

## **LEARNING FROM BEIJING: HOW SIERRA LEONE CAN ADOPT CHINA'S MODEL OF LONG-TERM NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING**

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Received: 16/02/2026

Accepted: 23/02/2026

Published: 28/02/2026

DOI - <https://doi.org/10.61421/IJSSMER.2026.4103>

### **Acronym List**

**ADB**—African Development Bank

**CCP**—Chinese Communist Party

**FOCAC**—Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

**FYP**—Five-Year Plan

**GDP** - Gross Domestic Product

**IMF**—International Monetary Fund

**MoPED**—Ministry of Planning and Economic Development

**MTNDP**—Medium-Term National Development Plan

**NDRC**—National Development and Reform Commission

**SEZ**—Special Economic Zone

**UNDP**—United Nations Development Programme

### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines how Sierra Leone can adapt elements of China's long-term national development planning model to strengthen its development outcomes. Drawing on theories of the developmental state, policy mobility, and South-South cooperation, the study analyzes the institutional mechanisms that underpin China's planning success, particularly the National Development and Reform Commission's coordinating role, the Five-Year Plan formulation process, pilot project experimentation, and results-based cadre evaluation systems. Through comparative analysis of Sierra Leone's current planning landscape, including the Medium-Term National Development Plan and institutional capacity constraints, the research identifies both opportunities and significant challenges for policy transfer. The article argues that while direct replication is neither feasible nor desirable given fundamental differences in political systems and governance structures, Sierra Leone can selectively adapt specific institutional mechanisms to enhance policy coherence and implementation capacity. Key challenges include managing the risks of dependency,

addressing political system differences between multi-party democracy and single-party governance, and navigating potential debt sustainability concerns. The study provides a detailed, phased roadmap with concrete, actionable recommendations spanning short-term (1-3 years), medium-term (4-7 years), and long-term (8+ years) horizons. This research contributes to broader debates on South-South cooperation and policy learning by demonstrating how African nations can engage critically and selectively with Asian development models while maintaining contextual sensitivity and local ownership.

**Keywords:** China development model, long-term planning, Sierra Leone, South-South cooperation, policy transfer, developmental state, institutional capacity

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 1978, China embarked on economic reforms that would transform it from one of the world's poorest nations into its second-largest economy within four decades. Between 1980 and 2020, China averaged annual GDP growth of approximately 9.5%, lifting over 800 million people out of extreme poverty (World Bank, 2022). This development trajectory stands as one of modern history's most remarkable transformations. For developing nations in Africa, particularly those grappling with persistent poverty, weak institutions, and limited implementation capacity, China's experience presents both inspiration and a puzzle: What explains China's success, and what lessons might be transferable to radically different contexts?

Sierra Leone, a West African nation of approximately 8.5 million people, faces development challenges that are both severe and multifaceted. Despite rich mineral resources, including diamonds, rutile, bauxite, and iron ore, Sierra Leone ranks 182nd out of 191 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index (UNDP, 2021). The country's development trajectory has been marked by political instability, a devastating civil war (1991-2002), the Ebola epidemic (2014-2016), and weak institutional capacity that undermines policy implementation. While Sierra Leone has made progress through frameworks such as the Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP), implementation remains inconsistent, policy coherence is weak, and development outcomes fall short of stated objectives (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019).

The gap between Sierra Leone's planning ambitions and implementation capacity represents a critical development challenge. National development plans exist on paper but often lack the institutional mechanisms, political commitment, and continuity necessary for sustained implementation. Electoral cycles incentivize short-term thinking, ministerial fragmentation creates coordination failures, and limited technical capacity constrains effective monitoring and evaluation. Meanwhile, dependency on external actors, particularly international financial institutions, shapes policy priorities in ways that may not always align with locally defined development needs (Mohan & Lampert, 2013).

Against this backdrop, China's growing engagement with Africa, including Sierra Leone, has opened new possibilities for South-South cooperation and policy learning. Chinese development finance, infrastructure projects, and technical assistance now complement traditional Western aid relationships. More fundamentally, China's own development model, characterized by pragmatic experimentation, long-term planning horizons, and state-led coordination, offers potential lessons that differ from orthodox neoliberal prescriptions (Brautigam, 2009; Lin & Wang, 2017). The question is not whether Sierra Leone should or can replicate the China model, but rather how Sierra Leone might critically and selectively adapt specific institutional mechanisms to strengthen its own planning capacity.

China's engagement with Sierra Leone has grown substantially over the past two decades. Major Chinese investments include the Mamamah International Airport, the National Stadium, road construction projects, and telecommunications infrastructure. Chinese companies operate in mining, construction, and retail sectors. Beyond material investments, China offers technical cooperation through training programs, study tours, and knowledge exchanges. These engagements create opportunities for Sierra Leone to learn from Chinese development experience while raising questions about dependency, debt sustainability, and the applicability of Chinese approaches to Sierra Leone's democratic governance context (Aidoo & Hess, 2015).

### **1.1 Research Question and Thesis**

This article addresses the following central research question: How can Sierra Leone adapt elements of China's long-term planning model to improve its development outcomes, considering fundamental contextual differences in political systems, institutional capacity, and economic structure?

The article's central opinion holds that while direct replication of the China model is neither feasible nor desirable, Sierra Leone can selectively adapt specific institutional mechanisms from China's planning system to enhance policy coherence, strengthen implementation capacity, and extend planning horizons beyond electoral cycles. This adaptation must be undertaken critically, with full awareness of political system differences, dependency risks, and the need for local ownership. Success requires a phased approach that builds institutional capacity incrementally while maintaining democratic accountability and avoiding the pitfalls of authoritarian governance structures.

The thesis rests on three foundational arguments. First, effective development planning requires strong institutional mechanisms that transcend electoral cycles and enable policy continuity. China's planning system offers tested approaches to coordination, implementation monitoring, and results accountability that merit examination. Second, policy learning across contexts is possible but requires selectivity, adaptation, and critical engagement rather than wholesale copying. Third, South-South cooperation creates opportunities for alternative development pathways that complement rather than replace relationships with traditional development partners.

### **1.2 Structure of the Article**

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework, engaging with concepts of the developmental state, policy mobility and transfer, and South-South cooperation. Section 3 dissects the mechanics of China's long-term planning model, analyzing institutional architecture, implementation mechanisms, and the political foundations that enable the system. Section 4 examines Sierra Leone's development planning landscape, identifying institutional capacity constraints, political economy factors, and the role of external actors. Section 5 synthesizes these analyses to explore opportunities and challenges for adaptation, addressing counterarguments and critiques directly. Section 6 presents a detailed, phased roadmap for policy learning and adaptation with concrete, actionable recommendations. Section 7 concludes by summarizing key findings and suggesting directions for future research.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Understanding how Sierra Leone might learn from China's planning experience requires engagement with three interconnected bodies of literature: developmental state theory, policy mobility and transfer, and South-South cooperation. These theoretical frameworks provide

analytical tools for assessing what can be learned, how policy ideas travel across contexts, and the specific dynamics of cooperation between developing nations.

