

## Social Impact Pathways from China to Southeast Asia: A Focused Study on Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand

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**Abstract:** China's increasing engagement with Southeast Asia represents a significant political and developmental trend in the twenty-first century. This study analyzes how China's effort toward development strategies, bilateral cooperation frameworks, and civil society initiatives generates a measurable social impact in Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand, with a focus on education, medical health, and sustainable development. By employing policy analysis, case studies, and secondary literature, the research examines Chinese-funded friendship schools, educational training programs, medical team deployments, and clean-energy investments in the Southeast Asia region. The findings indicate that Chinese engagement has enhanced access to education, healthcare, and renewable energy, although outcomes differ by country and are influenced by local governance, absorptive capacity, and stakeholder participation. The study contends that transitioning from donor-centric to partnership-centric models anchored in community ownership, transparency, and long-term capacity building is essential for a prosperous and sustainable impact. Policy recommendations are offered for governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society.

**Background:** China's impact in the ASEAN region has proving to be important for a social impact during the last twenty years. During that timeframe, China's presence in Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand has proven to be beneficial in the focused areas of education, medical health, and sustainability. With China's investments in these three particular countries, it is necessary to understand how a positive impact will be favorable to Southeast Asia in the future.

**Materials and Methods:** The research applied a mixed method analysis using qualitative and quantitative approaches for a comparative case study design. Data was collected through a systematic review of secondary literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, reports from international organizations, and investigative journals. Case studies were selected to represent the three analytical domains—education, health, and sustainable development—and to capture variation across the three focused countries. Quantitative data on enrollment rates, health outcomes, and energy capacity were incorporated to deliver empirical grounding for qualitative claims. The study did not rely on primary fieldwork and all findings are therefore interpreted with appropriate attention to the limitations of secondary data sources.

**Results:** The findings of this researched determined that Chinese cooperation has created significant benefits in education, improved health service, and progress toward clean energy transitions. However, the sustainability and equity of these benefits are frequently constrained by structural factors, including weak local governance capacity, insufficient transparency, limited capacity building, and cultural insensitivity.

**Conclusion:** The analysis established that the social impact of China's engagement with Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand across three domains: education, medical health, and sustainable development, are extremely beneficial to Southeast Asia. For future improvements, by strengthening the governance frameworks that regulate Chinese cooperation programs, ensuring that agreements are transparent, and confirming that community concerns are systematically incorporated will assist for a better tomorrow with China's investments in the ASEAN region.

**Key Words:** China-Southeast Asia relations; social impact; education development; health cooperation; sustainable development; Cambodia; Philippines; Thailand.

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### I. Introduction

China's engagement with Southeast Asia has grown significantly over the last twenty years. Trade and infrastructure have expanded into education, healthcare, environmental governance, and social welfare. Such growth illustrates the planned use of China's soft power and its synchronization with the Southeast Asian development priorities. Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand, each playing a unique role within the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which provides excellent examples to analyze the social aspects of Chinese engagement.

Cambodia has traditionally maintained the closest political association with Beijing among ASEAN member states, a relationship that has intensified considerably since the mid-2000s (Un, 2019). Chinese investment in Cambodia accounts for a significant share of total foreign direct investment, and this economic interdependence has been accompanied by growing cooperation in education, health, and infrastructure. The Philippines, on the other hand, has an uncertain relationship with China due to tensions particularly over territorial disputes in the South China Sea and a pragmatic economic partnership under successive administrations (Baviera, 2016). Thailand occupies a middle position, maintaining traditionally cordial relations with China while also managing a complicated network of domestic political affairs and regional commitments.

The central research question guiding this study is: Under what conditions does China's engagement in Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand produce a meaningful and sustainable social impact? This question holds particular relevance for policy experts, development practitioners, and local communities, especially as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) expand their reach. The analysis centers on education, medical health, and sustainable development, as these domains represent the primary areas of Chinese cooperation and illustrate both positive outcomes and unintended consequences.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on China's development cooperation in Southeast Asia. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework and methodology. Sections 4 through 6 analyze cooperation in education, medical health, and sustainable development, respectively. Section 7 examines policy systems and governance. Section 8 discusses developing challenges and opportunities, and Section 9 provides conclusions and policy recommendations.

