Dispatch No. 407 | 17 November 2020

Africans regard China's influence as significant and positive, but slipping

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 407 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey

Summary

Home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies (Mitchell, 2019), Africa has attracted the attention of leaders and economic strategists everywhere, including China. Over the past two decades, political and economic relations between China and Africa have grown rapidly, with trade volumes increasing from about $11 billion in 2000 to $185 billion in 2018 (Amoah, Hodzi, & Castillo, 2020; China Africa Research Initiative, 2018). China is the leading provider of financial support for infrastructure development for Africa, even though the United States is still the continent's largest aid donor (Muchira, 2018; Shepherd & Blanchard, 2018).

However, China's investments on the continent have been a topic of widespread scrutiny and debate. Because China's financial support for Africa is often in the form of long-term loans rather than grants, it has been criticized as a "debt trap" that China may use to gain strategic advantages on the continent, with the United States and others warning Africa against succumbing to China's "debt diplomacy" (Green, 2019). Some argue that African countries that borrow from China may lose key assets if they are unable to pay back their loans (Brautigam, 2019; Brautigam & Kidane, 2020; Sun, 2014).

How do ordinary African's perceive China's engagement in their countries and economies? Afrobarometer's national surveys in 18 African countries in 2019/2020 show that while Africans hold positive views of China's assistance and its political and economic influence on the continent, its perceived level of influence on African economies has nonetheless waned somewhat over the past five years. China remains second to the United States as Africans' preferred development model. And among those who are aware of Chinese loans and development assistance to their countries, majorities are concerned about being heavily indebted to China.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys, completed in 18 countries before being interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue in at least 17 more countries in late 2020 and 2021. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This dispatch draws on data from 26,777 interviews completed in the first 18 Round 8 countries between July 2019 and April 2020 (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country findings such as regional or Africa-wide averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

- On average across 18 countries, China trails the United States as Africans' preferred development model (32% vs. 23%), followed by former colonial powers and South Africa (11% each).
  - The United States ranks at the top in 13 of 18 surveyed countries, while China is No. 1 in three countries: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Botswana.
  - While the overall average has changed little over the past five years, some countries record substantial changes, including Burkina Faso (a 19-percentage-point increase in preference for China) and Lesotho (a 14-point increase in preference for the United States).
- About six in 10 Africans (59%) say the economic and political influence of China in their country is "somewhat positive" or "very positive," while only about one in seven (15%) consider it negative. Views on U.S. influence are almost identical (58% vs. 13%).
  - On average across 16 countries tracked in both 2014/2015 and 2019/2020, positive views of China's political and economic influence have decreased modestly, from 65% to 60%.
- While a majority (55%) of Africans say China's economic activities in their country have "some" or "a lot" of influence on their economy, that proportion has declined sharply over the past five years.
  - Perceptions of Chinese influence declined in all surveyed countries except Cabo Verde, including huge drops in Sierra Leone (-39 percentage points), Botswana (-24 points), Malawi (-23 points), and Mali (-21 points).
- Among the 48% of African citizens who are aware of Chinese loans or development assistance to their country:
  - Almost eight in 10 (77%) are aware that loans must be repaid.
  - A majority (58%) say their government has borrowed too much money from China.
- Seven in 10 Africans (71%) say English is the most important international language for young people to learn. Only 2% prefer Chinese.

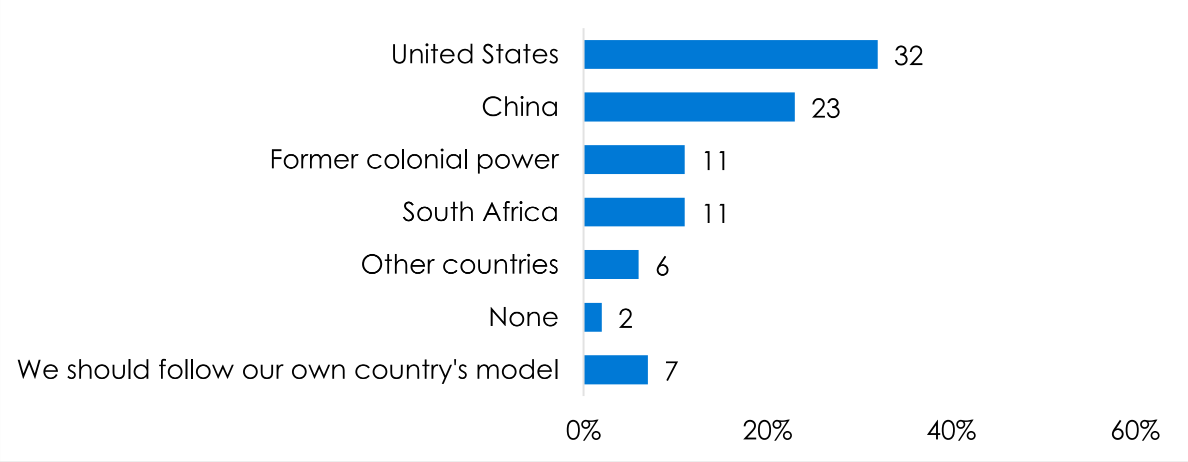
Best model for development

Afrobarometer asks Africans which country provides the best model for the future development of their own country. As in the 2014/2015 survey (Lekorwe, Chingwete, Okuru, & Samson, 2016), China ranks second across 18 countries in 2019/2020, trailing the United States (23% vs. 32%) (Figure 1). One in 10 respondents cite their former colonial power (Britain, France, or Portugal) and South Africa (11% each).

In 13 of the 18 countries, citizens prefer the U.S. model to China's, including large gaps in Sierra Leone (42 percentage points), Cabo Verde (29 points), Angola (27 points), Kenya (20 points), Ghana and Uganda (18 points each), and Ethiopia (16 points) (Figure 2). China outstrips the United States in just three of the 18 countries: Mali (by 23 percentage points), Burkina Faso (18 points), and Botswana (4 points).

