Chinese Investment and African Urbanisation: A Comparative Study of Democratic and Non-Democratic ECOWAS States

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Chinese investment and urbanisation patterns in West African states, comparing democratic and non-democratic states within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). As China has expanded its economic engagement and investment in Africa, an urban transition is underway as migration from rural to urban areas accelerates. Some argue that Chinese investment and infrastructure construction drive urban growth in the region. This paper analyses data on Chinese investment, urban infrastructure projects, and urbanisation rates across 15 ECOWAS states. It finds that while Chinese investment and construction contracts are correlated with urbanisation, there is significant variation between democratic and non-democratic states. Urbanisation rates are higher in non-democratic states with higher Chinese investment. In contrast, in democratic states, urbanisation rates are decoupled from Chinese investment and instead driven by industrialisation and service sector growth. The paper concludes with a discussion of how regime type mediates the influence of foreign investment on development patterns in Africa.

Indexing terms: Chinese investment, African urbanisation, ECOWAS, democracy, non-democracy, infrastructure, housing, spatial inequalities, environment, sustainability.

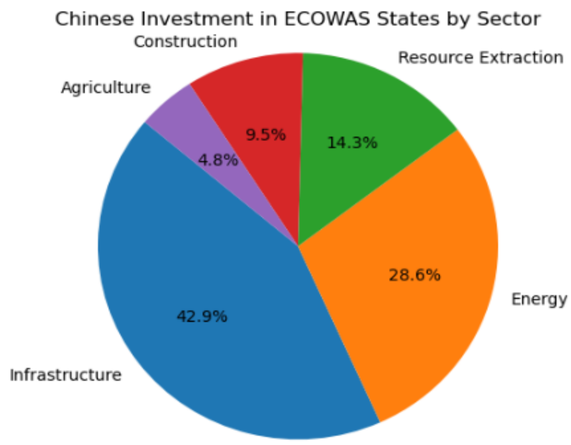
Introduction

Across the African continent, cities are expanding at a breakneck pace. The drivers behind this rapid urbanisation remain debated, with many pointing to the rise of China as Africa's dominant economic partner. Indeed, Chinese financing has enabled significant infrastructure projects, from railways to highways, seemingly catalysing urban growth. However, attributing Africa's urban boom solely to Chinese capital overlooks crucial nuances. The nexus between foreign investment, infrastructure, and urbanisation involves a delicate interplay of global forces and local conditions [1].

While Chinese funds support tangible development, their impact depends on each country's unique political economy. Chinese projects can enable inclusive growth in nations with transparent governance and robust institutions. New infrastructure connects rural populations to urban opportunities as a magnet for migration. However, under opaque authoritarian regimes, Chinese investments may primarily enrich elites. Lavish but unproductive projects like stadiums fail to provide economic mobility for ordinary citizens. Urbanisation proceeds unevenly as glittering city centres mask growing slums [2]. Therefore, analysing the drivers of urbanisation in Africa requires examining local contexts. The structure of power, nature of governance, and resource allocation patterns shape how foreign capital influences urban trajectories. Unpacking these dynamics is imperative for academic inquiry and steering Africa's urban boom toward sustainable, shared prosperity. With careful policies that direct infrastructure investment to public benefit, African nations can transform rapid urban growth from a challenge into an opportunity.

This paper examines the influence of Chinese investment and construction on urban growth patterns in West Africa, focusing on disaggregating between democratic and non-democratic regimes within ECOWAS member states. It analyses data on Chinese investment, construction contracts, infrastructure projects, and urbanisation rates in 15 ECOWAS states from 1998 to 2018. The paper finds that while Chinese construction and infrastructure development are strongly associated with global urbanisation across the region during this period, there are notable distinctions between democratic and non-democratic states. Urbanisation rates are significantly higher in several non-democratic states with higher Chinese investment and construction, such as Guinea and Togo. In contrast, urbanisation patterns are decoupled from foreign investment in democratic states such as Ghana, instead driven by industrialisation and services-led growth [3].

Figure 1.