## **II. Previous Studies and Assessment of Literature**

The scholarly literature on China's engagement with Southeast Asia spans several disciplines, including international relations, development studies, public health, and environmental science. Research conducted prior to the year 2010 tended to frame Chinese involvement mainly through the lens of international competition, examining Beijing's use of economic statecraft to cultivate political influence (Shambaugh, 2013). More recent work has shifted attention to the developmental dimensions of Chinese engagement, questioning whether Chinese-funded projects produce outcomes comparable to those achieved through Western-led development assistance (Dreher et al., 2021).

In the field of education, researchers have documented the rapid expansion of Confucius Institutes and bilateral school partnerships across Southeast Asia (Lo, 2020). These projects have been credited with increasing access to Chinese-language instruction and vocational training, particularly in countries such as Cambodia and Thailand, where labor market demand for Mandarin-speaking workers has grown substantially. However, critics have articulated concerns as to how these programs promote cultural uniformity at the expense of local educational values and national curricula (Lim & Herrera, 2019).

The literature on China's medical diplomacy in Southeast Asia spotlights the long-standing practice of deploying medical teams to partner countries, a tradition dating back to the Maoist era that has sustained and expanded under subsequent administrations (Chen & Wu, 2020). The Guangxi Medical Team's permanent presence in Cambodia is frequently cited as a model of continued bilateral health cooperation, with documented contributions to the management of communicable diseases, including malaria and dengue fever. At the same time, scholars have questioned whether such deployments promote genuine capacity building or whether they create forms of dependency that undermine the development of local health systems (Huang, 2019).

Research on China's role in sustainable development across Southeast Asia has grown considerably in the wake of the BRI, which has channeled substantial investment into renewable energy, transportation infrastructure, and ecological restoration (Wang, 2021). Studies of solar energy projects in Thailand and mangrove restoration projects in the Philippines suggest that Chinese companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly attentive to environmental aspects, though concerns about project transparency, community consultation, and long-term environmental impact persist (Gallagher & Irwin, 2014;

Zhang et al., 2022). The literature on cross-border e-commerce platforms—including Pinduoduo’s agricultural supply chain partnerships in Thailand—points to an emerging model of private-sector-led social impact that merits closer scholarly attention.

A significant gap in the literature is the lack of comparative studies examining Chinese social engagement across multiple Southeast Asian countries. Most research to date has concentrated on single-country or single-sector analyses, limiting the ability to draw systematic conclusions regarding the conditions that enable sustainable social impact from Chinese cooperation. This research intends to address this gap employing a multi-country, multi-sector analytical approach.

### **III. Conceptual Framework and Methodology**

This study draws on a combination of theories to examine the social impact of Chinese engagement in Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The primary conceptual framework is derived from the literature on development cooperation and South-South cooperation (SSC), which spotlights the distinctive features of development partnerships among Global South actors, including common historical experience, mutual benefit, and non-conditionality (Mawdsley, 2012). SSC theory provides a useful lens for understanding China’s stated approach to development cooperation, which focuses on sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit rather than the relative governance associated with Western aid frameworks.

The study further utilizes social impact assessment (SIA) frameworks, which offer methodologies for evaluating both intended and unintended social consequences of development interventions (Becker, 2001). SIA highlights community participation, distributional equity, cultural responsiveness, and lasting sustainability—dimensions frequently overlooked in economic assessments of development cooperation. By combining SSC theory with SIA frameworks, this analysis reviews Chinese engagement in Southeast Asia from theoretical, conceptual, and practical perspectives.

Methodically, the study uses a mixed method analysis using qualitative and quantitative approaches for a comparative case study design (Yin, 2018). Data was collected through a systematic review of secondary literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, reports from international organizations, and investigative journals. Case studies were selected to represent the three analytical domains—education, health, and sustainable development—and to capture variation across the three focused countries. Where available, quantitative data on enrollment rates, health outcomes, and energy capacity were incorporated to deliver empirical grounding for qualitative claims. The study does not rely on primary fieldwork; all findings are therefore interpreted with appropriate attention to the limitations of secondary data sources.