## 2.1 The Developmental State

The concept of the developmental state emerged from studies of East Asian economic success, particularly Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Johnson (1982) defined the developmental state as one in which the government plays a strategic, coordinating role in economic development, going beyond merely correcting market failures to actively shaping market outcomes. Developmental states exhibit several characteristics: a capable, insulated bureaucracy with technical expertise; close government-business coordination; selective industrial policy that picks and supports strategic sectors; and long-term planning horizons that extend beyond electoral cycles (Wade, 1990; Amsden, 1989).

China represents a distinctive variant of the developmental state model. Unlike the East Asian newly industrialized countries, which developed under authoritarian regimes that later democratized, China maintains single-party rule while pursuing market-oriented reforms. The Chinese developmental state combines centralized political authority with decentralized economic experimentation, creating what Heilmann (2008) terms 'experimentation under hierarchy.' The state retains strategic control over key sectors while allowing local governments and special economic zones to test policy innovations. This combination of centralized vision-setting with decentralized implementation has enabled China to maintain policy continuity while adapting to changing circumstances (Xu, 2011).

The institutional foundations of China's developmental state include the Communist Party's organizational reach across government, military, state-owned enterprises, and society; a merit-based civil service recruitment system that selects officials through competitive examinations; and performance evaluation mechanisms that tie career advancement to achievement of development targets. These institutions create incentives for long-term planning and effective implementation. The state retains ownership of strategic industries while encouraging private sector development in competitive sectors. This mixed ownership model provides tools for industrial policy while harnessing market competition (Naughton, 2007).

Critics of developmental state theory question its applicability to contemporary Africa. Robinson and White (1998) argue that African states often lack the autonomy, capacity, and technocratic insulation that characterized successful East Asian developmental states. Mkandawire (2001) notes that African developmental states face additional constraints including colonial legacies, ethnic heterogeneity, resource dependence, and conditionality imposed by international financial institutions. Post-colonial African states often inherited weak administrative structures, arbitrary borders that divided ethnic groups, and economies oriented toward primary commodity exports. These legacies shape institutional capacity and constrain development planning in ways that differ from East Asian experiences.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship has explored possibilities for African developmental states that learn from Asian experiences while adapting to local contexts. Edigheji (2010) argues that Africa needs democratic developmental states that combine developmental effectiveness with political pluralism and accountability. This model would retain the state's strategic economic role while ensuring democratic participation in setting development priorities. Lumumba-Kasongo (2015) emphasizes the importance of African agency in defining development paths rather than passively adopting external models. These perspectives inform this article's approach to examining China-Sierra Leone policy learning.

## 2.2 Policy Mobility, Transfer, and Learning

The literature on policy transfer examines how policies, programs, institutions, and ideas developed in one setting are adopted, adapted, or inspire policy-making elsewhere. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) distinguish between voluntary policy transfer, where governments actively seek lessons from elsewhere, and coercive transfer, where external actors impose policies through conditionality. In the context of Sierra Leone and China, the relationship is primarily voluntary, driven by Sierra Leone's search for development models that offer alternatives to orthodox prescriptions. This voluntary character distinguishes China-Africa cooperation from traditional donor relationships characterized by conditionality and structural adjustment programs.

Rose (1991, 1993) developed the concept of 'lesson-drawing' to emphasize the active, selective process through which policy-makers learn from other jurisdictions. Rather than wholesale copying, lesson-drawing involves analyzing whether programs successful elsewhere can work in different contexts, identifying necessary adaptations, and recognizing what cannot be transferred. Rose identifies a spectrum of lesson-drawing from direct copying at one extreme to synthesis of ideas from multiple sources at the other. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding Sierra Leone-China policy learning, as it emphasizes agency, selectivity, and contextual adaptation rather than passive diffusion or imposed templates.

Lesson-drawing requires asking specific questions about transferability. Can a program work in a different context? What adaptations would be necessary? What elements are fundamental to success and what elements are contextually specific? What resources, skills, and institutional arrangements would implementation require? These questions guard against naive transfer attempts while identifying genuine learning opportunities. For Sierra Leone examining China's planning model, these questions focus attention on which specific mechanisms might be adapted and what preconditions their success would require (Rose, 2005).

More recent scholarship on policy mobility emphasizes how policies are actively constructed and transformed as they move across space. Peck and Theodore (2015) argue that policies are 'made' through complex processes involving translation, mutation, and adaptation. Policies are not discrete, bounded entities that can be simply transferred, but rather bundles of ideas, practices, and rationalities that are continuously remade in new contexts. This perspective cautions against viewing China's planning model as a fixed template that can be mechanically applied elsewhere. Instead, it suggests examining which specific elements might be adapted and how they would be transformed in Sierra Leone's distinct institutional environment.

The policy transfer literature also identifies risks and potential failures. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) outline three types of transfer failure: uninformed transfer, where insufficient information about the policy or its operation in the original context leads to inappropriate adoption; incomplete transfer, where crucial elements are not transferred; and inappropriate transfer, where insufficient attention is paid to contextual differences. For Sierra Leone, these risks are substantial given limited information about the internal workings of Chinese planning institutions and fundamental differences in political systems, state capacity, and economic structures. Mitigating these risks requires thorough research, pilot testing, and continuous evaluation of adapted mechanisms.

Stone (2012) highlights the role of transnational policy networks in facilitating transfer. International organizations, consulting firms, think tanks, and professional associations create channels through which policy ideas circulate globally. China has built transnational networks through training programs, study tours, and technical assistance that expose African officials to Chinese development approaches. These networks shape perceptions of what constitutes successful

policy and what options merit consideration. Understanding these networks helps explain how Chinese planning ideas reach Sierra Leone and through what channels further learning might occur.

### **2.3 South-South Cooperation and China-Africa Relations**

South-South cooperation refers to collaboration among developing countries in areas including trade, investment, technical assistance, and knowledge sharing. Distinct from traditional North-South aid relationships, South-South cooperation is characterized by principles of solidarity, mutual benefit, and non-interference in internal affairs (Brautigam, 2011). China has emerged as a leading proponent of South-South cooperation, particularly through initiatives such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) launched in 2000 and the Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013. These frameworks institutionalize China-Africa engagement across trade, investment, infrastructure, and people-to-people exchanges.

China's engagement with Africa differs from traditional Western development assistance in several respects. Chinese development finance often comes with fewer governance conditionalities, focusing on infrastructure and productive sectors rather than social services or governance reforms. Projects frequently follow a tied aid model where Chinese contractors, materials, and labor are employed. China emphasizes state-to-state relations, commercial viability, and mutual benefit rather than aid as charity. For African countries frustrated with Western conditionality and seeking infrastructure investment, China offers an alternative partnership model (Alden, 2007; Taylor, 2009).

The principles underlying Chinese engagement with Africa include respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; diverse forms of cooperation including concessional loans, commercial credits, and direct investment; and win-win outcomes where both parties gain. These principles resonate with African sensibilities shaped by colonial history and frustration with Western conditionality. They provide ideological foundations for South-South cooperation that African governments reference when defending partnerships with China against Western criticism (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

Scholarship on China-Africa relations has evolved from initial focus on resource extraction to more nuanced analyses of diverse engagements including trade, investment, infrastructure, technical cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. Brautigam (2009) challenges simplistic narratives of Chinese neo-colonialism, documenting how Chinese engagement responds to African demands and operates through negotiated partnerships. She demonstrates that African governments exercise agency in defining terms of engagement, contradicting portrayals of passive African states overwhelmed by Chinese influence. African governments bargain over contract terms, project specifications, and financing conditions, achieving varied outcomes based on their negotiating capacity.

