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Governance Capacity and Green Conditionality: How African States Navigate Chinese and Western Climate Finance

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***Abstract**: African states face a complex dual challenge: closing a vast climate finance gap while managing increasingly divergent conditionality frameworks imposed by Chinese and Western financiers. This paper examines how governance capacity shapes African states' ability to navigate these contrasting finance models, drawing on qualitative comparative analysis of Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Senegal. Through thematic document analysis of policy frameworks, multilateral reports, and bilateral investment records, the study finds that governance capacity is the decisive variable determining whether African states can extract genuine developmental value from external green finance. Countries with stronger planning institutions, transparent debt management systems, and coordinated climate governance frameworks demonstrate measurably greater ability to leverage multiple financiers strategically, negotiate favorable terms, and enforce local content provisions. The study further finds that both Chinese and Western green conditionality generate structural tensions with African development priorities — but in distinct ways: Western conditionality creates access barriers through procedural complexity, while Chinese implicit conditionality constrains local industrial development through supply chain lock-in. The paper concludes that reforming climate finance architecture — from both Chinese and Western sides — alongside urgent capacity-building investments in African institutions represents the most viable pathway toward a just and effective green transition in Sub-Saharan Africa.*

Keywords: governance capacity, green conditionality, climate finance, China–Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South–South cooperation, green transition

1. Introduction

The architecture of international climate finance is undergoing a profound transformation. For decades, multilateral institutions led by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Western bilateral donors defined the norms, instruments, and conditions under which developing countries could access green investment capital. The emergence of China as a major development financier — channeling an estimated US$4.5 billion annually in climate-related finance to developing countries between 2013 and 2022 — has fundamentally disrupted this landscape (World Resources Institute, 2024). For Sub-Saharan Africa, where climate finance flows increased 48% from US$29.5 billion in 2019/20 to US$43.7 billion in 2021/22 yet still fall drastically short of estimated needs, the arrival of Chinese capital has opened new possibilities while simultaneously generating new governance challenges (Climate Policy Initiative, 2024).

At the heart of this transformation lies a contested concept: conditionality. Western-led institutions have historically attached extensive political, institutional, and procedural conditions to climate finance — requirements that many African governments view as burdensome, paternalistic, and poorly adapted to local development realities (Easterly, 2005; Prizzon et al., 2017). China, by contrast, has promoted a "no political conditionality" model, framing its lending through principles of sovereignty, mutual benefit, and South–South solidarity (Bräutigam, 2020; FOCAC Secretariat, 2024). Yet Chinese finance carries its own implicit conditions — contractor nationality requirements, equipment sourcing constraints, and in some cases resource collateralization — that shape developmental outcomes in ways that are less transparent but no less consequential (Dreher et al., 2021; Meister, 2023).

How do African states navigate these contrasting conditionality frameworks? And to what extent does governance capacity determine success in extracting developmental value from external green finance? These questions are under-researched in the existing literature, which tends to focus on bilateral China–Africa or Western donor–Africa relationships in isolation, rather than examining how African states manage multiple financiers simultaneously. This paper addresses this gap through a qualitative comparative study of four Sub-Saharan African countries — Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Senegal — that vary systematically in governance capacity and financing portfolios.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on conditionality, governance capacity, and climate finance in Africa. Section 3 presents the research design and methodology. Section 4 reports findings across the four case countries. Section 5 discusses broader implications. Section 6 concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conditionality in Development Finance: A Contested History

Conditionality — the practice of attaching policy or governance requirements to development loans and grants — has been one of the most debated concepts in international development since the structural adjustment era of the 1980s. Early critics, including Easterly (2005) and Moyo (2009), argued that externally imposed conditionality undermines recipient country ownership, distorts domestic political economy, and often fails to produce the governance improvements it targets. Subsequent empirical research has produced mixed findings: some studies find that conditionality improves fiscal discipline and institutional quality under specific conditions, while others document unintended negative consequences for social spending and political stability (Dreher et al., 2021; Haglund, 2011).