### **IV. Education Cooperation: Expanding Access and Building Capacity**

Education has emerged as one of the most visible and significant domains of China’s social engagement in Southeast Asia. The establishment of China-Cambodia, China-Thailand, and China-Philippines Friendship Schools constitutes a concrete expression of bilateral educational partnerships designed to expand access to quality schooling in disadvantaged communities. These schools typically offer a combination of standard national curriculum instruction and supplementary training in Chinese language and vocational skills, showing a dual objective: meeting local educational needs while simultaneously cultivating familiarity with Chinese language and culture.

In Cambodia, Chinese educational investment has been concentrated in both urban and peri-urban areas, with an increasing amount of secondary schools and vocational training centers receiving funding from Chinese state-affiliated organizations and private enterprises (Un, 2019). The Cambodian government’s National Education Strategic Plan has actively sought to incorporate Chinese language instruction into its larger human capital development strategy, accepting the economic value of Mandarin proficiency in a labor market increasingly integrated with Chinese manufacturing and tourism. Chinese-accredited universities have also established cooperative agreements with Cambodian higher education institutions, providing scholarship opportunities for Cambodian students and facilitating faculty exchange programs.

The Philippines presents a more complex educational system, formed by its colonial history, its status as one of the most English-proficient countries in Asia, and the considerable political sensitivities surrounding

Chinese cultural influence. The Bright Bridge Project—a Chinese-funded rural school construction initiative—has been cited as an example of how Chinese educational investment can address infrastructure deficits in remote communities without generating the cultural friction associated with Confucius Institute programs (Lo, 2020). By focusing on physical infrastructure rather than curriculum content, the project has achieved a degree of political acceptance that more philosophical based education projects have struggled to secure. As of 2023, the project had supported the construction or renovation of more than forty rural schools in regions with high poverty rates and limited government educational spending.

In Thailand, China’s educational involvement has increasingly emphasized digital education using science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) instruction, reflecting both the Thai government’s priorities and China’s comparative advantage in educational technology. Online e-learning platforms developed by Chinese companies have been piloted in rural provinces of northern and northeastern Thailand, providing students with access to mathematics, science, and coding instruction that would otherwise be unavailable due to the shortage of qualified teachers in these regions (Lim & Herrera, 2019). The use of gamified learning applications and artificial intelligence (AI) assisted tutoring software has been very successful by engaging students who have historically experienced high dropout rates.

Vocational education and technical training represent another major area of Sino-Southeast Asian educational cooperation. Joint vocational training centers, established under bilateral agreements between China and each of the three focused countries, provide instruction in fields including automotive maintenance, construction technology, hospitality management, and information technology. These centers serve a dual function: they target immediate skills gaps in local labor markets while preparing workers to participate in Chinese-invested industries, including manufacturing, logistics, and tourism. The alignment between vocational training courses and employer demand has been identified as a key success factor in these programs, though concerns have been raised about the lasting sustainability of centers that depend heavily on Chinese institutional support (Chen & Wu, 2020).

Although these achievements exist, challenges persist. Educational cooperation programs are frequently poorly documented and subject to limited independent evaluation, which challenges efforts to measure their impact on learning outcomes, school completion rates, or labor market integration. Issues related to curriculum standards, teacher training quality, and fair resource distribution across geographic and socioeconomic groups remain poorly addressed. Additionally, the focus on Chinese language instruction, though economically motivated, has sparked debate over the balance between international language skills and the preservation of national linguistic heritage.