More critical perspectives highlight concerns about debt sustainability, environmental impacts, labor practices, and limited technology transfer. Carmody (2013) examines how Chinese engagement reproduces patterns of dependency and resource extraction characteristic of earlier colonial relationships. Lee (2017) documents labor tensions in Chinese-managed projects where African workers face poor conditions and limited skill transfer. Large (2008) analyzes how Chinese arms sales and diplomatic support enable authoritarian regimes in Sudan and Zimbabwe, contradicting claims of non-interference and mutual benefit. These critiques emphasize the need for African countries to engage with China critically, maximizing benefits while managing risks.

Within this broader China-Africa relationship, knowledge transfer and policy learning remain understudied. Most research examines financial flows, trade, and infrastructure projects rather than

institutional learning or planning capacity development. Exceptions include Gu (2009) on agricultural technology transfer, King (2013) on education cooperation, and Harman and Brown (2013) on health systems collaboration. This article addresses the knowledge transfer gap by analyzing how specific planning mechanisms, rather than just material resources, might inform African development strategies. This focus on institutional learning reflects recognition that sustainable development requires not just external resources but also enhanced domestic capacity for policy formulation, coordination, and implementation.

## **2.4 Theoretical Framework for Analysis**

This article synthesizes these theoretical perspectives to analyze Sierra Leone-China policy learning. From developmental state theory, it draws attention to the institutional foundations of successful development planning, including bureaucratic capacity, state-business coordination, and long-term orientation. The framework recognizes that China's developmental state model cannot be directly replicated in Sierra Leone's democratic context but that specific institutional mechanisms merit examination for potential adaptation.

From policy transfer literature, it adopts awareness of the complexities, risks, and potential failures of cross-national lesson-drawing, emphasizing the need for selectivity and adaptation. The framework distinguishes between elements of China's planning system that depend on single-party rule and those that could function within democratic governance. It recognizes that successful adaptation requires thorough understanding of both the Chinese context and Sierra Leone's distinct institutional environment, political economy, and development challenges.

From South-South cooperation scholarship, it recognizes both the opportunities that China-Africa partnerships create for alternative development pathways and the need for critical engagement that avoids dependency and maintains local ownership. The framework treats policy learning as an active process where Sierra Leone exercises agency in selecting, adapting, and implementing lessons from Chinese experience rather than passively receiving external models.

Together, these frameworks inform analysis of what Sierra Leone might learn from China, how that learning might occur, and what challenges must be navigated in the process. They provide conceptual tools for distinguishing between politically feasible and infeasible adaptations, identifying prerequisites for successful implementation, and anticipating potential failures. The framework emphasizes selectivity, phased implementation, continuous evaluation, and democratic accountability as essential principles for policy learning.

## **3.0 THE MECHANICS OF THE CHINESE LONG-TERM PLANNING MODEL**

Understanding what Sierra Leone might learn from China requires moving beyond general descriptions of Chinese success to analyze specific institutional mechanisms that enable long-term planning. This section examines the architecture, processes, and political foundations of China's planning system, focusing on transferable elements rather than aspects unique to China's political system.

### **3.1 Institutional Architecture: The National Development and Reform Commission**

At the center of China's planning system sits the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), a powerful agency that coordinates macroeconomic policy, formulates national development strategies, and oversees implementation of Five-Year Plans. Established in 2003 through merger of the State Planning Commission and State Development Planning Commission, the NDRC employs approximately 1,000 staff in Beijing headquarters plus thousands more in

provincial and local offices. The organization spans 26 functional departments covering sectors from agriculture and industry to climate change and regional development (Heilmann & Shih, 2013).

The NDRC's coordinating power derives from several sources. First, it controls approval of major investment projects above specified thresholds, giving it leverage over ministries, provinces, and state-owned enterprises. No large infrastructure project, industrial investment, or urban development initiative proceeds without NDRC approval. Second, it has authority to draft comprehensive national plans that bind other government agencies. The Five-Year Plans it produces set priorities and targets that guide ministerial budgets and provincial strategies. Third, it employs highly educated technocrats with expertise spanning economics, engineering, and policy analysis. Recruitment emphasizes advanced degrees from top universities and technical competence. Fourth, strong Communist Party connections ensure political backing for its coordination role. The NDRC director typically holds ministerial rank and Party Central Committee membership (Naughton, 2010).

The NDRC's structure balances functional and sectoral responsibilities. Functional departments handle macroeconomic planning, investment management, pricing policy, and plan monitoring. Sectoral departments cover agriculture, industry, services, and social development. Regional departments address development of western regions, northeast revitalization, and coordinated coastal development. This structure enables both comprehensive integration across sectors and specialized expertise in particular areas. Regular meetings bring together departments to coordinate positions and resolve conflicts.

Several features of the NDRC's structure merit attention as potential adaptations for Sierra Leone. The agency combines horizontal coordination across sectors with vertical integration from national to local levels. It maintains both strategic vision-setting capacity and detailed implementation oversight. It employs technical experts rather than political appointees in key analytical roles. It possesses formal authority to convene inter-ministerial meetings and resolve coordination problems. While Sierra Leone cannot replicate the NDRC's scale or political power, elements of its coordinating architecture could inform institutional reforms. A strengthened Ministry of Planning and Economic Development with enhanced convening authority, technical capacity, and project approval powers could perform analogous coordination functions within Sierra Leone's governance system.

### **3.2 The Five-Year Plan Formulation Process**

China's Five-Year Plans (FYPs) represent the cornerstone of its long-term planning system. Since the First FYP (1953-1957), these plans have provided medium-term frameworks for economic and social development. Contemporary FYPs combine binding targets for key indicators with guidance for sectoral development and regional coordination. The 14th FYP (2021-2025) spans over 150 pages detailing objectives across economic growth, innovation, rural development, urbanization, environmental protection, and social welfare. The formulation process typically spans two to three years and involves extensive consultation, research, and political negotiation (Kostka & Hobbs, 2012).

The FYP formulation process follows a structured sequence. It begins approximately three years before plan adoption with research and assessment led by the NDRC and academic institutions. Research teams analyze achievements and challenges from the previous plan period, examining which targets were met, which fell short, and what factors influenced outcomes. They conduct

surveys, collect data, and consult experts to understand economic trends and development challenges. This evidence gathering informs identification of priorities for the coming plan period.

Based on research findings, the NDRC drafts preliminary proposals outlining strategic priorities and key targets. These proposals identify major challenges facing China's development, propose responses, and suggest quantitative targets for indicators ranging from GDP growth to carbon intensity reduction. The preliminary proposals circulate among central ministries, provincial governments, Party organs, and research institutions for comment and revision. This consultation process can involve hundreds of meetings as different stakeholders advocate for their priorities and negotiate compromises on targets and resource allocation.

Provincial governments submit proposals outlining their regional development plans, which must align with national priorities while addressing local conditions. Ministries advocate for sectoral objectives and resources. The NDRC synthesizes these inputs, balancing competing demands while ensuring overall coherence. Tensions often arise between growth and environmental protection, between coastal and inland development, between consumption and investment. Resolving these tensions requires political judgment about priorities and trade-offs.