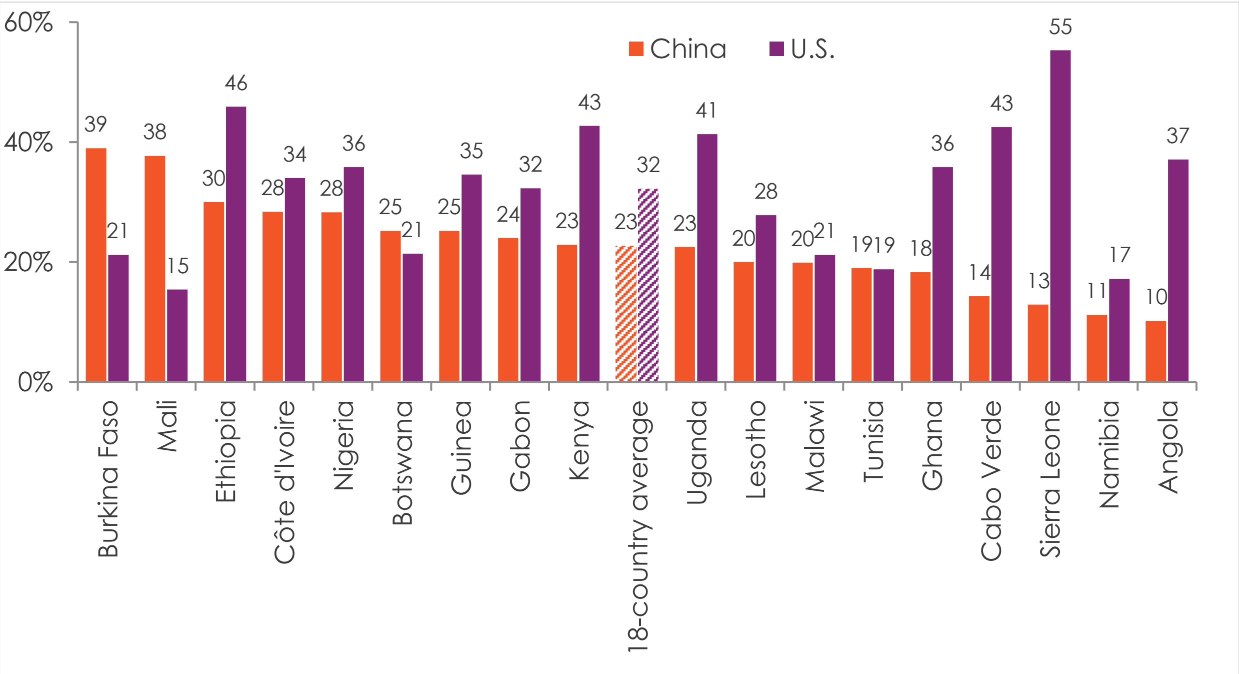
Given that China is the newcomer in this global competition, it is notable that younger Africans are more likely than their elders to favor the U.S. model (35% of those aged 18-35 vs. 27% of those over age 55), while regard for the Chinese model is fairly steady across all age groups (Figure 3). Men and women are equally likely to prefer the United States, but more men than women prefer China (26% vs. 20%). Respondents' experience with poverty[1] seems to make little difference in their preferred development model, while those with post-secondary education are slightly more likely than their less-educated counterparts to prefer China.

Figure 1: Best model for development | 18 countries | 2019/2020



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model?*

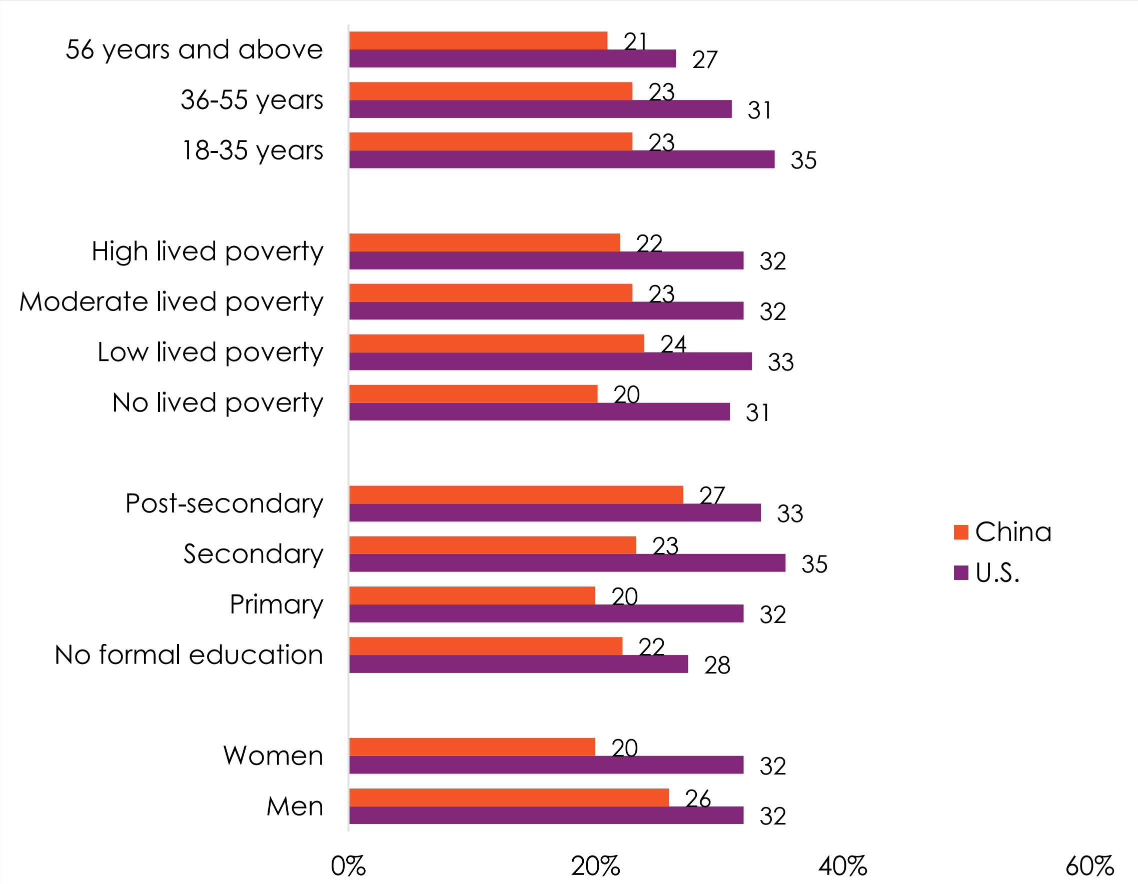
Figure 2: Best model for development: China vs. U.S. | 18 countries | 2019/2020



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model?*

[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 3: Best model for development: China vs. U.S. | by socio-demographic group | 18 countries | 2019/2020