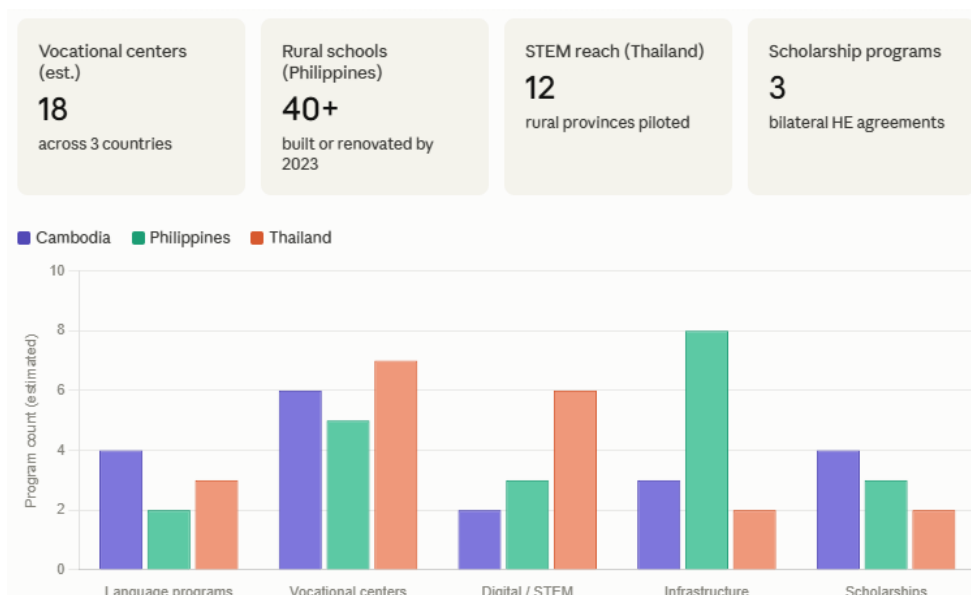


Figure 1. China–Southeast Asia education cooperation indicators by country and type (2015–2023).

Values represent estimated relative program counts derived from secondary literature.

Sources: Lo (2020); Lim & Herrera (2019); Un (2019); Chen & Wu (2020).

## **V. Medical Health Cooperation: Diplomacy, Capacity, and System-wide Challenges**

China's medical diplomacy in Southeast Asia has a history that predates the contemporary BRI era, rooted in a tradition of international solidarity that was articulated as a core component of Chinese foreign policy during the 1950s and 1960s. The deployment of Chinese medical teams to developing countries—a practice that has persisted across successive administrations—represents one of the most enduring and institutionally embedded forms of Chinese development cooperation (Huang, 2019). In Cambodia, the Guangxi Medical Team has maintained a permanent presence for more than three decades, working alongside Cambodian health professionals to address a range of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

The contribution of Chinese medical teams to the management of malaria and dengue fever in Cambodia has been particularly significant. Both diseases remain major public health challenges in rural Cambodia, where insufficient health care infrastructure, location isolation, and poverty combine to impede successful prevention and treatment. Chinese medical teams have provided technical assistance for vector control programs, trained local health workers in diagnostic and treatment protocols, and donated diagnostic equipment, including portable ultrasound machines and laboratory testing kits. The combination of Chinese medical expertise with the operational networks of the local Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières has enhanced the reach and sustainability of these interventions, creating a collaborative model that utilizes the comparative advantages of different institutional actors (Wang, 2021).

In Thailand, Chinese health cooperation has taken a somewhat different form, indicating the country's more advanced healthcare system and its greater capacity to absorb and deploy new medical technologies. The donation of portable diagnostic equipment—including handheld ultrasound devices developed by Chinese medical technology companies such as Mindray—has enabled community health workers in rural Thai provinces to conduct basic diagnostic evaluations without requiring patients to travel to urban hospitals. This innovation has been credited with improving early identification rates for conditions such as cardiac disease, liver disorders, and obstetric complications, with notably significant benefits for elderly patients and pregnant women in remote communities (Zhang et al., 2022).

The Philippines has received Chinese health cooperation mainly through bilateral donation programs and joint scientific initiatives focused on infectious disease surveillance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China provided vaccine doses, personal protective equipment, and medical supplies to the Philippines under an emergency health diplomacy framework, a gesture that temporarily improved bilateral relations, though ongoing territorial tensions (Baviera, 2016). However, scholars have noted that the long-term result of these interventions depends heavily on the extent to which they are accompanied by investments in local health system capacity, including training programs, supply chain development, and regulatory strengthening.