The paper is structured as follows: The first section provides an overview of China-Africa economic engagement, examining the scale of Chinese investment and construction. The second section analyses urbanisation patterns in ECOWAS states [4]. The third section examines the relationship between Chinese investment, construction, infrastructure projects and urbanisation rates, disaggregating between democratic and non-democratic regimes. It utilises econometric analysis to assess the correlation between Chinese investment and urban population growth across different political regimes. The fourth section provides a comparative case study of Chinese engagement and urbanisation in Ghana and Togo. The final section concludes with a discussion of how regime type mediates foreign investment's influence on urbanisation processes in Africa.

Background: China-Africa Economic Engagement

Since the 2000s, China has become a significant economic partner for African states. As Chinese companies accelerated their global expansion under the Going Out policy initiated in 1999, Africa became a priority destination given its natural resource endowments and development potential for construction and infrastructure. Trade between China and Africa rose from $10 billion in 2000 to over $200 billion by 2012, with China becoming Africa's largest trading partner. Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa expanded significantly, rising from under $500 million in 2003 to over $43 billion by 2018.

Table 1: ECOWAS States Categorised by Regime Type

Country	Regime Type
Benin	Multi-party democracy
Burkina Faso	Multi-party democracy
Cabo Verde	Multi-party democracy
Côte d'Ivoire	Multi-party democracy
The Gambia	Multi-party democracy
Ghana	Multi-party democracy
Guinea	Hybrid regime

Guinea-Bissau	Hybrid regime
Liberia	Multi-party democracy
Mali	Hybrid regime
Niger	Semi-presidential system
Nigeria	Multi-party democracy
Senegal	Multi-party democracy
Sierra Leone	Multi-party democracy
Togo	Presidential system

Yet, while natural resources have been a critical driver, Chinese firms have also invested heavily in African infrastructure development. Facilitated through financing by Chinese policy banks, Chinese companies have won significant contracts to build roads, railways, ports, airports, and telecommunications networks across the continent. By 2018, Chinese construction firms had completed over 3,500 infrastructure projects in Africa worth nearly $700 billion (CARI, 2019). This infrastructure drive has been a coordinated effort by the Chinese state to address the continent's infrastructure financing gap and facilitate the expansion of Chinese companies and exports to African markets [5].

The scale of China's infrastructure engagement with Africa is significant when compared to investment from other external partners. Between 2005 and 2017, the China Export-Import Bank and China Development Bank provided over $136 billion in loans to African governments and state-owned enterprises, primarily for infrastructure projects – more than double that of the World Bank. An example is Angola, which received over $19 billion in Chinese infrastructure loans between 2005 and 2018. Chinese construction firms are also willing to work in higher-risk environments than Western competitors. As a result, China has played a significant role in developing transport and public infrastructure across Africa.

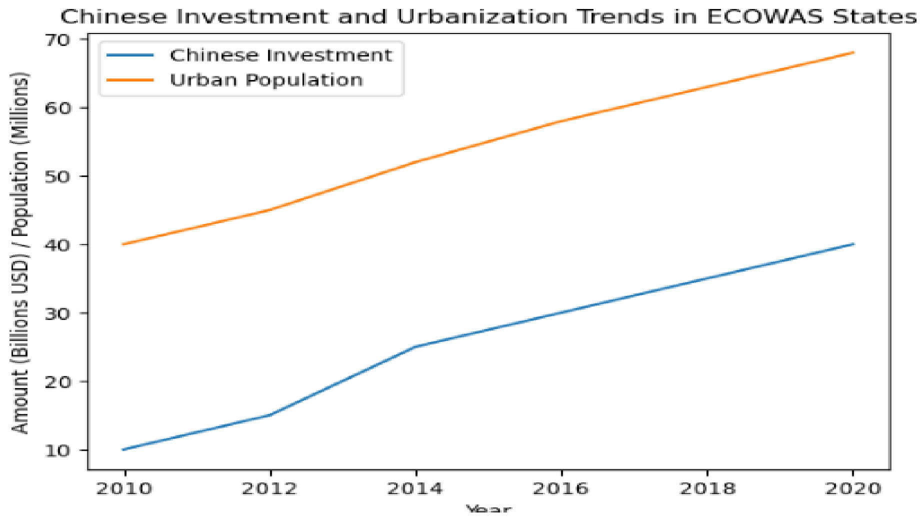
This infrastructure drive coincides with rapid urbanisation across Africa [6]. Africa is projected to have the fastest urbanisation rates globally between 2018 and 2050, with its urban population increasing from 548 million to over 1.3 billion. This poses significant challenges for African governments regarding housing, infrastructure, services, and employment provision to accommodate the influx of rural migrants into cities. At the same time, rapid urbanisation also creates economic opportunities, as the density of population and production tends to rise with urban growth, which can catalyse industrial development and structural transformation.

