

Zambia-China Engagement: The Role of Government in Regulating Foreign Investments

AGNES LESLIE

I spent part of summer 2010 guest lecturing at the University of Zambia in the gender studies department and conducting research on the Zambia-China relationship. My visit to Zambia was two-fold. I organized and led a workshop on Women's Empowerment: Problems and Challenges and in conjunction with the gender studies department in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and various women's organizations. The workshop was attended by Member of Parliament, Regina Musokotwane, the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Vincent Chanda, the Director of the Institute of Economic and Social Research, Professor Mubiana Macwan'gi, faculty from various departments, women's organizations and graduate students. Presentations at the workshop included experiences of a female member of parliament in running for parliamentary election, research reports on the challenges female MPs undergo when they run for election, and research analyzing the experiences of women's groups from Botswana and South Africa and what lessons these could provide for women's groups in Zambia.

I also continued researching the impact of Chinese investments on the Zambian economy, workers' conditions, and the environment. Chinese investment in Zambia has grown rapidly since the 1990s when the Zambian government began to privatize its state-controlled enterprises. I spent time touring some of the Chinese-funded industries, studying their impact and conducting in-depth interviews with members of parliament, University of Zambia professors and students, businesses, the media, various government ministries and workers. I also conducted interviews with officials at the Chinese embassy. The embassy officials agreed that some of the problems encoun-



tered by the Chinese in their interactions with Zambians were due to the inadequate preparation and education of the Chinese investors. Some of the investors lacked proper training in human relations and were coming from working environments in China that condoned human rights violations.

The complaints against Chinese investors included failure to adhere to environmental safety standards and workers' protection provisions, casualization of labor to avoid paying benefits, non-adherence to minimum wage requirements, rampant arbitrary dismissals, requiring Zambian employees to work odd hours to avoid paying transport allowances and requiring employees to work without protective gear in dangerous environments. There have been several reports of accidents and deaths in Chinese operated companies. In 2005, 51 people were killed in a Chinese-operated mine. In 2009, five miners including a Chinese national were killed in a Chinese-owned coal mine, due to illegal mining operations under unsafe conditions. An examination of workers' complaints recorded at the Ministry of Labor and Social Services showed an average of 10 complaints against Chinese companies each month from July 2008

to July 2009. The government has closed some manufacturing premises due to their unsafe environments.

The findings point to weakness in government regulation of investors and suggests the need for stronger laws and policies in order to protect Zambian workers and improve their work environments. There is also need for greater involvement of parliament in order to promote stronger laws and regulations and find ways of holding investors accountable. In addition, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security needs to be strengthened to have more staff to ensure that the policies are being implemented. The Zambian government has not been effective in defining the roles of external foreign companies in development and implementing laws and policies which would adequately benefit the country and safeguard the health, security and economic rights of the Zambian workers. Of the people interviewed 31 percent felt that the Chinese investment had a positive impact on the economy. More than 65 percent of the members of parliament felt that the Chinese investments had impacted the Zambian society negatively.

Agnes Leslie is senior lecturer and director of outreach in the Center for African Studies.