A persistent debate in the literature on Chinese medical diplomacy centers on the distinction between humanitarian service delivery and planned relationship-building. Critics claim that medical team deployments and equipment donations primarily serve as instruments of soft power rather than as authentic expressions of development solidarity, thereby limiting their impact on health system capacity (Huang, 2019). Advocates maintain that these objectives are not mutually exclusive and that strategically motivated interventions can yield genuine health benefits when well-designed and strictly evaluated. Current evidence shows that while Chinese medical cooperation in Southeast Asia has produced tangible health impacts, these outcomes are uneven, and their sustainability relies on host-country investments in health system strengthening.



Figure 2. China–Southeast Asia medical health cooperation indicators by country and intervention type (1990–2023). Values represent estimated relative program intensity derived from secondary literature. Sources: Huang (2019); Wang (2021); Zhang et al. (2022); Baviera (2016).

## VI. Sustainable Development: Energy, Ecology, and Economic Empowerment

Sustainable development has become an increasingly prominent dimension of China’s engagement with Southeast Asia, motivated by a combination of domestic policy priorities—including the goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2060—and growing international pressure to demonstrate that Chinese overseas investment is compatible with environmental and social standards. In all three focused countries, Chinese companies and government agencies have invested in clean energy projects, ecological renewal initiatives, and digital economic development programs that can contribute to sustainable enhancement goals, although with varying degrees of success.

Thailand has emerged as one of the most significant recipients of Chinese clean energy investment in Southeast Asia. Crystal Energy and other Chinese solar companies have developed photovoltaic (PV) installations in central and northern Thailand that combine electricity generation with agricultural production—a model identified as photovoltaic plus agriculture. Under this model, solar panels are installed on elevated structures that allow crops to be cultivated beneath them, generating renewable electricity while maintaining farming productivity. This approach addresses a key tension in solar energy deployment—the trade-off between energy generation and agricultural land use—and has been particularly well received in Thailand’s rice-growing regions, where land is scarce, and farmer incomes are low (Gallagher & Irwin, 2014). By 2023, Chinese-invested PV installations in Thailand had a combined capacity exceeding two gigawatts, contributing considerably to the country’s renewable energy targets.

In the Philippines, Chinese environmental engagement has focused partly on mangrove restoration, a priority that underscores the environmental value of Philippine coastal ecosystems and the growing recognition—within China as well as internationally—that forest conservation and restoration are key parts of climate change mitigation. The China Green Initiative has provided technical support for mangrove restoration projects in coastal provinces of the Philippines, working in partnership with local government units, NGOs, and fishing communities. These projects have involved the collection and propagation of native mangrove species, the removal of invasive species, and the development of community-based monitoring systems that empower local residents to take ownership of restoration outcomes (Zhang et al., 2022). The combination of

environmental and livelihood objectives—through eco-tourism development and sustainable fisheries management—has enhanced the social sustainability of these projects.

Cross-border e-commerce represents an emerging frontier of Chinese social and economic engagement in Southeast Asia that cuts across conventional sectoral categories. Pinduoduo, one of China’s largest e-commerce platforms, has established direct purchasing partnerships with agricultural producers in Thailand, enabling farmers to sell fresh produce to Chinese consumers without multiple intermediaries. This model—sometimes described as ‘digital supply chain integration’—has the scope to significantly increase smallholder farmers’ incomes by eliminating transaction costs and opening the door to a market of hundreds of millions of consumers. However, the sustainability of such partnerships depends on maintaining quality standards, reliable logistics infrastructure, and regulatory systems that protect the interests of small-scale producers (Lo, 2020).

Cambodia’s engagement with Chinese sustainable development initiatives has been more limited, partly showing the country’s lower absorptive capacity and partly indicating the concentration of Chinese investment in sectors—including garment manufacturing, gambling, and real estate—that have attracted criticism from civil society organizations on social and environmental grounds. Nevertheless, there are emerging examples of Chinese investment in solar energy and sustainable agriculture in Cambodia that merit attention, including compact solar irrigation systems that reduce dependence on diesel-powered pumps and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.



Figure 3. China–Southeast Asia sustainable development cooperation indicators by country and initiative type (2015–2023). Values represent estimated relative program intensity derived from secondary literature. Sources: Gallagher & Irwin (2014); Zhang et al. (2022); Lo (2020).