In the green finance domain, conditionality has taken new forms. The Bretton Woods Project (2024) documents how IMF Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) conditions and World Bank Development Policy Finance instruments increasingly require energy sector reforms — including subsidy removal, utility privatization, and carbon pricing — as preconditions for accessing climate capital. While justified in terms of enabling environments for private green investment, these conditions generate significant political and economic tensions for low-income African governments managing complex social contracts (Bretton Woods Project, 2024; Bhattacharya et al., 2020).

2.2 China's "No Conditionality" Model: Rhetoric and Reality

China's official development finance narrative emphasizes non-interference in recipient country domestic affairs, South–South solidarity, and mutual benefit — principles codified in successive FOCAC action plans (FOCAC Secretariat, 2021, 2024). Scholarly analysis broadly confirms that Chinese loans do not carry explicit political conditionality such as governance reforms, democratic accountability benchmarks, or institutional transparency requirements (Bräutigam & Hwang, 2022; Dreher et al., 2021).

However, Chinese finance is not condition-free. Meister (2023) demonstrates empirically that Chinese loans to African countries carry higher interest rates and shorter maturities than comparable Western multilateral loans, and tend to be more heavily collateralized — often against natural resource export revenues. Additionally, EPC (Engineering, Procurement, and Construction) contract structures typical of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects require the use of Chinese contractors and Chinese-sourced equipment, effectively locking African economies into supply chain relationships that limit local industrial development (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022; Chen & Landry, 2023). These implicit conditions, operating through commercial rather than political channels, have developmental consequences that are less visible but potentially as significant as formal Western conditionality.

2.3 Governance Capacity and Climate Finance Access

A growing body of literature identifies domestic governance capacity as a critical mediating variable in determining development finance outcomes. UNDP (2024) and the Climate Policy Initiative (2024) find that African countries' ability to access and effectively deploy climate finance is significantly constrained by weak institutional frameworks, insufficient technical capacity to prepare bankable project proposals, and inadequate systems for tracking and managing climate expenditure. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa similarly documents that "weak capacity among governments and entities applying for climate finance" and "lack of governance and coordination among relevant agencies" are among the most cited barriers to accessing available climate funds (UNECA, 2024).

Crucially, governance capacity affects not only access to finance but also the terms on which it is received. Alden and Alves (2017) and Taylor (2020) demonstrate that African states with stronger negotiating capacity and clearer development strategies have historically secured more favorable investment terms from both Chinese and Western financiers. Conversely, governments with weak planning capacity and fiscal vulnerability are more likely to accept suboptimal terms under competitive pressure from multiple lenders. This suggests a governance-finance nexus: capacity determines terms, and terms shape developmental outcomes.

2.4 The Multi-Financier Navigation Challenge

Scholarship on African agency in international development finance has grown substantially in recent years. Broich (2021) and Dollar (2023) demonstrate that African states are not passive recipients of external finance but active navigators of a complex multipolar landscape. The African Leaders Nairobi Declaration of 2023 articulated a collective African vision for climate finance reform — calling for reform of eligibility criteria, greater use of direct access modalities, and stronger African representation in global climate governance (African Development Bank, 2023; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2025). Yet the capacity to translate such collective aspirations into bilateral negotiating leverage varies dramatically across the continent's 54 states.

Research on multi-financier navigation remains underdeveloped. Most existing studies focus on bilateral relationships — China and a single African country, or the World Bank and a recipient government — rather than examining how states simultaneously manage multiple creditors with divergent expectations. This paper contributes to filling this gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design, examining four Sub-Saharan African countries — Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Senegal — through a most-different systems logic. The four countries were selected to maximize variation along two key dimensions: governance capacity (measured by composite indicators from the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators and Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance) and financing portfolio composition (the relative balance between Chinese, Western multilateral, and bilateral sources in their green investment portfolios). This design enables assessment of whether governance capacity systematically shapes the quality of outcomes across countries with different financing relationships.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The study draws on a political economy framework integrating three theoretical lenses: development finance theory (conditionality, concessional lending, and aid effectiveness), institutional capacity theory (the role of state institutions in mediating external finance outcomes), and African agency theory (the ability of African states to shape terms of engagement with external partners). Together, these lenses allow systematic analysis of how structural constraints and actor-level capacities interact to produce varied developmental outcomes.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

All data are drawn from secondary sources. Thematic document analysis was applied to: FOCAC summit communiqués (2015–2024); World Bank and IMF country reports for each case; national climate and development strategies; Climate Policy Initiative and UNDP climate finance reports; AidData Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset (v3.0); and peer-reviewed academic literature. Triangulation across source types — official Chinese, Western multilateral, African government, and independent academic sources — is used to identify convergent findings and analytically significant divergences in framing.