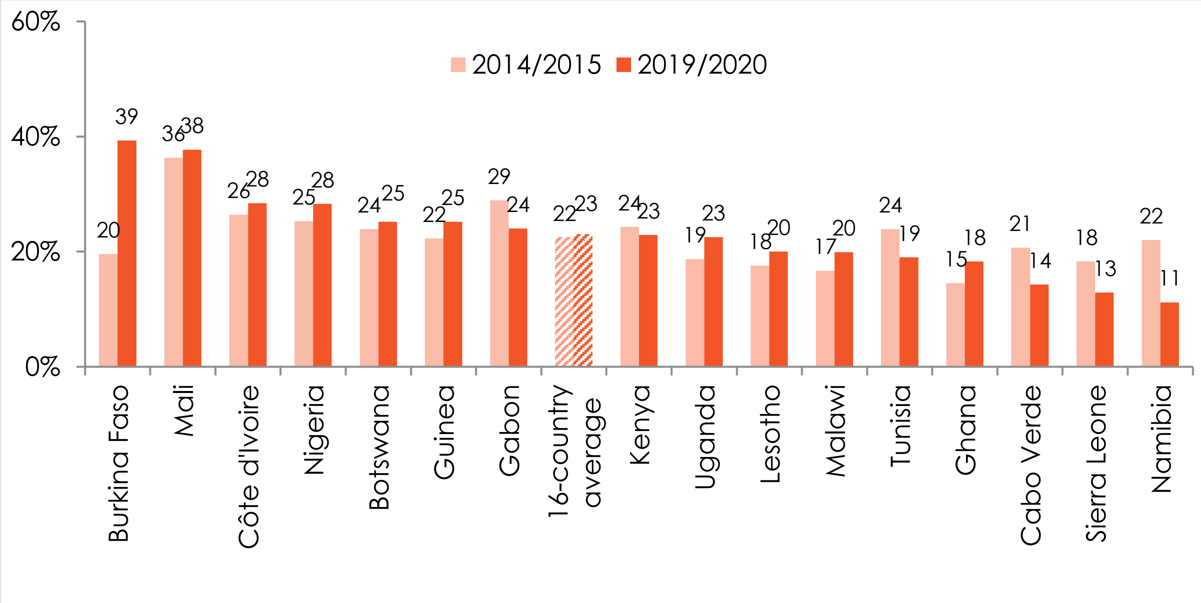
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model?*

On average across the 16 countries[2] in which this question was asked in both 2014/2015 and 2019/2020, preferences for China and the United States as the best model for development remain largely unchanged, though the gap narrowed from 11 to 8 percentage points. A few countries, however, recorded substantial changes. Burkina Faso shows a 19-percentage-point increase in preference for China, while Namibia and Cabo Verde record significant decreases (-11 and -7 percentage points, respectively) (Figure 4).

As for the U.S. model, preference doubled in Lesotho (from 14% to 28%) and increased sharply in Sierra Leone (by 12 percentage points) while decreasing in seven other countries, including Cabo Verde (-9 points), Botswana (-9 points), Nigeria (-7 points), and Burkina Faso (-7 points) (Figure 5).

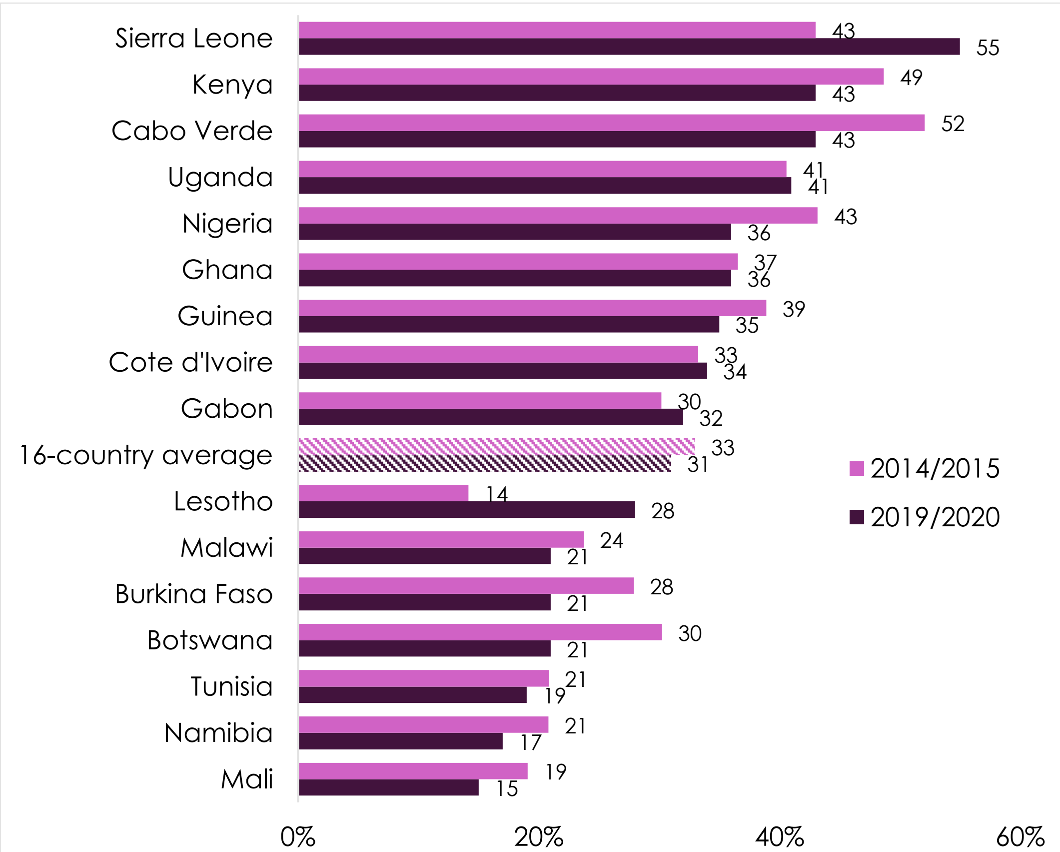
[2] Angola and Ethiopia were not included in the 2014/2015 survey. Afrobarometer's special series of questions on China were asked in these countries for the first time in the 2019/2020 survey.

