad with multi-party politics too. These organs were created on a poor foundation, and it was an abrupt departure from how things were done here. The economic crisis was deep ministers were more concerned about their political future than the prescriptions of the Bretton Woods. Many did not think that the economic path was the right one and just wanted the adjustments to end. (Interviewee20-Goc)

The imposed economic adjustment programmes by Western lenders were never meant to succeed They failed woefully they were designed abroad and imposed on the country without appraising the reality of our country and people. The government had no choice and accepted National press carried these throughout the year. Also, economic informality dominates our economy, political connections and relationship were evident the implementation of the adjustment programmes ... Our politicians cling to power All they care. (Interviewee25-Ng)

Unfortunately, the neo-liberal reforms, including the new labor code, resulted in the increase of precarious jobs. It can be argued that the Cameroon state believed (in ideological and practical terms) that the neo-liberal orientation was not the right path for the country. The country was in recession for more than 20 years despite the far-reaching reforms. As captured from the narrative of the above interviewee, this reinforced the notion within government circles that market liberalization was bad enough for Cameroon.

The Influence of Post-colonial Ties and Labor Market Policies (1960 to 1988)

To reiterate, the Cameroonian state is relatively young (gained independence from France in 1960 (French Cameroon) and 1961 (English Cameroon)). After independence, failed efforts were made to establish an economic and political system through the merging of colonial French and British models practiced, a priori, in the territories (Fonchingong, 2005). This failure was because economics were mostly influenced by the French metropolitan administration that setup Cameroon’s systems after independence. For example, the 1952 labor code, instituted by colonial authorities, was successively promulgated to other codes in 1967 and 1974 (Fambon, 2013). The only significant modification of the 1974 code was the establishment of rigid labor contracts whereby conditions for dismissal were constraining, in terms of notice, allowances, and administrative procedures. So, the consolidation of French institutions and labor market ideologies in Cameroon determined the course of the labor market policies and practices at an early stage and perpetuated their evolution over time. A banking sector trade union president and an HR manager of a French oil and gas firm remarked, respectively, as follows:

We were never given the chance to develop as an independent nation after 1960. France directed every way of life. French Cameroon was the majority in the union of the two Cameroons and France gave us pseudo-independence. The root of all policies around work and employment centres around our inability to do what independent states do, from the beginning. (Interviewee3-Tu)

We operate here as we would do at home. This is a ‘French’ country and our government, and our company’s senior directors sometimes, continue to help Cameroon develop its labour policies, and as has been the case for a very long time. The government is receptive to our ideas because they are better. (Interviewee16-Fr)

A series of cooperation agreements covering military missions, economic, legal, financial, cultural, treasury relations, and civil aviation were signed between France and the first Cameroon president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, who presided over an authoritarian political system for 22 years (Kofele-Kale, 1981). However, during his reign, the country experienced a period of unprecedented economic prosperity in the 1960s and 1970s. An official in the Ministry of Youth and Employment noted as follows:

We were handicapped by the agreement that Alhidjo (Cameroon’s first President) signed with the French. We could not do anything, and all orders were dictated from Paris. This constrained us in all spheres, social, cultural, economic, politics etc. We did not have independence it was a scheme. (Interviewee 34-Go)

The Cameroonian state began to put in place its industrial development policies only in the early 1970s. In 1977, the government initiated the indigenization of employment policies which saw the creation of the National Commission for the Cameroonisation of Employment (NCCE) – for the promotion of Cameroonian-based knowledge and management systems. The premise of these policies also included the pursuit of other initiatives aimed at giving opportunities and a voice to the local workers thereby shunting the colonizers and their work practices (Fonchingong, 2005). However, the NCCE and its policies were ignored by the private sector, which was dominated by foreign companies. The public sector implemented some of the NCCE policies, albeit informally, because appropriate implementation instruments were lacking and there was no human capital to properly develop such policies (Tchakounté, 2013). Also, after independence was granted, the colonial power engaged in a new form of economic imperialism (Asongu & Aminkeng, 2013) which included elite connivance, unequal exchange, and corruption, coupled with implementation weaknesses, the pursuit of work and employment policies of the NCCE was severely undermined. So, foreign companies which were arguably only operating in the private sector at the time had their way, in terms of work and employment policies and practices at an organizational level, due to their presumption of having superior practices, their unequal relationship with Cameroon, and the dynamics of the post-colonial imperialism. A recruitment manager in a US insurance firm and a director in a German community development firm echoed these words in relation to how they operated in the country:

They (foreign companies) did whatever they wanted to. Most of them treated state policies as not worthy of their time. ... basically, we did what we could in the circumstances. We were rarely challenged by the government. (Interviewee18-Ac)

We have tried a lot to bring in the expertise to help the stakeholders in this sector develop good policies and practices. We use best practices which are better than those we encounter here and have been emulated by others. (Interviewee7-Gn)

The above observation was corroborated by informants in other foreign companies. Thus, Cameroon was dependent solely on foreign companies to develop the private sector. Another institution created in the labor market during this period was the NSIF in 1967. The NSIF administered existing, from the French colonial period, legal provisions including prenatal and maternity grants, specified medical expenses, maternity leave benefits, and monthly allowances for each eligible child (Engo, 1984: 266). While Hamann (2020) argued that the design of labor policies was not domestically driven but simply an adaptation of existing regulations created under French rule, the NSIF’s mandate was expanded in 1977 to manage the existing employer-funded scheme covering occupational diseases and work injury.

Discussion

This study explored how the shifting geopolitical landscape and dynamics which flowed from it, in a unique Cameroonian institutional setting, influenced the evolution of labor market policy options. It was anticipated, a priori, that the Cameroonian state was institutionally weak and corrupt to develop coherent labor market policies on its own. The evidence of this study shows that the state had been rendered weak since independence. The interrelated findings demonstrate how the weak parochial Cameroonian state, and its related social actors, were bent on pursuing the CoE policies immediately after independence. This failed because it was severely handicapped by the kind of independence it got, the demeaning posture of the new imperialist relationship (Asongu & Aminkeng, 2013; Kofele-Kale, 1981), and debilitating activities of foreign MNEs to the existing labor laws. The post-colonial powers maintained a firm grip on many spheres of life. So, the Cameroonian state could not develop policies that did not serve the interest, to a significant extent, of the new imperialist France (SAIIA, 2009) and now, China. The institutions of a viable independent state were, and are, not developed according to the norms, values, and interests of Cameroonian people (Nyiauwung, 2021). So too was the posture of foreign companies in the private sector in weakening state institutions by blatantly disregarding the labor rules because of their perceived superior labor policies and practices. This was in the backdrop of a 'master-slave' relationship that the new Cameroonian state had come out of, nominally. Cameroon was still under colonial rule, albeit of a different kind – so-called economic imperialism (Bräutigam, 2011). Cameroon has now moved from Western to Chinese neo-colonialism (Cabestan, 2015).

The Cameroonian economy during the post-independence period witnessed growth, but labor market policies were influenced from outside the country – Paris. As the economy slowed down in the 1980s with a subsequent recession, a new kind of influence, structural adjustment programs by international lenders, kicked in and lasted for over 15 years. During this period, Cameroon was still unable to independently manage the economy and the labor market through its policy options. Labor market policies were directed by international lending institutions (Hamann, 2020). Western MNEs in Cameroon also 'cherry-picked' which labor market regulations to respect or to undermine as they perceived 'their' work and employment policies and practices to be superior to local norms and values (confirmed during FGD by government informants). However, the state did not 'believe' in these policies but had to implement them. As conditions changed due to the arrival of Chinese investment, the state leveraged the dynamics which flow from it to pivot labor market policies toward the failed, in the 1970s, CoE orientations.

The availability of this major source of FDI to the state which it could depend on and the fact that the state actively engaged in various learning visits to Beijing, saw the adoption of a new (old) social market economic model. The 'enabling' environment of unconditional investments from China markedly reduced Cameroon's dependence on Western FDI and presented a unique opportunity to the state to pursue its nationalistic tendencies, including the once-abandoned CoE project. It was clear from the interviewees that the arrival of Chinese investment was the central catalyst for this shift in labor market policy options. The Cameroonian state leveraged the dynamics which flowed from pitting the West against China in changing the 'rules of the game' (on which, see; Gerschewski, 2021; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). However, this shift to the CoE policy was embraced by Chinese companies, and less so by Western MNEs, in Cameroon. But it allowed Chinese firms to engage in paying their workers relatively low wages, offered poor labor standards for its Cameroonian workers cherry-picked business contracts, polluted the environment around mining sites, and discharged toxic waste from its hydro-electricity plants into the rivers (Chen & Landry, 2018). Also, the secrecy of China–Cameroon relations and the fact that the country's corruption index dropped further in the last 6 years than during the structural adjustment programs (Transparency International, 2021) also demonstrated the institutional enfeebling impact of Chinese FDI. As such, MNEs through FDI (mostly private from the West and state-owned from the Chinese) engaged in a selective, but in a strategic manner, weakening of parochial and crony Cameroonian labor market institutions.