4. Findings

4.1 Kenya: High Governance Capacity, Strategic Multi-Financier Navigation

Kenya represents the most institutionally capable case in this study. With a relatively sophisticated National Treasury, established climate finance tracking systems, and a proactive National Climate Change Action Plan, Kenya has demonstrated consistent ability to access and manage multiple financing streams simultaneously (Climate Policy Initiative, 2024). Kenya's green finance portfolio draws on World Bank IDA credits, European Investment Bank loans, and Chinese-financed infrastructure — most notably the standard-gauge railway from Mombasa to Nairobi — as well as pioneering domestic green bond issuances.

Kenya's institutional capacity has enabled strategic navigation of competing conditionality frameworks. When faced with World Bank procedural requirements for its geothermal expansion program, Kenya's Ministry of Finance deployed experienced technical teams capable of meeting safeguard documentation requirements within acceptable timeframes, thereby accessing IDA climate finance without excessive delay (World Bank Group, 2024). Simultaneously, Kenya has maintained active engagement with Chinese financiers for large infrastructure projects where speed is prioritized. The government has, on occasion, successfully negotiated revisions to Chinese contractor provisions, inserting local content requirements into specific project agreements.

However, Kenya is not without vulnerabilities. IMF analyses have flagged rising public debt levels, partly attributable to infrastructure borrowing from Chinese lenders, as a macroeconomic risk (IMF, 2023). The standard-gauge railway, while transformative, has generated controversy over its debt service obligations and the limited employment of Kenyan workers in construction phases. This case illustrates that even relatively high-capacity governance environments do not fully immunize states from the structural risks of external green finance.

4.2 Ghana: Moderate Capacity, Proactive Strategy Under Fiscal Pressure

Ghana presents a case of moderate governance capacity operating under acute fiscal pressure. Following its 2022 sovereign debt crisis and subsequent IMF program, Ghana's ability to access external green finance has been significantly constrained: IMF conditionality restricts additional external borrowing, limiting the government's room to pursue Chinese or Western-financed green projects at scale (IMF, 2023; Republic of Ghana, 2023). This case sharply illustrates how macro-fiscal vulnerability — itself partly a product of prior external borrowing — can collapse the space for multi-financier navigation.

Yet Ghana's National Green Economy Strategy (2023) demonstrates institutional capacity for strategic planning, articulating a clear vision of green industrialization, identifying sector-specific financing gaps, and specifying the role envisaged for different financier types (Republic of Ghana, 2023). Where Ghana has been able to engage Chinese financiers — as in the Bui hydropower extension and industrial park upgrades discussed earlier — the presence of a coherent national strategy has provided negotiating leverage, enabling the inclusion of energy-efficiency and skills-transfer provisions in some project agreements (Africa–China Centre for Policy & Advisory, 2026).

The Ghana case highlights a key structural tension: governance capacity at the technical planning level does not always translate into negotiating capacity at the political level, particularly when fiscal vulnerability reduces the government's outside options. Debt distress effectively converts a nominally multi-financier environment into a de facto monopsony, where the government is dependent on whichever financier is willing to lend under restrictive macro conditions (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; IMF, 2023).

4.3 Ethiopia: Lower Capacity, High Dependence on Chinese Finance

Ethiopia represents a case of lower governance capacity — particularly in the domains of transparency, accountability, and coordination across government agencies — combined with high dependence on Chinese development finance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2025; UNDP, 2024). Chinese enterprises have financed over 2,000 projects worth approximately US$5 billion in Ethiopia, including the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway and major renewable energy installations, making China the dominant external infrastructure financier in the country (China Africa Research Initiative, 2024).