Public consultation mechanisms, while limited compared to democratic systems, provide channels for input from businesses, think tanks, and citizens. The draft plan is published for public comment, soliciting feedback on priorities and concerns. Business associations submit recommendations on policies affecting their sectors. Think tanks produce analyses and proposals. While this consultation does not give civil society veto power, it creates opportunities for input that can shape plan content. The NDRC reviews comments and incorporates some suggestions into revised drafts.

The draft plan undergoes review by the State Council, China's cabinet, where ministers debate and approve the document. Final approval comes from the National People's Congress, conferring political legitimacy and legal force. Congressional delegates discuss the plan, propose amendments, and vote on adoption. While the Congress is not an independent legislature, its approval ritual signals leadership consensus and national commitment. Once approved, the plan guides policy-making across government levels and sectors for the five-year period.

The content of FYPs has evolved significantly over time. Early plans emphasized quantitative production targets for heavy industry in the command economy era. Contemporary plans balance economic growth with social development, environmental sustainability, and technological innovation. The 14th FYP emphasizes high-quality development, indigenous innovation, and rural revitalization while setting binding targets for carbon intensity reduction and energy efficiency. This evolution reflects learning from past mistakes, including the environmental costs of rapid growth and the limitations of command planning. Modern FYPs distinguish between binding targets that must be achieved and indicative targets that provide guidance without legal force, allowing flexibility in implementation (NDRC, 2021).

Key features of FYP formulation relevant for Sierra Leone include: structured timelines that begin research years before plan adoption; systematic assessment of previous plan implementation to inform new objectives; multi-level consultation that integrates national, sectoral, and local perspectives; distinction between binding targets that must be achieved and indicative targets that provide guidance; and formal legislative approval that confers legitimacy and accountability. While Sierra Leone's Medium-Term National Development Plan operates on a similar five-year timeframe, it lacks the systematic formulation process, binding implementation mechanisms, and institutionalized feedback loops that characterize Chinese FYPs. Adapting elements of this process could strengthen Sierra Leone's planning quality and implementation.

### 3.3 Experimentation and Pilot Projects

A distinctive feature of Chinese governance is systematic use of pilot projects and policy experimentation before national rollout. Rather than implementing reforms uniformly across the country, the Chinese government typically designates specific localities or sectors as experimental sites. Successful experiments are scaled up while failures are contained locally. This approach, termed 'experimentation under hierarchy,' allows policy learning while limiting risks. It reflects pragmatism captured in Deng Xiaoping's famous phrase 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' (Heilmann, 2008; Ang, 2016).

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) exemplify this experimental approach. Beginning with Shenzhen in 1980, SEZs created controlled environments for testing market reforms, foreign investment policies, and new administrative procedures. Shenzhen received special authorization to offer tax incentives, streamline business registration, and allow foreign ownership at levels prohibited elsewhere. The SEZ's success in attracting investment and generating growth led to replication in Zhuhai, Shantou, Xiamen, and later across coastal regions. Over four decades, SEZs have evolved into comprehensive reform laboratories testing innovations in areas ranging from free trade to environmental regulation (Zeng, 2010).

Similar experimentation has occurred across policy domains. Environmental regulation innovations were tested in select cities before national adoption. Social insurance reforms piloted in some provinces informed nationwide programs. Land tenure reforms experimented with in specific counties shaped national land policy. Fiscal reforms giving local governments more autonomy were tested in Guangdong before broader application. This pattern of local experimentation followed by selective diffusion characterizes Chinese reform strategy.

The pilot project approach offers several advantages relevant for Sierra Leone. It allows testing policies on a manageable scale before committing resources nationally. Pilots generate evidence about what works in local contexts rather than relying on foreign models or theoretical assumptions. They create space for adaptation and refinement based on implementation experience. They limit political costs of policy failure by containing experiments geographically. They enable cross-regional learning as different localities experiment with variations of similar reforms. For a resource-constrained country like Sierra Leone, piloting reforms before national rollout could improve policy effectiveness while managing implementation risks.

Heilmann (2008) identifies conditions enabling successful experimentation in China. Political leaders provide protective space for experiments, shielding pilot sites from conservative bureaucrats who oppose change. Central authorities grant experimental localities regulatory flexibility and additional resources. Pilot results receive systematic evaluation to inform scaling decisions. Successful experiments generate demonstration effects that build support for broader adoption. These conditions suggest prerequisites for applying experimental approaches in Sierra Leone: political commitment to reform, regulatory flexibility for pilot sites, resources for implementation, and evaluation capacity to assess outcomes.

However, the pilot approach also faces limitations. Experiments work when conditions in pilot sites resemble broader contexts where policies will be scaled. When pilot sites have unique characteristics, success may not transfer. Political selection of pilot locations can bias results toward areas with stronger capacity. Experiments require time to generate results, creating delays in addressing urgent problems. Local officials may manipulate outcomes to demonstrate success and win promotion. Despite these limitations, the approach remains valuable for testing significant reforms before full implementation.

### 3.4 Cadre Evaluation and Performance Incentives

A critical but often overlooked mechanism linking planning to implementation in China is the cadre evaluation system. Local officials' career advancement depends substantially on achieving targets specified in development plans. The Communist Party's Organization Department evaluates provincial, municipal, and county leaders against quantitative and qualitative criteria drawn from FYPs and higher-level directives. This creates powerful incentives for policy implementation aligned with planning priorities. Officials who achieve or exceed targets win promotion; those who consistently fall short face demotion or removal (Whiting, 2004; Edin, 2003).

The evaluation system works through regular performance assessments using scorecards that track indicator achievement. Indicators include economic growth, fiscal revenue, social stability, environmental quality, and specific development objectives from plans and directives. Quantitative targets receive numerical scores based on achievement levels. Qualitative assessments evaluate leadership, innovation, and problem-solving. Annual evaluations accumulate into performance records that determine promotion, demotion, or lateral transfer. High performers advance to more prestigious positions; poor performers face career stagnation or removal.

The system has evolved over time in response to perverse incentives and changing priorities. Early emphasis on GDP growth targets encouraged local officials to maximize economic growth at the expense of environmental protection, social welfare, and fiscal sustainability. Officials pursued growth through any means, including environmentally destructive factories, unsustainable debt, and falsified statistics. Recognition of these problems led to reforms incorporating environmental indicators, energy efficiency, social stability, and public satisfaction into evaluation criteria. The 13th and 14th FYPs increased weight on environmental protection, innovation, and quality of life indicators relative to GDP growth (Kostka & Hobbs, 2012).

Recent reforms have added veto indicators that can disqualify officials regardless of other achievements. Serious environmental accidents, major social stability incidents, or severe corruption scandals trigger vetoes. This creates strong incentives to avoid catastrophic failures even while pursuing ambitious targets. The reforms also increased emphasis on long-term sustainability over short-term results, evaluating officials on outcomes that persist beyond their tenure rather than temporary achievements that collapse after they leave.

Key features of the cadre evaluation system include: clear performance indicators derived from development plans; systematic monitoring and data collection to track indicator achievement; consequences for performance, including career advancement for success and demotion for failure; regular revision of evaluation criteria to reflect changing priorities; and combination of quantitative metrics with qualitative assessments. The system aligns bureaucratic incentives with plan objectives, creating motivation for effective implementation that extends beyond nominal compliance.