Theoretical Contributions

This article's contribution is two-fold: First, it contributes to revealing the debilitating role geopolitical shifts and their ensuing dynamics (through MNEs) play in the development of labor market policies in an African context characterized by entrenched parochial and crony institutions. That is, in fragmented institutional contexts (especially those with pronounced corruption and Western neo-colonial legacies), institutional voids that exist do not solely, *stricto sensu*, arise from state neglect in attempting to develop formal institutions. They also arose in significant part, from the debilitating actions of private- and state-owned capital that confounded the state's strategic labor market institutional building initiatives. While Chinese and Western MNEs as well as incumbent institutional keepers benefitted from the voids, the pre-eminence of informal institutional norms and values were important and evident in our case. The neo-colonial arrangements in Cameroon were (and are still) designed to subjugate the socio-politico-economic sphere (Moncrieff, 2012) in a continuation of a 'master-slave' relationship (Nkomo, 2011). Thus, Cameroon (and so are most African countries) is still a vassal state (Emmanuel, 2013) to a great extent. We also reiterate that the formal institutional voids and informal institutional norms were exploited by the predatory state actors (see Carney & Witt, 2012) to stay in power and to serve the interests of their Chinese and Western masters (Chen & Landry, 2018; Forje, 2008). We, therefore, argue in line with others (Bothello et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2019; Mair et al., 2012) by critiquing the concept of institutional voids as rooted in an ethnocentric approach to management research. We also emphasize that it accords relatively less attention to the influence of 'power plays' (geopolitical forces) on institutional gatekeepers in an entrenched parochial and crony institutional context to activate and/or debilitate regulative, cognitive and normative features to pursue strategic interests. We further add to this critique by highlighting the way any (claimed) institutional voids or labor market policy weaknesses in Cameroon were not solely due to the absence of the state's strategic (albeit indigenous in nature) institutional aims of, *inter alia*, supporting skills, provisions of centralized collective agreements and improving local content policies (Geary & Nyiawung, 2021). These were indeed present to an extent.

Second and related to the above contribution, we strengthen the conjecture in literatures (on which, see Seriki, 2020; Tawiah et al., 2021) that in emblematically weak and parochial African institutional contexts with formal neo-colonial labor market institutions, Chinese investments are likely to precipitate 'their' erosion through opaque and corrupt practices. The evidence from our study alludes to the current shifting geopolitical landscape due to the availability and nature, mostly unconditional, of Chinese investment accentuated corruption and secrecy in Cameroonian society (Cabestan, 2015), including in labor market policy development. From the above contributions, we add to the growing body of literature on the evolution and shape of labor market policies in Africa (Benjamin, 2005; Hamann, 2020; Millington, 2017). We highlight that the concept of institutional voids in non-western contexts needs to emerge organically from studies by considering the complexities and richness of local institutional settings. Studies should not be driven by rote application of the concept of institutional voids by researchers who are too often separated from the contexts about which they theorize (Bothello et al., 2019). Therefore, institutional voids researchers need to pay close attention to contextual and conceptual considerations in tandem and unveiled jointly in non-western contexts rather than viewing both (context and concept) as two distinct categories in which the later obstructs the former.

Empirical Implications

The evidence from this study showed that two insights emerged from the collected data. First, the empirical data reveals how an entrenched parochial and crony Cameroonian institutional context is predisposed to transnational forces playing a pivotal role, rather than independent coherent national socio-economic policy options, in shaping labor market institutions in the country (Aloumedjo, 2018; Nguemjougou, 2017). The development of socio-economic governance in Cameroon anchored in a long history of dependency, a culture of clientelism, and recent neo-colonial relations (Emmanuel, 2013; Forje, 2008; Hamann, 2020), predisposes the state to be at the mercy of transnational forces. Thus,

the state lacks the independence to develop its own labor market policies. In this light, this study also illustrates classic political complicity between the inherently opaque nature of Chinese investments and a parochial corrupt Cameroonian state (Cabestan, 2015; Chen & Landry, 2018) which perpetuates labor market policy options trapped in the nation's history and feeble socio-economic development.