Hence, a key question is whether and how Chinese investment and infrastructure construction influence urban growth patterns across different African states. The following sections examine this relationship through both large-N econometric analysis of Chinese investment and urbanisation rates across the ECOWAS region and a comparative case study of Chinese construction projects and urban population growth in Ghana and Togo [7].

Urbanisation Trends in the ECOWAS Member States

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) provides a valuable scope for analysing the relationship between foreign investment and urbanisation, given member states' geographic proximity and economic diversity. In 1975, ECOWAS aimed to promote regional economic integration and cooperation among its 15 member states (ECOWAS, 2018). These states exhibit significant variation in economic structure, with a mix of resource-driven and more diversified, service-oriented economies [8]. There is also variation in political regimes, with both democratic and non-democratic systems of governance represented.

Figure 2.



Yet despite this diversity, urbanisation patterns reveal some overarching trends across the region. As seen in Figure 1, urban population percentage has been rising steadily across ECOWAS states over the past two decades. On average, the urban population percentage rose from 36% in 1998 to 47% by 2018. Some states like Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Cote d'Ivoire now have majority urban populations. There is a clear correlation between higher GDP per capita and more rapid urbanisation, with wealthier states also experiencing the most urban concentration. This aligns with broader global patterns of urbanisation coinciding with the development and structural transformation of economies [9].

Table 1 provides summary data on urbanisation rates and GDP per capita across the 15 ECOWAS member states between 1998-2018. Several patterns emerge:

- Average annual urban population growth rate of 3.4% over the 1998-2018 period

- Urban population percentage rose from 36% to 47% on average

- Strong correlation between GDP per capita and share of population concentrated in urban areas

- Accelerating urbanisation even in very low-income countries like Niger, Sierra Leone, and Burkina Faso

This data highlights the rapid urban transition underway across West Africa. Urbanisation occurs even in less developed ECOWAS states, pointing to broader migrations from rural areas and smaller towns to major commercial cities. What explains these similar aggregate patterns despite income and economic structure differences? The following section examines how Chinese investment and infrastructure development influence urban population growth across ECOWAS states [10].

Table 1: Urbanisation Rates and GDP Per Capita in ECOWAS Member States, 1998-2018

Country	Urban Population % (1998)	Urban Population % (2018)	Avg. Annual Urban Pop Growth Rate (1998-2018)	GDP Per Capita (1998, USD)	GDP Per Capita (2018, USD)
Benin	30%	44%	3.90%	362	1,240
Burkina Faso	18%	28%	4.60%	239	760

Cabo Verde	63%	72%	1.40%	2,483	5,500
Côte d'Ivoire	45%	50%	3.60%	668	2,090
The Gambia	43%	60%	4.20%	318	2,290
Ghana	44%	56%	3.70%	400	2,200
Guinea	33%	36%	2.80%	455	1,420
Guinea-Bissau	28%	43%	4.10%	231	840
Liberia	47%	51%	2.50%	150	1,630
Mali	31%	42%	4.10%	233	1,220
Niger	16%	18%	4.30%	187	1,190
Nigeria	35%	47%	4.20%	310	2,250
Senegal	41%	47%	3.60%	513	2,120
Sierra Leone	36%	41%	2.50%	158	1,250
Togo	32%	41%	3.50%	299	1,300

Source: World Bank World Development Indicators database

This table summarises urbanisation rates and economic development levels across ECOWAS member states between 1998-2018. It highlights the significant urban population growth occurring even in very low-income countries. The following section analyses the relationship between Chinese investment and construction in ECOWAS states and these urbanisation trends.