Ethiopia's weaker institutional capacity has several measurable consequences for green finance outcomes. First, limited technical capacity within relevant ministries has historically constrained Ethiopia's ability to access Western climate funds: Green Climate Fund approvals have been slow, and the country's capacity to meet World Bank safeguard requirements has lagged (UNDP, 2024; UNECA, 2024). Second, the limited transparency of Chinese loan terms — combined with restricted domestic capacity for debt portfolio management — has contributed to the accumulation of external liabilities flagged by the IMF as a source of fiscal risk (IMF, 2023). Third, local content provisions in Chinese-financed projects have been inconsistently enforced, limiting technology transfer and employment creation relative to what the scale of investment would theoretically allow (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022).

Nevertheless, Ethiopia's more recent policy moves — including the 2024 ban on fossil-fuel vehicle imports and active negotiation of electric vehicle supply chain partnerships with Chinese manufacturers — suggest an emerging capacity for strategic agency even within governance constraints (Xinhua / FOCAC Secretariat, 2024). This points to a dynamic rather than static relationship between capacity and agency.

4.4 Senegal: Emerging Capacity, Diversified Portfolio Strategy

Senegal represents a case of intermediate and improving governance capacity, with a notably diversified green finance portfolio. The government has successfully accessed financing from the World Bank, European Union, French Development Agency (AFD), and Chinese sources for renewable energy projects — particularly in solar power, where Senegal has become a regional leader (Climate Policy Initiative, 2024). Senegal's PETROSEN strategy for managing new gas revenues includes explicit provisions for channeling a portion of proceeds into green transition investments, illustrating a domestically driven resource governance framework.

Senegal's ability to engage Western climate finance has been supported by investments in institutional capacity: the country has dedicated climate finance tracking systems, a functioning Green Fund coordination unit, and experienced technocrats capable of managing World Bank and GCF procedures (UNDP, 2024). Simultaneously, Senegal has engaged Chinese finance for specific infrastructure priorities — solar industrial zones and power transmission upgrades — while maintaining sufficient leverage to negotiate technology partnership provisions in selected agreements (Africa–China Centre for Policy & Advisory, 2026; Carbon Brief, 2024).

The Senegal case suggests that investment in governance capacity is not merely desirable but strategically transformative: it expands the set of viable financing options, strengthens negotiating leverage, and reduces vulnerability to both Western conditionality traps and Chinese supply chain lock-in.

4.5 Cross-Case Pattern: Governance Capacity as the Decisive Variable

Across the four cases, a consistent pattern emerges: governance capacity — operationalized as the combination of technical planning capacity, debt management systems, negotiating expertise, and inter-agency coordination — is the decisive variable shaping the quality of green finance outcomes. Table 1 summarizes the cross-case comparison.

Table 1: Governance Capacity and Green Finance Navigation Outcomes — Cross-Case Comparison

Country	Governance Capacity Level	Dominant Financier Type	Conditionality Challenge	Evidence of Strategic Navigation	Key Vulnerability
Kenya	High	Mixed (World Bank, China, EIB)	Procedural complexity of Western finance	Local content negotiation; domestic green bonds	Debt sustainability from infrastructure loans
Ghana	Moderate (constrained by debt crisis)	Increasingly IMF-dependent	IMF macro-conditionality limits borrowing space	National Green Economy Strategy; EPC renegotiation	Fiscal vulnerability reduces outside options
Ethiopia	Lower	Chinese-dominant	Supply chain lock-in; transparency gaps	EV import ban; mineral partnership strategy	Debt accumulation; limited technology transfer
Senegal	Intermediate and improving	Diversified	Balancing Western procedures and Chinese implicit conditions	Climate finance tracking; GCF direct access	Gas transition risk; capacity gaps in subnational institutions

Sources: Climate Policy Initiative (2024); UNDP (2024); IMF (2023); China Africa Research Initiative (2024); Republic of Ghana (2023); Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2025); World Bank Group (2024).

5. Discussion

5.1 Rethinking Conditionality: Explicit vs. Implicit

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The findings invite a reconsideration of how conditionality is conceptualized in the climate finance literature. The dominant discourse contrasts Western "high conditionality" with Chinese "no conditionality" — a binary that both sides have strategic interests in maintaining. African governments critical of Western procedures invoke China's accessibility, while Chinese officials promote the sovereignty-respecting character of their model relative to the intrusive demands of Bretton Woods institutions.