Figure 4: China as the best model for development | 16 countries | 2014-2020



***Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model? (% who say China)*

Figure 5: U.S. as the best model for development | 16 countries | 2014-2020



***Respondents were asked**: In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model? (% who say United States)*

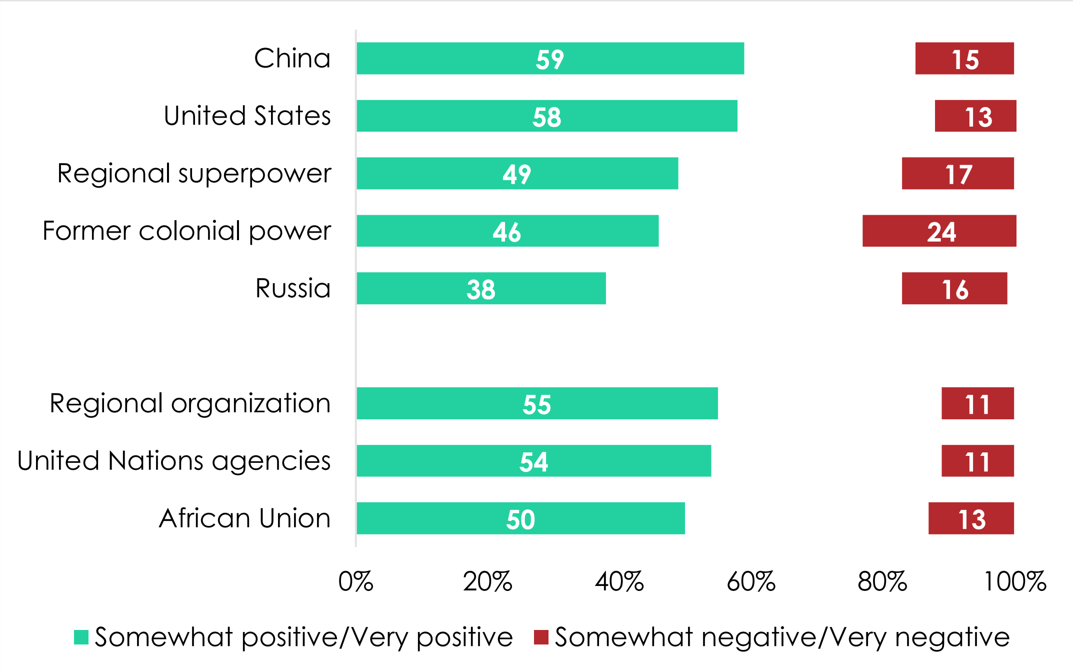
External influences

China's economic and political influence in Africa, like that of the United States, is far more widely seen as a good than a bad thing. On average, about six in 10 Africans (59%) say China's influence in their country is "somewhat positive" or "very positive," while only about one in seven (15%) consider it negative. Views on U.S. influence are about the same (58% vs. 13%) (Figure 6).

Pluralities welcome the influence of their regional superpower (49%), their former colonial power (46%), and Russia (38%).

Positive assessments also far outnumber negative views of the influence of regional organizations (55% vs. 11%), United Nations agencies (54% vs. 11%), and the African Union (50% vs. 13%).

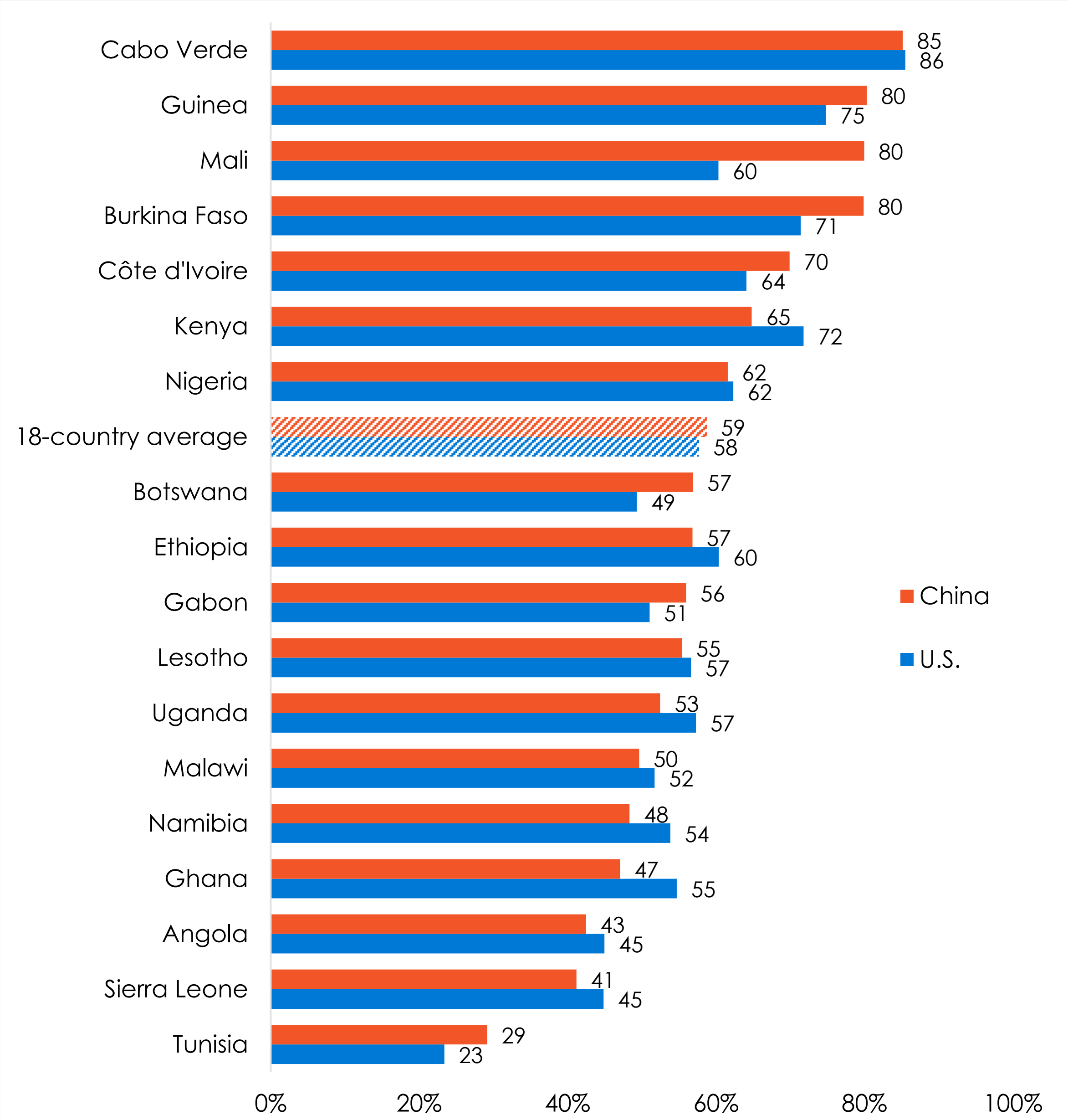
Figure 6: External influences: positive or negative? | 18 countries | 2019/2020



Respondents were asked: *In general, do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries/organizations on [your country] is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

In most countries, the difference in positive perceptions of Chinese and U.S. influence is fairly small; the only double-digit gap is in Mali (80% positive for China, 60% for the United States) (Figure 7). In fact, respondents who feel positively about the influence of China are more likely to hold positive views of U.S. influence as well – i.e. the two views are strongly and positively correlated, suggesting that for many Africans, U.S.-China "competition" may not be an either-or proposition, but a win-win.