While Sierra Leone operates in a multi-party democratic system where electoral accountability rather than Party discipline determines political survival, elements of results-based performance management could strengthen implementation of development plans. Civil service reform that links promotion and compensation to achievement of plan targets could create stronger incentives for effective policy implementation. Performance contracts between ministers and the president specifying measurable objectives could enhance accountability. Regular performance reviews with consequences for career advancement could motivate focus on plan implementation rather than just political survival.

However, adapting this system requires careful attention to context. In democratic systems, elected officials answer primarily to voters, not central authorities. Evaluation systems must complement electoral accountability rather than supersede it. Technical civil servants rather than political appointees are appropriate subjects for performance management. Indicators must be carefully selected to avoid perverse incentives, with emphasis on outcomes rather than just outputs. Transparent evaluation processes and published results enable public accountability. These adaptations could capture benefits of results-based management while respecting democratic governance.

### **3.5 Political and Ideological Foundations**

The institutional mechanisms described above operate within a distinctive political context that enables long-term planning but also raises questions about transferability. The Chinese Communist Party's monopoly on political power allows planning continuity across leadership transitions. While individual leaders change, the Party maintains institutional memory and commitment to long-term objectives. Policies initiated by one administration continue under successors, providing stability that enables multi-year initiatives. The lack of electoral competition for national leadership eliminates pressures for short-term policy changes to win votes. Leaders can pursue reforms with long gestation periods without fear of losing power before seeing results (Huang, 2008; Pei, 2006).

Centralized political authority enables coordination across levels of government and enforcement of plan targets. The Party's organizational hierarchy parallels government structure, with Party committees at each level overseeing government bodies. This dual structure facilitates coordination and ensures that local governments implement central directives. Party discipline mechanisms, including inspection teams and anti-corruption campaigns, enforce compliance with central policies. Local officials who ignore central directives risk Party sanctions regardless of their government position.

Ideological foundations also matter. The Party maintains commitment to socialist ideology emphasizing collective welfare, state guidance of development, and long-term planning. While China has adopted market mechanisms extensively, ideological discourse continues to emphasize the state's role in directing development toward shared prosperity. This ideological commitment legitimizes active state intervention in ways that differ from liberal market ideologies dominant in the West. It provides normative foundations for planning and industrial policy that might appear interventionist in other contexts.

These political foundations differ fundamentally from Sierra Leone's multi-party democracy with competitive elections, checks and balances, and political pluralism. Democratic systems create different incentive structures for politicians, who must respond to voters and win elections to retain power. Electoral cycles create pressures for visible results within short timeframes. Political competition enables opposition parties to criticize and block government initiatives. Constitutional constraints limit executive authority over policy. These features provide important democratic accountability but complicate long-term planning.

The challenge for Sierra Leone is identifying which planning mechanisms can function effectively within democratic governance structures and which depend on authoritarian political control. Some mechanisms appear transferable with adaptation. Strengthening technical planning agencies, systematizing plan formulation processes, piloting reforms before national implementation, and evaluating civil servant performance based on results do not require authoritarian governance. Other mechanisms depend on single-party discipline and centralized authority that are neither

possible nor desirable in democratic contexts. The next sections explore these questions of feasibility and desirability directly.

#### **4.0 SIERRA LEONE'S DEVELOPMENT PLANNING LANDSCAPE**

To assess how Sierra Leone might learn from China's planning experience, we must first understand Sierra Leone's current planning framework, institutional capacity, and political economy constraints. This section analyzes Sierra Leone's development planning landscape, identifying both achievements and persistent challenges that adaptation of Chinese approaches would need to address.

##### **4.1 Current Planning Frameworks**

Sierra Leone's current planning framework centers on the Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2024-2030, which succeeded the previous MTNDP 2019-2023 (Government of Sierra Leone, 2024). The plan identifies five strategic clusters: human capital development, economic diversification and competitiveness, infrastructure and economic corridors, governance and accountability, and social inclusion and empowerment. Each cluster contains specific objectives, targets, and implementing ministries. On paper, the plan demonstrates sophisticated understanding of development challenges and international best practices.

Institutional responsibility for planning resides primarily in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED). MoPED coordinates plan formulation, monitors implementation across sectors, and manages relationships with development partners. The ministry operates with limited staff and budget compared to line ministries like Finance, Health, or Education. Its coordinating authority depends more on personal relationships and informal influence than formal hierarchical power (Fanthorpe and Gabelle, 2013).

Several institutional weaknesses undermine plan implementation. First, coordination across ministries remains challenging. Each ministry develops its own sectoral strategies with varying degrees of alignment to the MTNDP. Competition for budget resources and political attention creates coordination difficulties (Gberie, 2005). Second, monitoring and evaluation systems lack strength. While MoPED issues annual progress reports, data quality is inconsistent, many indicators lack baseline measurements, and few mechanisms exist for holding implementing agencies accountable for missed targets (African Development Bank, 2023).

Third, technical capacity constraints affect both planning quality and implementation effectiveness. Many ministries lack adequate policy analysis capability, relying heavily on donor-funded consultants for strategy development. This creates problems of ownership and sustainability when external support ends. Fourth, statistical capacity remains weak. Sierra Leone's last comprehensive census occurred in 2015, and many economic statistics rely on estimates rather than systematic data collection. This complicates evidence-based planning and makes monitoring progress difficult (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2023).

##### **4.2 Institutional Capacity Constraints**

Sierra Leone's planning implementation faces severe institutional capacity constraints across multiple dimensions. Technical capacity remains limited, with shortages of trained planners, economists, statisticians, and policy analysts. The Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, which should play a coordinating role analogous to China's NDRC, operates with limited staff, constrained budgets, and insufficient authority to enforce plan implementation across

government. Many technical positions remain vacant or filled by personnel lacking relevant qualifications.

Data infrastructure presents another critical constraint. Effective planning requires reliable, timely data on economic performance, social indicators, and implementation progress. Sierra Leone's statistical system struggles with irregular data collection, outdated survey instruments, limited geographic coverage, and inadequate funding. The most recent national census occurred in 2015, and many sectoral data series have gaps of years. This data poverty undermines evidence-based planning, making it difficult to set realistic targets, track progress, or adjust policies based on outcomes.

Administrative systems also constrain implementation capacity. The civil service suffers from politicization, with appointments often based on patronage rather than merit. Staff turnover increases with changes in government, disrupting institutional memory and technical expertise. Compensation levels struggle to compete with private sector or donor employment, contributing to brain drain of qualified personnel. Information systems remain underdeveloped, with limited use of digital technologies for planning, monitoring, or service delivery.

Coordination mechanisms function weakly in practice. While inter-ministerial committees exist on paper, they meet irregularly and lack authority to resolve disputes or enforce decisions. Horizontal coordination between ministries working on related issues remains poor, leading to duplication, policy conflicts, and missed synergies. Vertical coordination between national, district, and chiefdom levels faces similar challenges, with limited integration of local development plans into national frameworks.

### **4.3 Political Economy and Short-Term Electoral Cycles**

Sierra Leone's multi-party democratic system creates political dynamics that fundamentally shape development planning. Presidential and parliamentary elections occur every five years, creating electoral cycles that influence policy priorities and implementation. Incoming governments often abandon or significantly revise their predecessors' development plans, arguing they reflect the losing party's agenda rather than national priorities. This political discontinuity undermines long-term planning, as initiatives requiring sustained implementation across multiple election cycles struggle to survive changes in government.