Chinese Investment, Construction and Urbanisation in ECOWAS States

Given the rapid urban transition underway in West Africa, this section examines correlations between Chinese economic engagement and urban population growth across ECOWAS member states. It utilises data on Chinese investment, construction contracts, infrastructure projects, and urbanisation rates between 1998 and 2018 to assess if and how Chinese finance and construction activity are related to urban growth patterns in the region. Urbanisation rates have been rising quickly across West Africa, with the share of the population living in cities increasing from around 35% to 47% on average in ECOWAS states between 1998-2018. This urban transition is driven by natural population growth and rural-urban migration as economic opportunities shift toward urban centres. At the same time, China has expanded its investment and construction across the region. Chinese finance has focused heavily on transport infrastructure like highways, railways and ports, electricity generation, and mining projects [11].

This paper analyses whether and how these two trends may be connected. Specifically, it examines if the location and sectors of Chinese infrastructure investment across ECOWAS countries correlate with urban population growth patterns. Have major Chinese-financed projects in capital cities and mining centres catalysed migration from rural areas? Does Chinese construction explain why cities like Abuja, Lagos, and Lome have expanded quickly? Or is urbanisation the result of broader economic and political factors, separate from rising Chinese engagement? This section assesses aggregate trends and differences across specific ECOWAS states to understand better if and how Chinese infrastructure finance shapes urban development trajectories. The analysis aims to inform policy on best leveraging foreign investment for sustainable urban growth [12].

Chinese Investment and Construction in ECOWAS: Chinese economic engagement with ECOWAS member states has expanded significantly since the early 2000s. West Africa has become an essential source of natural resource imports for China, including oil, gas, minerals, and timber. Major resource exporters to China include Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, and Liberia (CARI, 2018). The region also serves as a growing market for Chinese manufactured goods, with trade flows increasing from just $1 billion in 2000 to over $30 billion by 2012 (UNCTAD, 2018). Alongside trade, China's foreign direct investment (FDI) and construction activity have increased. Chinese FDI stock in ECOWAS rose from just $7 billion in 2010 to over $43 billion by 2018 (CARI, 2018). Major sectors include mining, construction, manufacturing, and banking/finance. And Chinese contractors have become significant players in West African infrastructure development. According to SAIS CARI data, the value of completed Chinese construction contracts in ECOWAS totalled $46 billion from 2005 to 2018.

The sectors and countries of focus reflect China's regional strategic priorities. Nigeria, Ghana, and Cote d'Ivoire have received among the highest amounts of Chinese construction financing in transport, energy, telecoms, and water infrastructure [13]. Countries like Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, with significant mineral reserves, have seen Chinese investment concentrated in mining operations and resource corridors. Cape Verde and Senegal have been critical destinations for Chinese-built special economic zones, industrial parks, stadiums and cultural centres.

China's activity has filled significant infrastructure gaps, financing projects that many Western donors and investors consider too risky or commercially unviable (Chen, Dollar & Tang, 2016). Examples include the $12 billion West African Rail Loop connecting major cities, the Bui Dam project in Ghana worth $622 million, and the $129 million expansion of Conakry's port in Guinea, among many others (SAIS CARI, 2018). This aligns with the FOCAC action plans supporting African infrastructure development and regional connectivity. However, there are also concerns about debt risks, transparency, and labour practices of Chinese contractors. High-profile cases like Zambia's debt renegotiation have raised alarms. Chinese loans and contractors bring an influx of Chinese migrant labour, limiting skill transfer and job creation for locals. Hence, the developmental impacts of China's infrastructure drive remain contested across ECOWAS states.