Figure 7: Positive influence: China vs. U.S. | 18 countries | 2019/2020



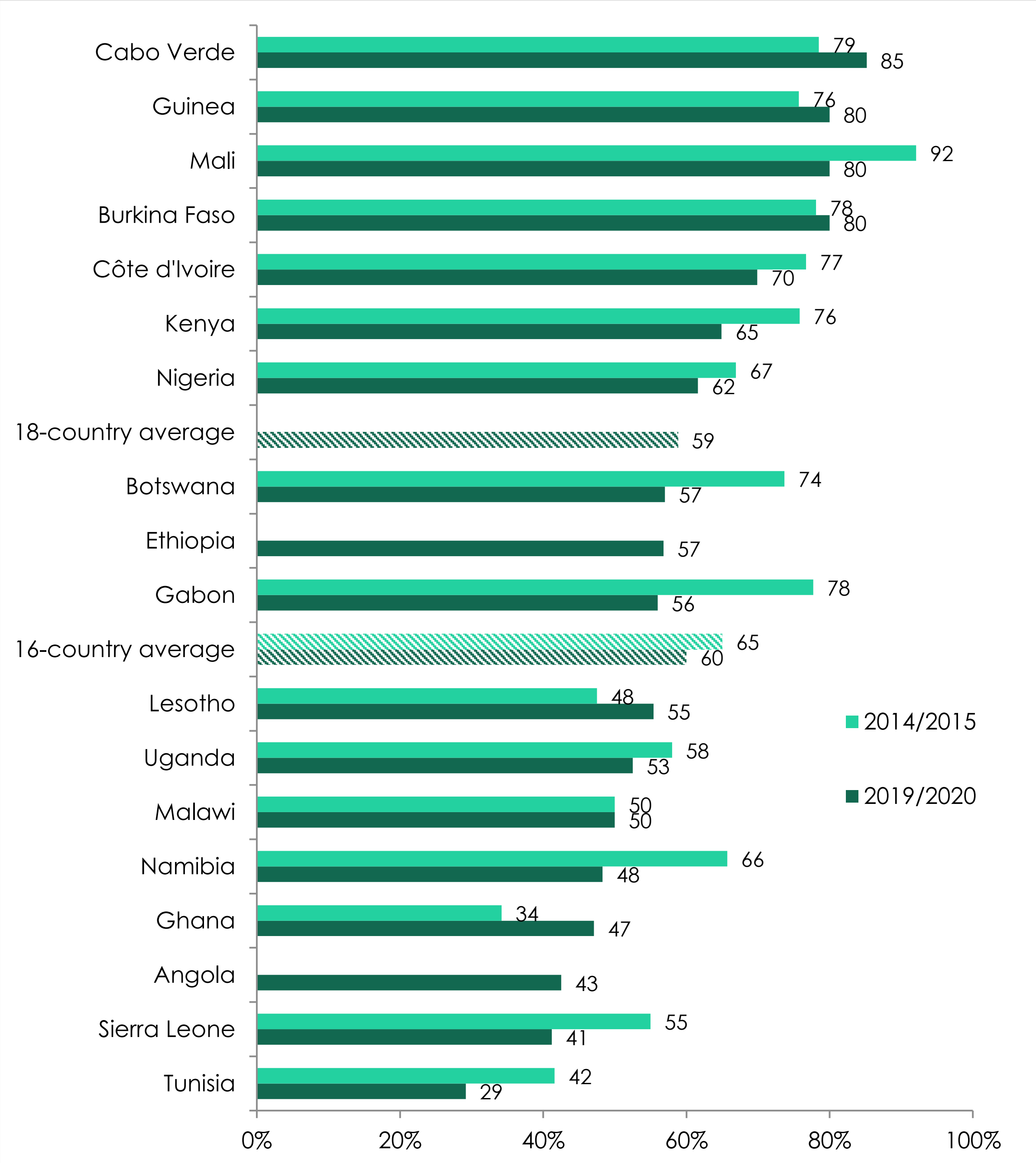
Question: *Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on [your country] is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat positive" or "very positive")*

While six in 10 Africans see China's influence as positive, that proportion has decreased over the past five years (from 65% to 60% across 16 countries surveyed in both rounds). Nine countries record declines, including steep drops in Gabon (-22 percentage points), Namibia (-18 points), Botswana (-17 points), Sierra Leone (-14 points), and Tunisia (-13 points). Only four countries show significant increases in the proportion of citizens who see Chinese influence as positive: Ghana (+13 percentage points), Lesotho (+7 points), Cabo Verde (+6 points), and Guinea (+4 points) (Figure 8).

Despite these declines, majorities in 12 of 18 countries surveyed in 2019/2020 hold positive views of China's economic and political influence, reaching 85% in Cabo Verde and 80% in

Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Positive assessments of China's influence are in the minority in five countries, most strikingly in Tunisia (29%).

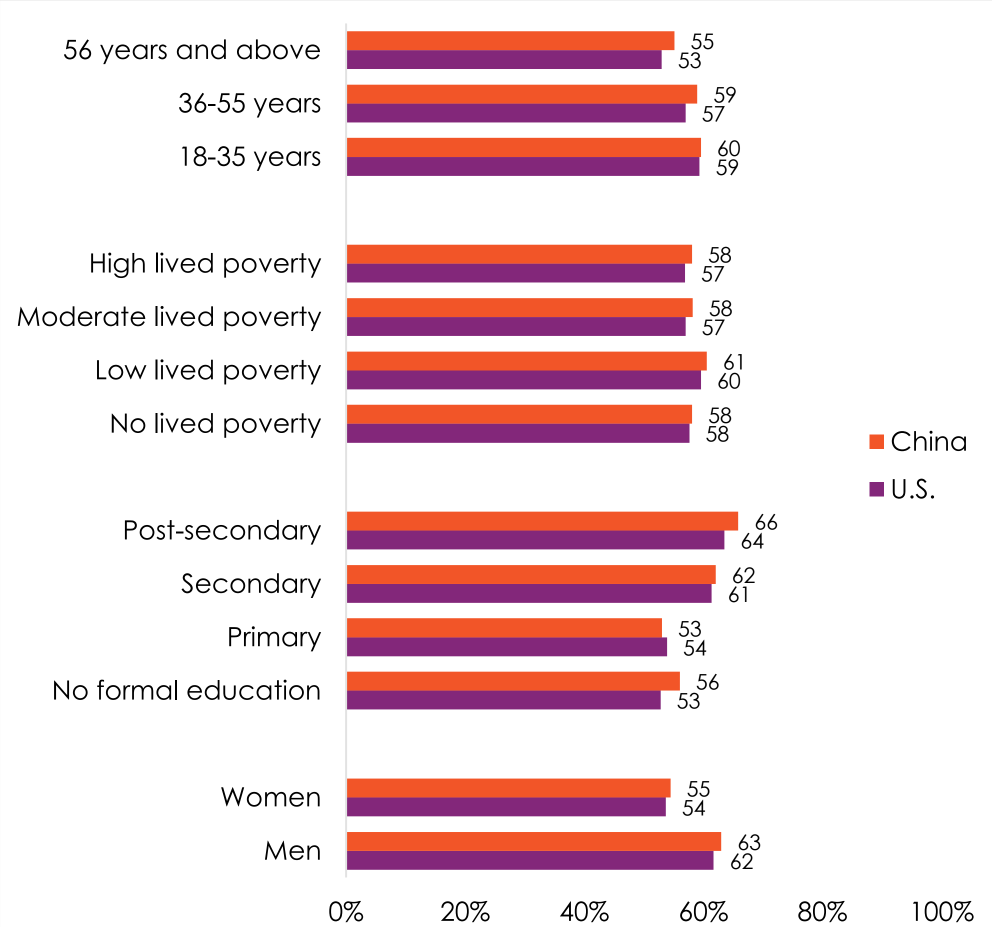
Figure 8: Perceived positive influence of China | 18 countries | 2014-2020



Respondents were asked: *Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on [your country] is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China? (% who say "somewhat positive" or "very positive")*

Positive perceptions of Chinese and U.S. influence follow similar patterns across key socio-demographic groups. For both countries, men, highly educated citizens, and younger adults are somewhat more likely than women, less educated citizens, and older adults to see the influence as positive (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Perceived positive influence of China and U.S. | by socio-demographic group | 18 countries | 2019/2020



Respondents were asked: *In general, do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries/organizations on [your country] is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat positive" or "very positive")*

Alongside modest declines in positive perceptions of China's influence, assessments of *how much* influence China's economic activities have in African countries have dropped sharply. On average across 18 countries, a majority (55%) of Africans say China's economic activities in their country have "some" or "a lot" of influence on their economy. But this reflects a major decrease over the past five years, from 71% to 56% across 16 countries surveyed in both 2014/2015 and 2019/2020.