Electoral incentives push politicians toward short-term, visible projects that can demonstrate achievements before the next election. Infrastructure projects with long gestation periods, institutional reforms with delayed payoffs, and investments in human capital that show results only after years struggle to compete politically with immediate, tangible interventions. This short-termism affects budget allocation, project selection, and policy continuity. Politicians face rational incentives to prioritize initiatives that generate political benefits within electoral timeframes.

Patronage politics further complicates development planning. Political support depends substantially on distributing resources to key constituencies, ethnic groups, and regions. This creates pressures for geographically dispersed, politically motivated spending rather than strategic investments based on development priorities. Civil service appointments, project locations, and resource allocation reflect political calculations alongside technical planning criteria. While democratic accountability offers important benefits, these political economy dynamics pose real challenges for implementing coherent, long-term development plans.

Regional and ethnic cleavages add additional complexity. Sierra Leone's political competition often follows regional lines, with parties drawing disproportionate support from specific areas. This can

lead to development spending concentrated in political strongholds while opposition areas receive limited investment. Such patterns undermine national planning that should distribute resources based on need, potential, and strategic priorities rather than electoral calculations. They also risk reinforcing regional inequalities and fueling political tensions.

#### **4.4 The Role of International Partners and Aid Conditionality**

External actors play an outsized role in Sierra Leone's development planning and implementation. Development assistance constitutes a significant share of government budgets, particularly for capital investments and social services. Major donors include the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, African Development Bank, United Kingdom, United States, European Union, and increasingly, China. Each donor brings preferences, priorities, and conditionalities that shape policy choices and resource allocation.

Traditional donors often emphasize governance reforms, fiscal discipline, and alignment with international best practices. These prescriptions sometimes conflict with locally defined priorities or ignore contextual realities. Conditionality attached to budget support and program loans constrains policy autonomy, limiting space for experimentation or deviation from orthodox approaches. Project earmarking means that even when development plans identify priorities, actual spending follows donor preferences for sectors and interventions they are willing to fund.

The proliferation of donor-supported projects creates coordination challenges. Multiple donors support parallel programs in health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure, each with distinct reporting requirements, implementation modalities, and timeframes. This fragments the development planning landscape and increases transaction costs for the government. Donor-driven initiatives may bypass national planning systems entirely, undermining efforts to establish coherent development strategies.

China's growing role as a development partner offers both opportunities and risks. Chinese financing for infrastructure projects addresses critical gaps in roads, energy, ports, and telecommunications. The absence of governance conditionality provides greater policy flexibility. However, concerns about debt sustainability, environmental impacts, and limited local participation in project selection warrant careful management. The challenge for Sierra Leone is leveraging diverse partnerships while maintaining ownership of its development agenda and avoiding unsustainable dependencies.

### **5.0 TOWARDS A HYBRID MODEL: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ADAPTATION**

This section synthesizes the preceding analysis to explore how Sierra Leone might selectively adapt elements of China's planning model while addressing fundamental challenges and counterarguments. The approach emphasizes critical engagement, selectivity, and contextual adaptation rather than wholesale copying.

#### **5.1 Opportunities: Adapting China's Institutional Mechanisms**

Several specific mechanisms from China's planning system offer potential value for Sierra Leone with appropriate adaptation. First, strengthening the coordination role of the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development could address ministerial fragmentation. Sierra Leone could study the NDRC's coordinating functions and adapt relevant elements to its democratic context. This might include enhanced authority to convene inter-ministerial meetings, review major project proposals, and ensure alignment with national development priorities. While the Ministry cannot wield

NDRC-level power in Sierra Leone's governance system, incremental strengthening of its coordination mandate could improve policy coherence.

Second, systematizing the plan formulation process could enhance planning quality. Sierra Leone could adopt structured timelines that begin research and consultation well before plan adoption, ensuring adequate analysis and stakeholder input. Systematic assessment of previous plan implementation to inform new objectives would institutionalize organizational learning. Multi-level consultation integrating national, sectoral, district, and chiefdom perspectives could strengthen local ownership. Distinguishing between binding targets requiring achievement and indicative targets providing guidance could clarify accountability while maintaining flexibility.

Third, piloting reforms before national rollout could reduce implementation risks. Sierra Leone could designate specific districts or sectors as experimental sites for testing innovations. Successful pilots could be scaled while failures are contained locally. This approach suits Sierra Leone's limited resources, allowing focused investment in pilot sites to demonstrate feasibility before broader commitment. Pilots would generate local evidence about what works in Sierra Leone's context rather than relying solely on foreign models.

Fourth, results-based performance management for civil servants could strengthen implementation incentives. Sierra Leone could link promotion and compensation to achievement of plan targets for technical positions. Performance contracts specifying measurable objectives and regular reviews with career consequences could motivate focus on implementation. Transparent evaluation and published results would enable public accountability. While elected officials must answer primarily to voters, professional civil servants are appropriate subjects for performance management aligned with plan objectives.

Fifth, long-term vision setting beyond electoral cycles could anchor medium-term planning. Sierra Leone could develop a 20-year national vision statement through broad-based consultation involving political parties, civil society, business, and citizens. Political parties would commit to this shared vision while competing over implementation strategies. Five-year plans would operationalize the vision within specific periods, providing continuity across administrations while allowing flexibility in approaches.

## **5.2 Challenges and Critiques: Political System Differences**

The most fundamental challenge in adapting China's planning model to Sierra Leone concerns political system differences. China's single-party system enables planning continuity across leadership transitions that is difficult to achieve in competitive democracy. In Sierra Leone, electoral competition creates incentives for incoming governments to distinguish themselves from predecessors by changing policies and priorities. Opposition parties criticize government plans as partisan rather than national. These dynamics undermine the long-term continuity that characterizes Chinese planning.

This challenge is real but not insurmountable. Democratic countries including South Korea, Malaysia, and Botswana have maintained long-term development plans across changes in government through several mechanisms. National consensus building around development priorities can create political costs for abandoning plans. Institutional embedding of planning processes in law and procedure can constrain arbitrary changes. Parliamentary oversight and public participation can depoliticize planning by making plans products of broad consultation rather than government preferences.

Sierra Leone could pursue similar strategies. A national development vision adopted by Parliament with multi-party support would be more resistant to partisan changes. Legislation requiring systematic plan formulation, consultation, and review could institutionalize processes that survive electoral transitions. Independent planning commissions insulated from political pressures could provide technical analysis that guides partisan debates rather than reflecting them. Civil society monitoring and citizen engagement could create accountability for plan implementation regardless of which party holds power.

### **5.3 Challenges and Critiques: Risks of Dependency**

Another critical concern involves dependency risks. Engaging with China as a model and partner could deepen Sierra Leone's dependency on external actors rather than building autonomous development capacity. Chinese loans for infrastructure have raised debt sustainability concerns in several African countries. Technical assistance and training programs create channels for Chinese influence over policy-making. Copying Chinese institutional arrangements could lead to inappropriate transplantation of mechanisms that work poorly outside their original context.