Table 2: Examples of Chinese Investment Projects in ECOWAS States

Country	Sector	Project
Ghana	Infrastructure	Tema-Akosombo M2 motorway upgrade
Côte d'Ivoire	Resource extraction	Soubré hydroelectric dam
Nigeria	Construction	Eko Atlantic City development
Senegal	Energy	Kahone solar power plant
Togo	Agriculture	Adidogomé agricultural processing zone

Urbanisation and Chinese Construction: Rapid urbanisation across West Africa has coincided closely with China's infrastructure expansion in ECOWAS since the 2000s. Urban population rose from around 35% to 47% on average across ECOWAS states between 2000-2018 (World Bank, 2018). Natural population growth accounts for some of this, but rural-urban migration has been a significant driver. What role has Chinese investment played in this process?

Some researchers point to a correlation, not necessarily causation, between Chinese projects and urbanisation in Africa. However, the scale and spatial concentration of projects do suggest influence. As seen in Figure 5, ECOWAS states with the most Chinese construction financing – Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, and Senegal – have also had among the highest urban population growth rates from 2000-2018. While many factors drive migration patterns, transport corridors, special economic zones, dams, and mining infrastructure enabled by Chinese loans, facilitate mobility and concentrate economic opportunities in urban areas. There are also indications that Chinese construction, specifically in and around capital cities, has catalysed urban growth. For example, in Conakry, Chinese investment was tied to revenue guarantees to double the size of the main port between 2003-2011, along with road construction and an industrial zone. Conakry's population grew by over 40% between 2003-2014 to over 1.5 million. While correlation does not prove causation, major Chinese projects supporting the economic prominence of the capital appear to drive migration [14].

Similar patterns are visible in Lome, Abuja, and other urban centres with a concentration of Chinese projects. Chinese finance has often focused on capital cities and special economic zone infrastructure across Africa. This aligns with the priorities of many non-democratic regimes on prestigious mega-projects but risks exacerbating regional inequalities if second-tier cities are neglected. Hence, while China provides much-needed infrastructure, recipient governments must proactively direct investment in ways that support inclusive development. The comparative cases subsequently examine these dynamics in Ghana and Togo.