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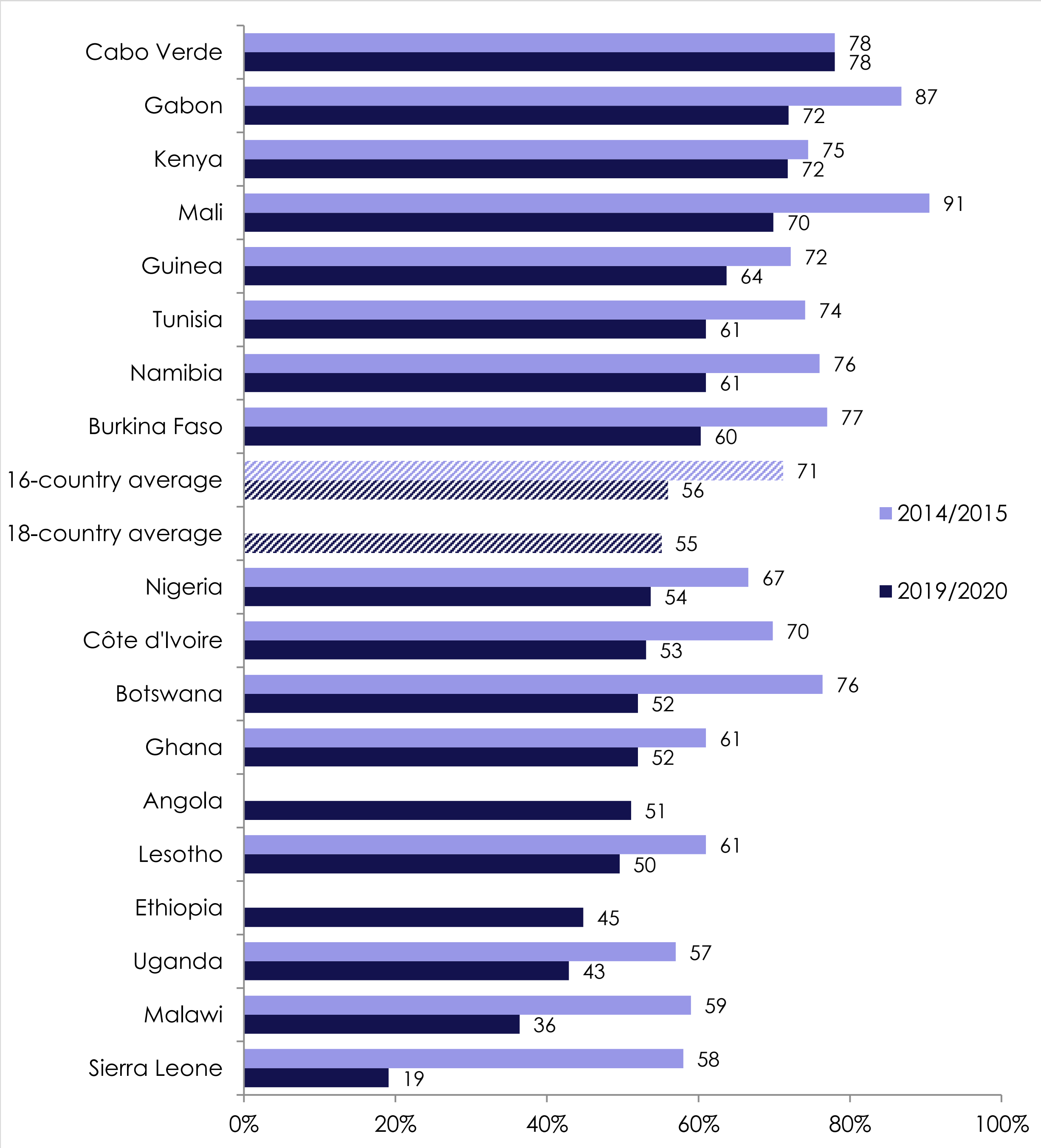
Perceptions of Chinese influence declined in all surveyed countries except Cabo Verde, including huge drops in Sierra Leone (-39 percentage points), Botswana (-24 points), Malawi (-23 points), and Mali (-21 points) (Figure 10).

The proportions who see China's economic activities as influential still exceed two-thirds in Cabo Verde (78%), Gabon (72%), Kenya (72%), and Mali (70%). But fewer than half of citizens agree in Ethiopia (45%), Uganda (43%), Malawi (36%), and Sierra Leone (19%).