These dependency risks require serious attention. Sierra Leone must approach China-Africa cooperation critically, maximizing benefits while managing vulnerabilities. This requires several safeguards. First, debt sustainability must be carefully managed through thorough project appraisal, realistic revenue projections, and limits on borrowing. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank can provide technical assistance in debt management even as Sierra Leone diversifies financing sources. Second, technology and knowledge transfer should be prioritized over turnkey projects that leave limited local capacity. Chinese infrastructure projects should include training components and local content requirements.

Third, policy learning should involve multiple sources rather than exclusive focus on China. Comparing Chinese approaches with alternatives from other developing countries creates space for informed choice rather than dependent adoption. Study tours, training programs, and technical cooperation should span diverse countries to enable synthesis of varied experiences. Fourth, local ownership and adaptation are essential. Institutional mechanisms should be designed by Sierra Leoneans based on study of Chinese and other experiences rather than transplanted wholesale. This ensures contextual fit and builds local capacity.

### **5.4 Challenges and Critiques: Debt Sustainability**

Debt sustainability concerns deserve specific attention given experiences in other African countries. Chinese infrastructure loans often involve large sums borrowed against future revenues. When revenues disappoint, debt service can crowd out social spending and constrain fiscal space. Sri Lanka's experience with Hambantota Port, where debt problems led to Chinese control, illustrates risks. Zambia and Kenya have faced debt distress partly related to Chinese borrowing. These cases raise legitimate concerns about whether Sierra Leone should deepen engagement with Chinese financing.

However, these concerns should not preclude all Chinese engagement. The question is how to structure cooperation to manage risks. First, project selection must prioritize economically viable investments likely to generate revenues or growth supporting debt service. Careful cost-benefit analysis should screen projects. Independent review by Parliament and civil society can reduce political pressure for prestige projects. Second, financing terms matter enormously. Concessional loans with low interest rates and long repayment periods pose less risk than commercial terms. Sierra Leone should negotiate strongly on terms and compare Chinese offers with alternatives.

Third, transparency in contracting and debt reporting is essential. Public disclosure of loan terms, implementation arrangements, and debt levels enables monitoring and accountability. Secret deals that emerge only when problems arise undermine governance and create opportunities for corruption. Fourth, diversification of financing sources maintains alternatives and bargaining power. Combining Chinese loans with traditional donor assistance, domestic revenue mobilization, and private investment reduces vulnerability to any single creditor.

### **5.5 Challenges and Critiques: Learning from China's Mistakes**

Sierra Leone must also learn from China's mistakes and development costs, not just successes. China's rapid growth generated severe environmental degradation including air and water pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. Industrial development proceeded with limited environmental regulation, creating health costs and ecosystem damage. Income inequality increased substantially as coastal regions and urban areas advanced far ahead of interior provinces and rural communities. Labor rights were often subordinated to growth imperatives, with poor working conditions and limited union organization.

These costs reflect prioritization of growth over other values and insufficient attention to distributional and environmental consequences. Sierra Leone can learn from these mistakes by integrating environmental protection and social equity into development planning from the outset. This means several things. First, environmental impact assessment should be mandatory for major projects, with meaningful public consultation and mitigation requirements. Second, regional development strategies should explicitly address inequality, directing investment to lagging areas rather than concentrating resources in already advanced regions.

Third, labor standards and working conditions must be protected even while attracting investment and promoting growth. This includes minimum wage enforcement, workplace safety regulation, and protection of union rights. Fourth, social protection systems including health insurance, pensions, and unemployment support should develop alongside economic growth rather than being deferred to later stages. Learning from China's experience means understanding what to avoid as well as what to emulate.

## **6.0 A PHASED ROADMAP FOR POLICY LEARNING AND ADAPTATION**

This section presents concrete, actionable recommendations for how Sierra Leone can engage in policy learning from China's planning experience. The roadmap spans short-term (1-3 years), medium-term (4-7 years), and long-term (8+ years) horizons, recognizing that institutional development requires sustained effort across multiple political cycles.

### **6.1 Short-Term Actions (1-3 Years)**

Short-term actions focus on building foundations for longer-term institutional development. These actions can begin immediately and show results within current political cycles, building momentum for sustained reform.

Establish a cross-ministerial planning task force. The Ministry of Planning and Economic Development should convene a task force bringing together representatives from key ministries, the Presidency, Parliament, civil society, and development partners. This task force would coordinate development planning, resolve inter-ministerial conflicts, and ensure alignment of sectoral strategies with national priorities. Regular meetings and clear terms of reference would institutionalize coordination. The task force provides a mechanism for addressing fragmentation without requiring major legislative changes.

Conduct study tours focused on NDRC functions. Sierra Leone should organize study tours to China for senior technocrats from the Ministry of Planning, Finance, and key sectoral ministries. These tours should focus specifically on understanding NDRC's coordinating mechanisms, plan formulation processes, and monitoring systems. Participants should document lessons learned and prepare recommendations for adapting relevant practices. Study tours should include both Beijing and provincial levels to understand implementation at different tiers.

Initiate a pilot for results-based cadre evaluation. Select one ministry, such as Agriculture or Health, to pilot performance management systems linking civil servant promotion to achievement of plan targets. Develop clear indicators, establish baseline data, and implement regular performance reviews. Document successes and challenges for informing broader rollout. This pilot tests the concept on a manageable scale while generating evidence about contextual adaptation requirements.

Strengthen data systems for planning. Invest in statistical capacity including regular surveys, administrative data systems, and analysis capabilities. Work with development partners to fund a new national census and establish continuous data collection mechanisms. Train statistics personnel in modern methods. Improved data infrastructure is foundational for evidence-based planning and monitoring that will support all other reforms.

Develop a systematic plan review process. Establish formal requirements for assessing implementation of the current MTNDP before formulating the next plan. This assessment should examine which targets were achieved, which fell short, what factors influenced outcomes, and what lessons should inform future planning. Systematizing this review process institutionalizes organizational learning.

## **6.2 Medium-Term Actions (4-6 Years)**

Medium-term actions build on short-term foundations to achieve more substantial institutional reforms. These actions require sustained political commitment and resources but can transform planning capacity.

Draft a 20-year national vision statement through broad-based consultation. Convene a national development conference bringing together political parties, civil society, business, labor, traditional authorities, youth, and citizens. Through facilitated dialogue, develop a shared vision for Sierra Leone's development over 20 years. This vision should identify fundamental aspirations transcending partisan differences while acknowledging areas of legitimate disagreement. Parliamentary adoption would confer legitimacy and create pressure for continuity across administrations.

Develop a national statistical capacity-building plan aligned with planning needs. Based on the short-term investments in data systems, create a comprehensive plan to build Sierra Leone's statistical capacity. This includes training programs, infrastructure investments, coordination mechanisms, and quality assurance systems. Align statistical priorities with planning information needs to ensure data collection serves policy purposes. Seek donor support for sustained investment in statistical development.

Expand pilot projects for development innovations. Building on early pilot experience, scale the experimental approach to multiple sectors and districts. Establish formal criteria for pilot selection, implementation support, evaluation, and scaling decisions. Create a knowledge management system documenting pilot lessons. This institutionalizes learning-by-doing and reduces risks of national policy changes.

Strengthen the Ministry of Planning's coordinating authority through legislation. Based on experience with the cross-ministerial task force, seek parliamentary approval for legislation giving the Ministry of Planning formal authority to coordinate development planning, review major projects, and convene inter-ministerial meetings. This legal foundation strengthens coordination beyond informal arrangements and survives personnel changes.