Second, the ease with which these transnational influences permeated, repeatedly and at different periods, Cameroon's institutional system to shape the development of labor market policy options is of note. It points to the fact that the internalization process of work and employment policy was weak because of incompatibilities with the interests and values of local social actors. The point here is that the adoption and sustenance of these labor market policies were dependent more on the internalization process than on their development and implementation (Nyiawung, 2021). That is, where labor market policies do not align with the norms, values, and interests of the affected key stakeholders, they can easily be eroded once conditions change (e.g., the availability of unconditional Chinese investment) which provided strong incentives for pursuing alternative options and interests.

Practical Implications

The research findings have some important practical implications for policymakers in developing institutional contexts, especially in Africa. First, it is the contention that many government policymakers in Africa do not pay close attention to the implementation instruments of policies (UNCTAD, 2017) and the value systems in which such policies are destined. In our case study, most of the policies were not effective due to lapses in implementation instruments and the underpinning value system in Cameroon. In line with Cooke (2018), we stress the importance of seriously considering implementation instruments which are key determinants of the outcome of every policy, especially foreign-designed options. Second, Western governments and their press are worried about the impact of Chinese investments in Africa (Bräutigam, 2019). They don't have to, if they can develop new relationships with Africa based on genuine equality and the pursuit of mutual interests. They need to sincerely develop (instead of exploiting) African economies to set themselves apart from Chinese FDI that is also exploitative, but in a different way.

Limitations

Our research has some limitations. First, the study is limited in sample size ($N = 41$). In addition, given that we pursued a case study approach, this limits the generalizability of this study (Yin, 2018). We also note the heterogeneity of the sample, with different organization and informants but other factors (such as duration of operation and assets portfolio) were not considered in the selection of participants. This should be considered in future studies. Also, quantitative studies could concentrate on a broader sample in Cameroon. Similarly, other research (both qualitative and quantitative) could shed further light on whether the same patterns exist elsewhere or explore the findings further – across the stages of development of the political economy, etc. – to uncover nuances across a larger sample of participants.

Conclusion

The findings from this study represent an important empirical and theoretical contribution to our understanding of the link between a fragile institutional system, transnational forces, and labor market policies in Cameroon. The relatively weak, economically and institutionally, Cameroonian state is important in expanding our understanding of how transnational forces (particularly post-colonial, neo-liberal, and Chinese investment) and the attendant dynamics might influence labor market institutions. The loci of the drivers of labor market policies in our case study were mainly exogenous and working in tandem with a parochial and crony institutional system in Cameroon (Fainshmidt et al., 2018), enabling social actors to recast work and employment policies and practices in the labor market. Also, in the evolving labor market in Cameroon, the time horizon by which the policies materialized

depended on the ‘posture’ and institutional mechanisms pursued by the social actors. Thus, in line with the arguments of Bernhard (2015) and Kraatz and Block (2017), this article accentuates the proposition that the shape of labor market policies is anchored on social actors’ motivations, relationships, and institutional resources available to them to pursue their interests. In sum, while both Chinese and Western FDI debilitated some labor market institutions, their erosion by the former was distinct as China also enabled institutional gatekeepers in Cameroon to further engage in corrupt practices, offer more concessions to the Chinese, and attempt to revive the retrogressive nationalistic (indigenization of) labor market policies of the mid-1970s.

Notes

We would like to thank the editorial team and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and guidance throughout the review process. We are particularly grateful for the critical comments from Professor Helena Barnard that helped to shape the article. Furthermore, participation at the *Management and Organization Review* Paper Development Workshop in October 2021 provided invaluable feedback on previous versions of the manuscript.

Appendix I: Main interview (unstructured) questions

1. What are the key features of the labor market in this country?
2. What striking legislation/policies guide the labor market in this country?
3. What has been the rationale(s) of labor market policies and their development in this country?
4. How does your organization respond to the current labor market policies?
5. What has been your/organization’s role in the enactment of labor market policies?
6. What influence does the West and/or China have on the labor market policies in this country?
7. How has the Chinese behaved toward work and employment policies and practices in the country?
8. Explain the key features of the labor market immediately after independence, during the structural adjustment programs and now.
9. Explain how your organization has responded to the labor market policies so far.
10. How do other social actors and policy makers function in terms enacting and implementing labor policies in this country?
11. What is impact of Chinese investments on employment and enhancing local content policy in this country?
12. How have Cameroonians accepted the prescriptions/influence of foreign organizations/governments (e.g., China and/or the West) in terms of the labor laws?
13. How has personal and political networks influenced labor market policies and practices?