Figure 10: Influence of China | 18 countries | 2014-2020

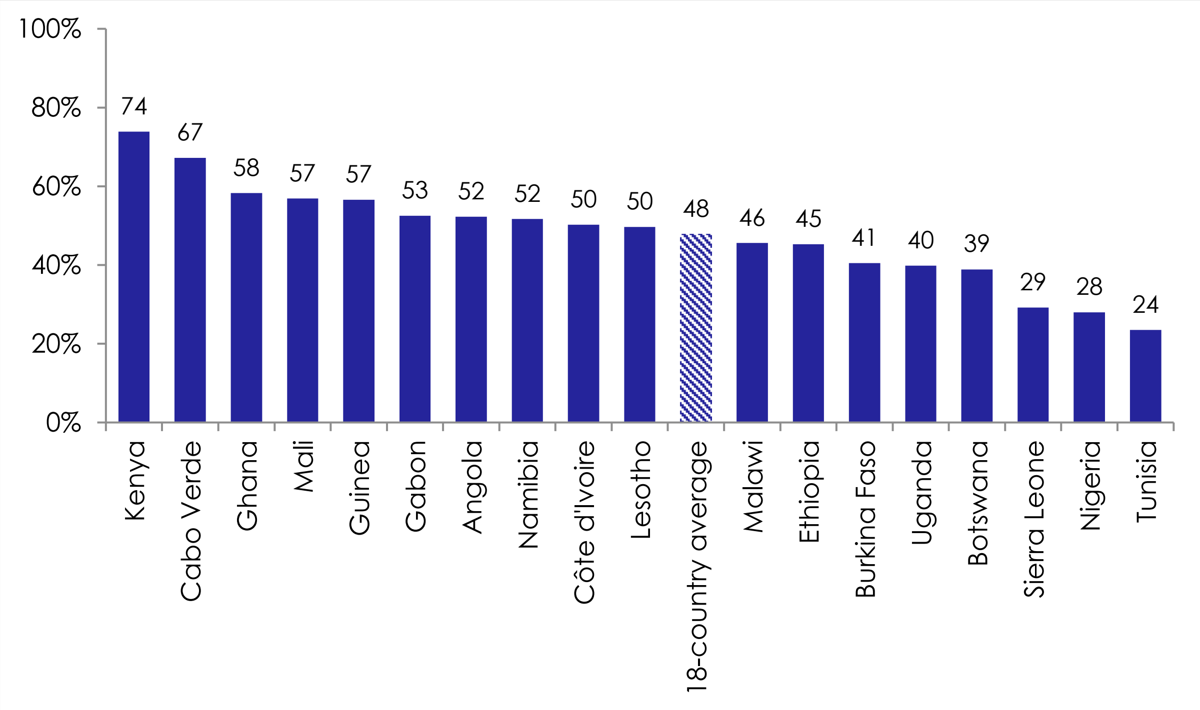


Respondents were asked: *How much influence do you think China's economic activities in [our country] have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "some" or "a lot")*

Views on development assistance from China

In spite of China's increasing investments and support in Africa, fewer than half of citizens (48%) are aware that China gives loans or development assistance to their countries (Figure 11). Awareness of China's provision of loans or development assistance varies from two-thirds or more in Kenya (74%) and Cabo Verde (67%) to fewer than three in 10 in Sierra Leone (29%), Nigeria (28%), and Tunisia (24%).

Figure 11: Heard of Chinese loans/development assistance | 18 countries | 2019/2020



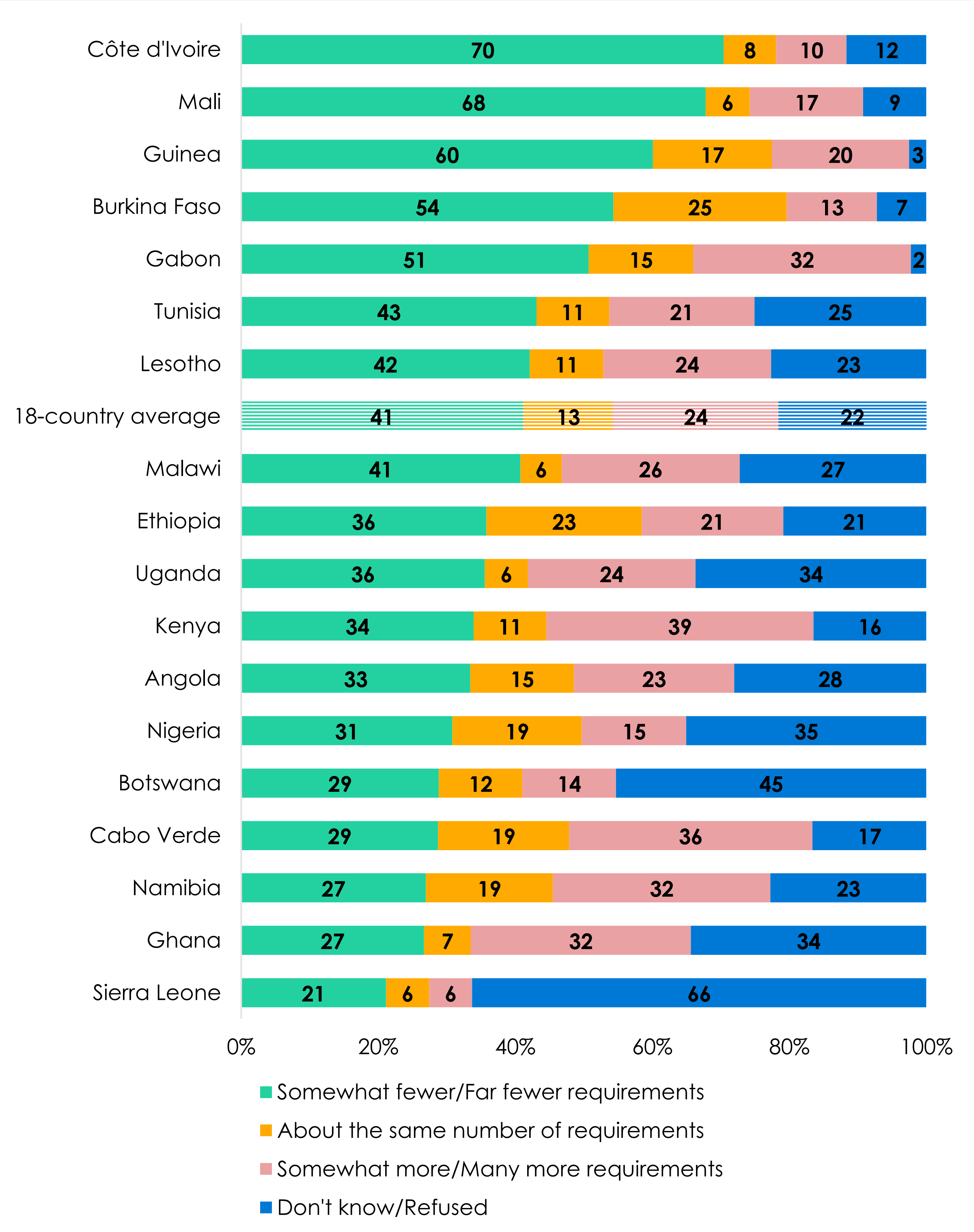
Respondents were asked: *To your knowledge, does China give loans or development assistance to our country's government, or haven't you had a chance to hear about this? (% who say "yes")*

Among citizens who are aware that their countries receive loans or development assistance from China, a quarter (24%) think China attaches more requirements to assistance than other countries, while a plurality (41%) say financial support from China comes with "somewhat fewer" or "far fewer" strings attached (Figure 12).

About three-quarters (77%) of those who are aware that their countries receive loans or development assistance from China are also aware that their governments will likely be required to repay loans (Figure 13). Except for Lesotho, majorities in all surveyed countries are aware of this obligation, including about nine in 10 citizens in Kenya (92%), Guinea (91%), Ghana (87%), and Uganda (87%).