Establish an independent planning commission. Create an autonomous body staffed by technical experts and insulated from political pressures to provide objective analysis and advice on development planning. This commission could prepare assessments of plan implementation, evaluate proposed policies, and recommend adjustments based on evidence. Independence enables technical analysis that constrains partisan manipulation of planning.

### **6.3 Long-Term Actions (8+ Years)**

Long-term actions represent the culmination of sustained institutional development, transforming Sierra Leone's planning capacity fundamentally.

Institutionalize a cycle of participatory plan formulation, monitoring, and revision. By this stage, Sierra Leone should have established systematic processes where five-year plans are formulated through structured research and broad consultation, implemented with regular monitoring, revised based on mid-term reviews, and assessed thoroughly before new plan cycles begin. This institutionalization means planning processes function regardless of which party holds power, embedded in law and administrative routine rather than depending on individual political will.

Achieve substantial improvement in statistical capacity and data-driven planning. Sierra Leone's statistical system should provide timely, reliable data on economic performance, social indicators, and implementation progress. Planning decisions should be routinely informed by evidence rather than assumptions. Monitoring systems should enable real-time tracking of indicator achievement and rapid course corrections when problems emerge.

Develop strong technical expertise in planning across government. Through sustained investment in education, training, and professional development, Sierra Leone should build cadres of skilled planners, economists, and analysts across ministries and districts. This technical capacity enables sophisticated policy analysis, implementation management, and results evaluation. Civil service career paths reward planning expertise, retaining talent in public service.

Achieve multi-party consensus on development priorities enabling policy continuity. While political competition continues, parties should have converged on core development priorities reflected in the 20-year vision and institutionalized through planning processes. Electoral competition focuses on implementation strategies rather than whether to plan. This consensus rests on citizen demand for continuity, institutional embedding of planning, and demonstrated benefits from sustained policy implementation.

Balance domestic resource mobilization with external partnerships. Sierra Leone should have strengthened tax collection, reduced dependency on external financing for core government functions, and diversified development partners. While external support continues, it complements rather than dominates domestic resources. This fiscal foundation enables autonomous policy-making while leveraging partnerships strategically.

### **6.4 Implementation Principles**

Several principles should guide implementation of this phased roadmap. First, maintain democratic accountability throughout. All reforms must respect democratic governance, electoral competition,

checks and balances, and civic participation. Strengthening planning capacity complements rather than supersedes democratic accountability. Second, ensure local ownership and adaptation. Institutional reforms should be designed by Sierra Leoneans drawing on multiple sources of inspiration rather than transplanting foreign models wholesale. Third, pursue incremental progress rather than wholesale transformation. Ambitious goals require patient, sustained effort across many years. Fourth, maintain flexibility and learning. Regular evaluation should identify what works and what needs adjustment, allowing course corrections based on experience. Fifth, seek broad-based support. Successful institutional development requires buy-in from government, Parliament, civil society, business, and citizens. Inclusive processes build legitimacy and sustainability.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

This article has examined how Sierra Leone can learn from China's long-term planning model to strengthen its development outcomes. The analysis demonstrates that while direct replication is neither feasible nor desirable given fundamental political system differences, Sierra Leone can selectively adapt specific institutional mechanisms to enhance planning capacity.

The study makes several key contributions. First, it situates Sierra Leone-China policy learning within theoretical frameworks of developmental state, policy transfer, and South-South cooperation. This grounding enables rigorous analysis of opportunities and constraints rather than naive enthusiasm or reflexive rejection. Second, it dissects specific mechanisms of China's planning system rather than treating it as a black box. Understanding how the NDRC coordinates planning, how Five-Year Plans are formulated, how pilot projects test innovations, and how cadre evaluation incentivizes implementation illuminates transferable elements.

Third, it provides realistic assessment of Sierra Leone's planning landscape, acknowledging both achievements and persistent challenges. The MTNDP represents progress, but implementation gaps, capacity constraints, political economy pressures, and dependency on external actors limit effectiveness. Understanding these constraints is essential for designing feasible reforms. Fourth, it addresses counterarguments and challenges directly rather than dismissing concerns. Political system differences, dependency risks, debt sustainability issues, and need to learn from China's mistakes receive serious attention.

Fifth, it provides a detailed, phased roadmap with concrete, actionable recommendations. Rather than vague exhortations to strengthen institutions, the roadmap specifies actions spanning short, medium, and long-term horizons. Establishing cross-ministerial task forces, conducting focused study tours, piloting performance management, strengthening data systems, drafting national visions, expanding experimental approaches, and institutionalizing planning cycles provide specific steps Sierra Leone can take.

The analysis reveals several key findings. Effective development planning requires institutional mechanisms that enable coordination, evidence-based decision-making, long-term orientation, and results accountability. China's planning system offers tested approaches to these challenges that merit examination. However, many mechanisms depend on political foundations, such as single-party discipline, that are neither possible nor desirable in democratic contexts. Successful adaptation therefore requires selectivity, focusing on mechanisms compatible with democracy while rejecting authoritarian elements.

Critical engagement is essential. Sierra Leone should study Chinese experiences alongside alternatives from other developing countries, synthesizing insights from multiple sources rather than adopting any single model. Learning should emphasize understanding underlying principles

and adapting them contextually rather than copying specific practices. Local ownership ensures reforms fit Sierra Leone's circumstances and build domestic capacity.

The phased roadmap recognizes that institutional development requires sustained effort across many years. Quick fixes are illusory. Building planning capacity demands patient investment in people, systems, and processes. Short-term actions create foundations for medium-term reforms that enable long-term transformation. This gradual approach suits Sierra Leone's limited resources and enables learning from early implementation before committing to larger changes.

The study also highlights the need to manage risks inherent in deepening engagement with China. Debt sustainability concerns are legitimate and require careful project selection, transparent contracting, and diversified financing. Dependency risks demand maintaining multiple partnerships and strengthening domestic capacity. Learning from China's mistakes means integrating environmental protection, social equity, and labor rights into development planning from the outset.

Several questions merit further research. How have other African countries adapted Asian development models? What explains variation in success and failure? What role do transnational networks play in shaping African officials' perceptions of Chinese planning? How do domestic political actors debate and contest proposals to learn from China? What institutional arrangements best balance democratic accountability with planning continuity? Addressing these questions would enrich understanding of policy learning in Africa.

Future research should also examine implementation of the proposed reforms. If Sierra Leone adopts elements of this roadmap, studying the process would generate valuable lessons. What facilitates or constrains implementation? How are Chinese-inspired mechanisms transformed in practice? What unanticipated consequences emerge? How do citizens and civil society respond? Answering these questions requires long-term, ethnographic research following reform processes closely.

In conclusion, Sierra Leone's search for development models need not choose between uncritical adoption of Chinese approaches and reflexive rejection of lessons from China's experience. Critical, selective adaptation offers a middle path. By examining specific institutional mechanisms, assessing compatibility with democratic governance, piloting reforms before scaling, and maintaining local ownership, Sierra Leone can strengthen planning capacity while avoiding dependency and authoritarian pitfalls. Success requires sustained political commitment, technical capacity building, and patient institutional development. The goal is not to replicate China but to build distinctively Sierra Leonean planning capacity informed by international best practices.

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