...these are only guiding questions that were further probed during the interviews...

Appendix II: A list of selected physical documents (in their original versions/languages) from government institutions and other organizations in Cameroon

1. Vocational Training Reform Support Policy and Project. DSCE1023 of May 2006. Ministry of employment and vocational training. Yaoundé.
2. La Représentativité des Organisations de Travailleurs et d’Employeurs au Cameroun. PRODIAP (2002).
3. Recrutements dans le Secteur Pétrolier - Priorité aux Camerounais. Camnews, Yaoundé, 16 Décembre 2013.
4. Upholding National Solidarity in Cameroon. Pamphlet of 16/04/2015. Ministry of Social Affairs.
5. Convention Collective Nationale des Entreprises Relevant de l’Exploration, de la Production et du Raffinage des Hydrocarbures au Cameroun. Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance (2014).
6. Institut National de la Statistique (INS) (2005): Enquête sur l’Emploi et le Cameroun, premiers indicateurs phase1, Mimeo. Cameroun.

7. République du Cameroun (2009). Document de stratégie pour la croissance et l'emploi. MINEFOP.
8. Institut national de la statistique, Enquête camerounaise auprès des ménages, 2007.
9. Institut national de la statistique, l'Enquête sur l'emploi et le secteur informel, 2018.
10. République du Cameroun, Document de stratégie de réduction de la pauvreté, 2003. Also available at <http://chagriouestcamer.afrikblog.com/archives/2009/05/06/13633208.html>
11. L'économie camerounaise. Un espoir évanoui. Karthala, 2000. Sopecam Production.
12. FES (2017) Social security for women in the informal sector: Women in petit trade as case study. Also available at: <http://www.fes-kamerun.org/cameroon/index.php/en/activities/188-socialsecurity-for-women-in-the-informal-sector-women-in-petit-trade-as-case-study-doualaapril->
13. Décret n° 93-571 du 15 juillet 1993 fixant les conditions d'emploi des travailleurs de nationalité étrangère pour certaines professions ou niveaux de qualification professionnelle.
14. The complete labor codes of 1952, 1967, 1974 and 1992.
15. Le marché du travail au Cameroun, 2015, (eds) Global Policy Network, New York.
16. Cameroon Industrial Development Corporation (CIDC) (2014). The labor market – policy and issues. A submission to the ministry of economy, planning and regional development. Yaoundé.
17. Collective agreement in the oil and gas sector in Cameroon (2014), from the Confederation of Free Trade Unions in Cameroon.
18. Organizational policy pamphlet on recruitment and training from:
 - a. ChinaCol
 - b. France3
 - c. USA1
19. Position paper on enhancing employment in key sectors of the economy, 1990. Cameroon Industrial Development Corporation (CIDC).

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Julius Nyiawung (Julius.Nyiawung@mu.ie) is the academic director of International Business Programme – Undergraduate and a lecturer in Organisational Behaviour and Management in the School of Business, Maynooth University, Ireland. He received his doctorate in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations from Smurfit Business School, University College, Dublin. Parallel to working with industry, his research interests include institutionalism, political economy, talent management, power relations, culture, entrepreneurship, and human resource management. He has published a number of case studies in textbooks and journal articles in *Human Relations* and *Africa Journal of Management*.

John F. Geary (john.geary@ucd.ie) is a Full Professor of Employment Relations at the College of Business, University College Dublin, Ireland. He obtained his doctorate from the University of Oxford (Nuffield College). His research interests include work and employment in multinational companies, employee activism, union organization, and the quality of work. He has published widely in international scholarly journals, including the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, *Human Relations*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, and *Work, Employment and Society*.

Serge Mandiefe Piabuo (spiabuo@worldbank.org) is an environmental Economist with the World Bank Environment, Natural Resources, and Blue Economy Global Practice Group. He has wide experience developing and supporting nature-based enterprises in Africa and Asia. His research interests include enterprise management, forest enterprise development, green growth through sustainable businesses and landscapes, policy impacts on climate change, and landscape governance. Serge has several scientific papers, book chapters, policy briefs, technical briefs, and reports on these subjects across different scales.