## VII. Policy Systems, Governance, and Regulatory Dimensions

The effectiveness of Chinese social engagement in Southeast Asia is not determined solely by the quality of individual projects or the resources invested in them. It is also essentially shaped by the policy systems, governance mechanisms, and regulatory structures within which these projects operate. In all three focused countries, the relationship between Chinese cooperation programs and domestic policy systems is complex and often rarely analyzed in the existing literature.

At the bilateral level, China's development cooperation with Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand is governed by a web of framework agreements, memoranda of understanding, and project-level contracts that vary considerably in their clarity, specificity, and conformity with host-country development strategies. The China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), established in 2018, has introduced greater institutional coherence to China's overseas development assistance, but observers have noted that the agency's operational guidelines are still less transparent than those of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) along with the Development Assistance Committee members (Dreher et al., 2021). This concealment complicates independent evaluation of project outcomes and limits the ability of host-country governments and civil society organizations to hold implementing partners accountable.

ASEAN provides a multilateral framework for Sino-Southeast Asian development cooperation, but its influence on the governance of specific Chinese projects is limited. The ASEAN Secretariat lacks the mandates and resources to conduct systematic oversight of bilateral development partnerships, and the principle of non-interference—shared by ASEAN and China alike—creates institutional barriers to the critical engagement necessary to address governance concerns in specific projects. Nevertheless, ASEAN's master plan on ASEAN connectivity and its loyalty to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals provide regulatory frameworks for evaluating Chinese cooperation programs and endorsing higher standards (Mawdsley, 2012).

At the national level, the governance capacity of host-country governments varies considerably across the three focused countries, with clear implications for their ability to negotiate, manage, and evaluate Chinese cooperation programs. Thailand's relatively strong state institutions and established regulatory systems provide a more beneficial environment for competent governance of Chinese investment than Cambodia's, where concerns about political capture and limited civil society space constrain independent oversight. The Philippines' democratic institutions and active civil society provide a degree of accountability that is not available in Cambodia, though they also generate political volatility that may complicate the implementation of long-term cooperation programs.

Non-governmental organizations—both Chinese and local—play an increasingly important role in mediating the relationship between Chinese development actors and Southeast Asian communities. The China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, Southeast Asian local public welfare organizations, and international NGOs such as the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières all contribute to the delivery of social services in ways that complement, and sometimes substitute for, the activities of government agencies and Chinese state-owned enterprises. These organizations bring technical expertise, community relationships, and reputational incentives that support more socially sensitive and sustainable approaches to development cooperation. However, their influence is often marginal compared to that of the major institutional actors, and their capacity to hold Chinese government and corporate actors accountable is limited.

## **VIII. Emerging Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities**

Several cross-cutting trends are changing the landscape of Chinese social engagement in Southeast Asia, generating both emerging opportunities and challenges for achieving sustainable impact. Understanding these trends is necessary for designing more efficient and fair cooperation frameworks.

Digital technology is perhaps the most disruptive force in this landscape. The expansion of Chinese internet platforms—including e-commerce, telemedicine, and online education—is creating new channels through which Chinese actors can engage with Southeast Asian communities and deliver social value. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, forcing both governments and communities to experiment with digital delivery mechanisms for services ranging from primary education to primary healthcare. Three technology companies from China, including Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance, have expanded their presence in Southeast Asian digital markets, and this commercial engagement is gradually intertwined with social development objectives (Wang, 2021).

Climate change and environmental degradation are increasing challenges to sustainable development across all three focused countries, and Chinese engagement in renewable energy, ecological restoration, and climate adaptation is therefore increasingly important. China's domestic experience with large-scale deployment of solar and wind energy, and its leading position in the global clean energy technology supply chain, give it distinctive assets for supporting Southeast Asian countries' energy transitions. However, the environmental

record of Chinese overseas investment—including in hydropower, mining, and industrial manufacturing—remains a source of concern, and host-country governments and civil society organizations are increasingly demanding higher environmental and social standards from Chinese investors (Gallagher & Irwin, 2014).