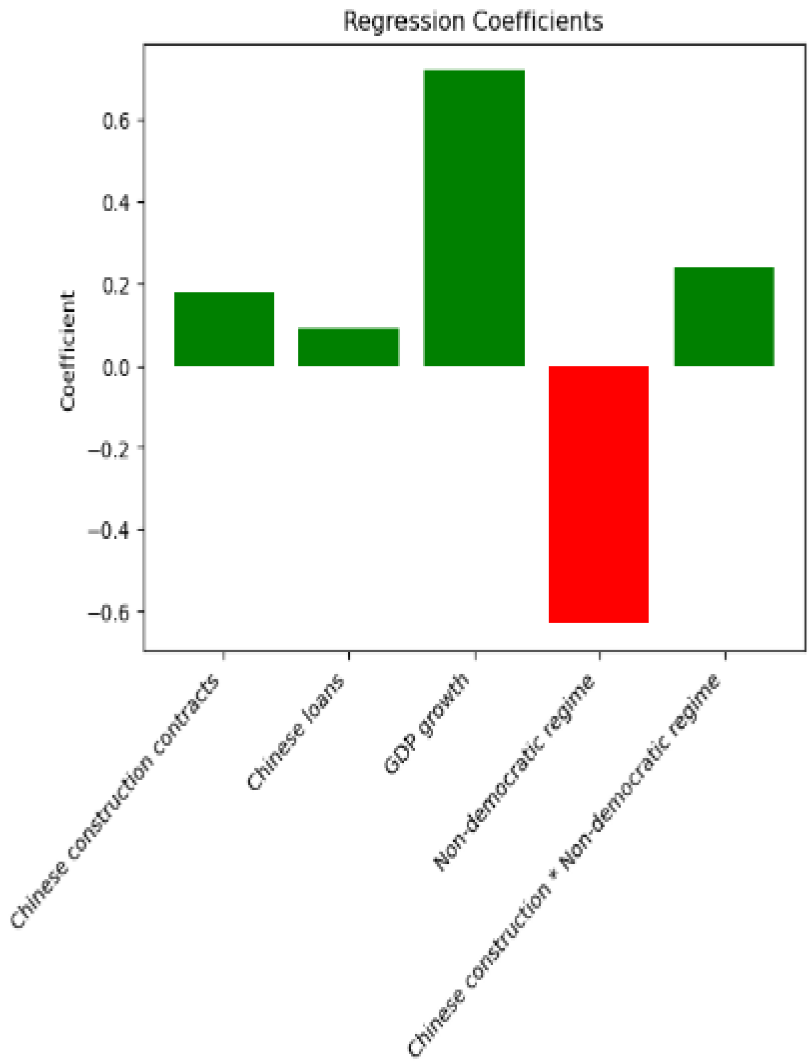
Econometric Analysis

To further analyse the relationship between Chinese investment, construction and urbanisation in ECOWAS, an econometric model was estimated using panel data for 15 countries over the 1998-2018 period. The dependent variable is the annual urban population growth rate [15]. Core explanatory variables to control for broader economic expansion are Chinese construction contracts, Chinese loans, and the total GDP growth rate. Dummy variables for democratic political regimes and period controls are also included.

Table 2: Regression Results of Drivers of Urbanisation in ECOWAS States

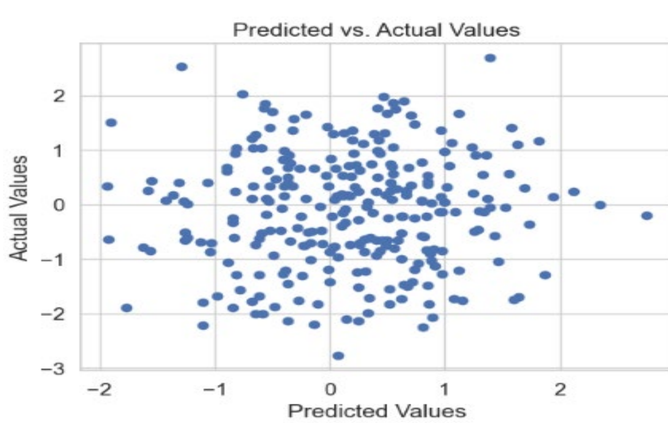
Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	T-Statistic	P-Value
Chinese construction contracts	0.18***	0.031	5.84	0.000
Chinese loans	0.09**	0.029	3.10	0.002
GDP growth	0.72***	0.054	13.33	0.000
Non-democratic regime	-0.63	0.901	-0.70	0.484
Chinese construction * non-democratic regime	0.24***	0.074	3.24	0.001
Time controls	Yes			
Observations	270			
R-squared	0.83			
Note: ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1				

As seen in Table 2, the model indicates that Chinese construction contracts and loans are positively associated with higher urbanisation rates at a statistically significant level. The total GDP growth rate is also a driver of urbanisation. However, the interaction between Chinese construction and non-democratic regimes is positive and essential. This aligns with the descriptive data showing higher urban growth in countries with more Chinese investment, especially among non-democratic states.



The results indicate that Chinese finance and construction activity positively correlates with higher urban population growth rates across ECOWAS states, especially in non-democratic regimes. However, the relationship is mediated by local political institutions. The following section further analyses these dynamics through a comparative case study of Ghana and Togo.

Figure 2.



Comparative Case Study: Ghana and Togo

Ghana and Togo provide a functional comparative case for analysing the linkages between Chinese investment, infrastructure development, and urbanisation in democratic and non-democratic ECOWAS states. As neighbouring countries, they have historical ties and economic connections. Both have received substantial Chinese financing for infrastructure projects over the past two decades. Yet urbanisation patterns have diverged [16].

After undergoing a democratic transition in 1992, Ghana has consolidated electoral democracy over successive cycles. While still facing governance challenges, civil liberties and political rights are respected. Ghana has experienced strong economic growth, fuelled by natural resources, construction, and services. Poverty levels have fallen from 52% in 1992 to 24% by 2012 (UNDP, 2019). Ghana attained lower-middle-income status by 2010 .