The comparative evidence presented here suggests this binary is analytically misleading. Both financing models impose conditions on recipients, but through different mechanisms and with different developmental consequences. Western conditionality operates explicitly through formal loan agreements and policy dialogue, creating access barriers that disproportionately affect lower-capacity states (Bretton Woods Project, 2024; Easterly, 2005). Chinese implicit conditionality operates commercially, through contractor nationality requirements and equipment sourcing constraints, creating developmental barriers that limit the transformation of imported capital into domestic industrial capacity (Bräutigam, 2020; Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022; Meister, 2023). Both forms of conditionality can undermine African development agency; neither is inherently superior or inferior from a developmental standpoint. The key difference is that Western conditionality is more visible and thus more amenable to reform advocacy.

5.2 The Governance-Finance Nexus

The cross-case analysis confirms and extends existing scholarship on the governance-finance nexus. Governance capacity does not merely determine access to climate finance — it shapes the terms, quality, and long-term developmental sustainability of that finance. This finding has significant implications for both research and policy.

For research, it argues against treating "Chinese finance" or "Western finance" as monolithic categories with fixed developmental effects. The same financial instrument — a Chinese Exim Bank concessional loan for a solar project — produces markedly different outcomes in Kenya (where strong procurement institutions enforce local content provisions) and in Ethiopia (where weaker institutions result in import-dependent implementation with limited technology transfer). Developmental impact is co-produced by financier design and recipient governance quality.

For policy, this finding places institutional capacity-building at the center of the climate finance agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa. The African Development Bank's (2024) ten-year strategy recognizes this, emphasizing the need to "increase countries' capacity to access climate finance" as a prerequisite for effective climate action. UNDP (2024) similarly calls for scaling up direct access modalities through strengthened national and subnational institutions. These recommendations find strong empirical support in the comparative evidence presented here.

5.3 Toward a Reform Agenda

The findings point toward a three-level reform agenda. At the international level, Western-led institutions should streamline conditionality frameworks to reduce procedural barriers without compromising environmental and social standards — a balance the Bretton Woods Project (2024) identifies as technically achievable through targeted simplification of safeguard documentation requirements. China should move toward greater transparency in loan terms and actively promote technology transfer provisions as standard elements of green finance packages, consistent with its stated South–South cooperation principles.

At the regional level, the African Union's collective bargaining capacity should be strengthened, enabling African states to coordinate negotiating positions vis-à-vis both Chinese and Western financiers. The Nairobi Declaration (2023) provides a normative foundation; translating it into binding regional frameworks for external finance governance is the next necessary step.

At the national level, the priority is investment in the technical institutions — treasury debt management units, climate finance tracking systems, NDC implementation offices, and environmental impact assessment bodies — that enable strategic multi-financier navigation. The cases of Kenya and Senegal demonstrate that this investment yields significant returns in terms of both access and quality of green finance.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how African states navigate the contrasting conditionality frameworks of Chinese and Western climate financiers, finding that governance capacity is the decisive variable shaping outcomes. The comparative analysis of Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Senegal reveals a consistent pattern: states with stronger planning institutions, debt management systems, and negotiating capacity are better positioned to access diverse financing streams, negotiate favorable terms, and translate external capital into genuine green industrial development.

The paper makes three contributions to existing scholarship. First, it challenges the binary "high conditionality versus no conditionality" framing that dominates both policy discourse and much academic literature, demonstrating that both Chinese and Western finance impose conditions with significant developmental consequences — just through different mechanisms. Second, it reframes the role of African states from passive recipients to active, if unevenly capacitated, navigators of a multipolar financing landscape. Third, it identifies governance capacity-building as the critical policy lever for improving green finance outcomes across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The implications for global climate finance architecture are significant. Closing Africa's green investment gap — estimated at 77% of financing needs — requires not only increasing the volume of available capital but also reforming the conditions under which it is delivered and strengthening the institutions through which it is received. Without parallel progress on all three dimensions, the expanded financing landscape of the post-FOCAC 2024 era risks replicating, in green guise, the developmental asymmetries of earlier aid and investment cycles. Achieving a genuinely just green transition in Sub-Saharan Africa demands that both financiers and African states rise to the governance challenge.

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