The risk of ‘donor dependency’—a pattern in which recipient communities become reliant on external resources and lack the motivation or capacity to develop their own solutions—is a recurring concern in the literature on Chinese development cooperation (Becker, 2001). This risk is particularly acute in sectors such as health and education, where service delivery requires sustained institutional commitment and cannot be provided effectively on a project-by-project basis. Chinese cooperation programs that focus on short-term service delivery without investing in local capacity building—including training, institution strengthening, and knowledge transfer—may generate immediate benefits while undermining long-term development trajectories. Addressing this challenge requires a deliberate commitment to capacity building as a core objective of cooperation programs, alongside realistic timelines that reflect the complexity of institutional development.

Cultural sensitivity and respect for local values represent a third cross-cutting challenge. Chinese development actors have sometimes been criticized for imposing standardized approaches to development that reflect Chinese cultural norms and development priorities without adequate attention to local context. In the field of education, for example, the emphasis on Confucian pedagogical values and Chinese linguistic instruction may not align with the educational philosophies and aspirations of communities in Cambodia, the Philippines, or Thailand. In healthcare, traditional healing practices and local illness narratives may not be adequately respected by Chinese medical teams trained in Western biomedicine. Effective social impact requires cultural humility—a willingness to learn from local communities and to adapt programmatic approaches accordingly (Lim & Herrera, 2019).

Opportunities for more effective and equitable Chinese social engagement in Southeast Asia are nonetheless considerable. The growing interest—within China’s government, business community, and civil society—in demonstrating the social value of overseas engagement creates a favorable context for advocacy aimed at raising standards and promoting more participatory approaches. The increasing sophistication of Southeast Asian civil society organizations, think tanks, and academic institutions means that local partners are better equipped than in the past to negotiate the terms of Chinese cooperation and to hold implementing partners accountable. And the shared interest of China and Southeast Asian countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals provides a normative framework for aligning Chinese engagement with internationally agreed improvement priorities.

## **IX. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

This study has analyzed the social impact of China’s engagement with Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand across three domains: education, medical health, and sustainable development. The findings reveal a complex and nuanced landscape. Chinese cooperation has generated significant benefits in all three areas, including expanded access to education, strengthened health service delivery, and progress toward clean energy transitions. However, the sustainability and equity of these benefits are frequently constrained by structural factors, including weak local governance capacity, insufficient transparency, limited capacity building, and cultural insensitivity.

The comparative analysis across three countries highlights the importance of contextual factors in shaping cooperation outcomes. Cambodia’s close political alignment with Beijing has facilitated a high volume of Chinese cooperation activity, but limited domestic governance capacity and civil society space constrain independent evaluation and accountability. The Philippines’ democratic institutions and active civil society provide important accountability mechanisms, but political volatility and territorial tensions complicate the implementation of long-term programs. Thailand’s strong state institutions and advanced development status create a more favorable environment for complex cooperation arrangements, including clean energy investment and digital economic integration.

Based on this analysis, several policy recommendations emerge. For Chinese government agencies and implementing partners, the most important priority is a genuine commitment to partnership-centric rather than donor-centric models of cooperation—models that prioritizes community ownership, local capacity building, and transparent evaluation over short-term service delivery and political visibility. This requires investing in co-design processes that involve host-country governments, civil society organizations, and affected communities from the earliest stages of program development.

For host-country governments, the priority is to strengthen the governance frameworks that regulate Chinese cooperation programs—ensuring that agreements are transparent, that project implementation is subject to independent oversight, and that community concerns are systematically incorporated into program design and evaluation. This is a politically demanding task in contexts where Chinese cooperation is intertwined with broader economic and diplomatic relationships, but the long-term benefits of more effective governance far outweigh the short-term costs.

For multilateral organizations, including ASEAN, the UN system, and international financial institutions, the opportunity is to develop shared standards and evaluation frameworks for development cooperation in Southeast Asia that can be applied to Chinese programs alongside those of other development partners. Such frameworks—grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals and human rights principles—would provide host-country governments and civil society organizations with authoritative benchmarks for assessing the quality of cooperation and advocating for improvement.

The social impact of Chinese engagement in Southeast Asia will be determined not by the volume of resources invested but by the quality of the relationships through which those resources are deployed. Building those relationships—on the basis of mutual respect, shared values, and genuine commitment to the well-being of affected communities—is the most important challenge facing Chinese development cooperation in the years ahead.

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