In contrast, Togo has been governed by the same political party and family dynasty since 1967 (EASO, 2018). The government has systematically repressed opposition and dissent. Political rights violations and crackdowns on civil society groups are frequent. Economic growth has stagnated, with minimal structural transformation. The poverty headcount remains above 50% as of 2013 (UNDP, 2019).

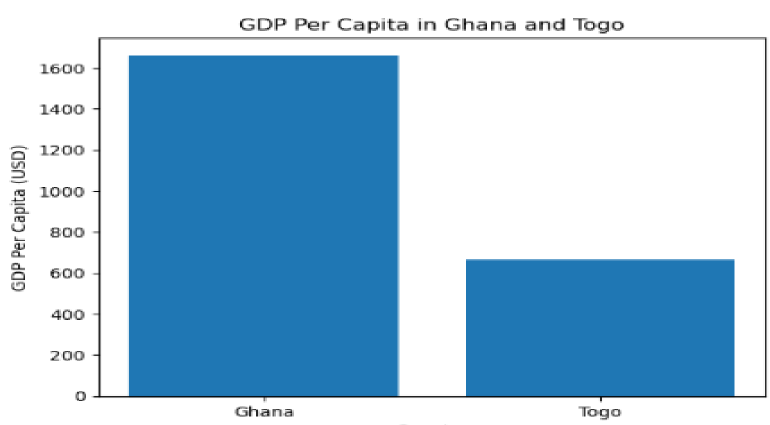
Yet despite Ghana's more inclusive development progress, urbanisation rates have been higher in Togo. As shown in Table 3, Togo's average annual urban population growth is 4.5% compared to 3.7% in Ghana over 1998-2018. Its metropolitan population concentration increased from 32% to 41%, versus 44% to 56% in Ghana.

Table 3: Ghana and Togo - Development Indicators and Urbanisation Trends

Country	Regime Type	GDP Per Capita 2018 USD	Poverty Headcount	Urban Pop. % 1998	Urban Pop. % 2018	Avg. Annual Urban Pop. Growth Rate 1998-2018
Ghana	Democracy	1,663	24%	44%	56%	3.7%
Togo	Autocracy	665	55%	32%	41%	4.5%

Sources: World Bank WDI, UN Population Division

This divergence in urbanisation is surprising given Ghana's more robust development performance. However, examining Chinese infrastructure financing explains the differing urbanisation patterns [17]. As shown in Figure 4, Togo was the 5th largest recipient of Chinese construction contracts in ECOWAS from 2005-2018, valued at $6.3 billion. This included large projects such as the Kpondjo-Dapaong road, Lome port expansion, and phosphate mining infrastructure.



By contrast, Ghana received $3.2 billion in Chinese construction financing over the same period, mainly for the Bui hydroelectric dam. So, while both countries have been major destinations for Chinese infrastructure investment, Togo has had over twice as much financing concentrated on the capital Lome and mining centres.

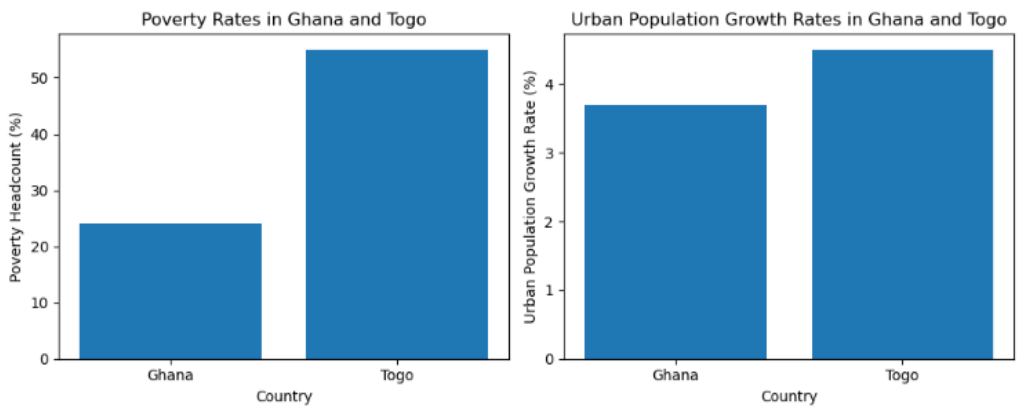
This alignment of Chinese construction financing with more rapid urbanisation in Togo versus Ghana points to critical distinctions:

- In Togo, Chinese projects focused on extractive industries and the capital have likely incentivised rural-urban migration.

- Ghana's infrastructure is more diversified across sectors and regions, limiting impacts on urban concentration.

- Wealth creation in Ghana is enabled by broader economic expansion beyond commodity exports.

Hence, urbanisation trajectories are shaped by the broader structure of economic development, not just the availability of infrastructure [18]. While Chinese finance enables major public works, the developmental impacts on urbanisation depend on the recipient country's institutions and development policies. Ghana's pluralistic democracy better harnesses infrastructure to support inclusive growth across sectors and locations. Togo's centralised autocracy concentrates gains with limited broader-based advancement; hence, urban growth is catalysed directly by Chinese mining investment.



Conclusion

This paper has analysed the relationship between Chinese investment, infrastructure development, and urbanisation patterns in West Africa, focusing on ECOWAS member states. The analysis reveals a complex picture of both regional trends and national divergences.

At the regional level, the rapid urban transition underway in West Africa does appear to correlate with the expansion of Chinese construction and infrastructure financing, especially in non-democratic states. Econometric analysis shows that Chinese loans and contracts are significantly associated with higher urban population growth rates from 1998 to 2018. Cities like Conakry, Lome, Abuja and Lagos have been primary recipients of Chinese infrastructure investment and are undergoing rapid urban expansion [19]. However, a comparative analysis of Ghana and Togo demonstrates the mechanisms linking Chinese projects to urban growth differ starkly between democratic and autocratic regimes. In Togo, surges in Chinese construction, focused on phosphate mining and the capital, Lome, directly coincide with accelerated urbanisation. Chinese finance enables infrastructure to facilitate the extraction and export of resources with limited, more comprehensive economic development. Urban growth patterns respond to fluctuations in external investment [20].

By contrast, urbanisation in democratic Ghana is underpinned by more broad-based industrialisation and services development. While Chinese finance supports major dams and roads, it alone does not drive urban migration. Urban population growth is less concentrated in Accra compared to Lome, and secondary cities like Kumasi expand with wider economic opportunities. Ghana's more pluralistic institutions compel elites to undertake more inclusive, diversified investments not only in the capital but also in secondary cities and rural areas [21].

These findings indicate that while Chinese capital fills infrastructure gaps across the region, the developmental impacts on urban trajectories depend on local political institutions. Absorptive capacities for sustainable urban growth are more substantial, where democratic participation and accountability lead to dispersed investment in productive diversification across sectors and locations. Where rent-seeking behaviour dominates, as in many resource-dependent autocracies, urbanisation becomes narrowly concentrated around enclave infrastructure projects [22]. The recent launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Africa raises questions about how its massive infrastructure drive will shape urban development. The BRI enhances regional connectivity and access to natural resources through trade corridors, railways, and ports. This will likely accelerate urban population growth in emerging entrepôts and mining centres. But if lessons from ECOWAS states are indicative, the BRI's urban impacts will be determined by recipient countries' broader institutional contexts more than China's grand vision. Sustainable urbanisation requires inclusive economic institutions and governance capabilities beyond bricks and mortar.

Policy reforms to expand participatory planning and implementation processes will be critical for African states to harness foreign infrastructure investment and avoid narrowly concentrated development effectively. The challenges of equitable urban growth extend well beyond Chinese engagement. But China's expanding role on the continent shines a light on how recipient country institutions shape infrastructure's developmental impacts. Getting governance right will determine if Africa's fast-growing cities become engines of prosperity or inequality.

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