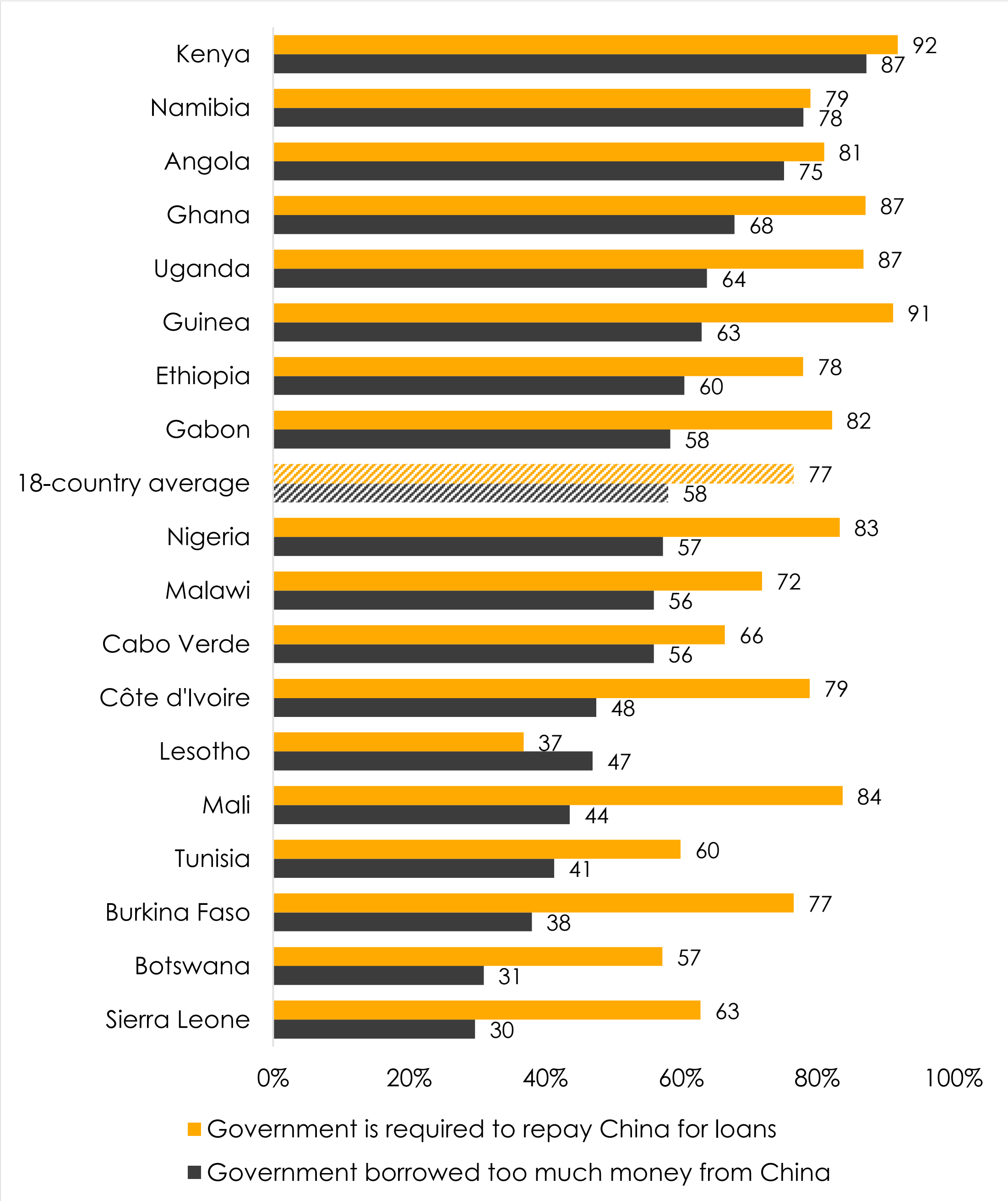
And a majority (58%) of those aware of China's assistance say their countries have borrowed too much from China (Figure 13). Kenyans (87%), Namibians (78%), and Angolans (75%) are particularly concerned about their government's indebtedness to China, while only three in 10 Sierra Leoneans (30%) and Batswana (31%) express such concerns. This suggests that the U.S. government and other development partners may be meeting with some success in their efforts to remind Africans that even if money from China and other non-traditional development partners comes with fewer strings, they are in danger of being lured into a deepening debt trap.

Figure 12: Conditionalities on loans/assistance | 18 countries | 2019/2020



Respondents who said they are aware of Chinese loans or development assistance were asked: *When the government of China gives loans or development assistance to [our country], do you think they put more requirements or fewer requirements on our government compared to other donor countries, or haven't you heard enough to say?*
(Note: Respondents who are not aware of Chinese loans or development assistance are excluded.)

Figure 13: Views on loans/development assistance from China | 18 countries | 2019/2020



Respondents who said they are aware of Chinese loans or development assistance were asked:

Do you think that our government is required to repay China for the loans and development assistance it provides to [our country]?

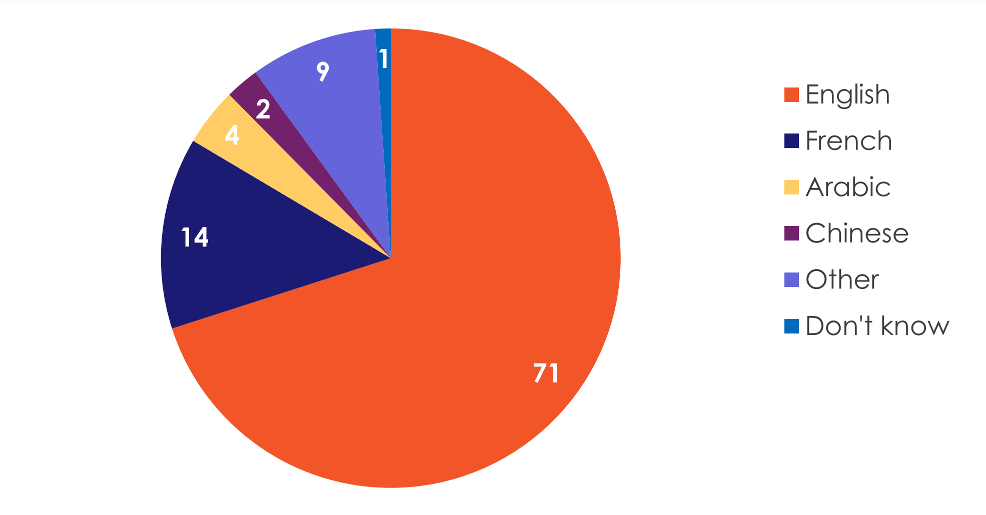
Do you think our government has borrowed too much money from China?

(Note: Respondents who are not aware of Chinese loans or development assistance are excluded.)

Best international language for the future

China's pursuit of cultural "soft power" (Nantulya, 2018), for example via an expanding network of Confucius Institutes across the continent (BBC, 2019), appears to be making little progress. Asked which international language they think is most important for young Africans to learn, seven in 10 respondents (71%) cite English, while only 2% choose Chinese (Figure 14). English is particularly valued by Africans with at least a secondary education (78%), though interest in Chinese is also higher among those with higher education (5%).

Figure 14: Most important international language to learn (%) | 18 countries | 2019/2020



Respondents were asked: *In thinking about the future of the next generation in our country, which of these international languages, if any, do you think is most important for young people to learn?*

Conclusion

Recent Afrobarometer surveys show that Africans generally hold positive views of both Chinese and U.S. economic and political influence on the continent. Moreover, attitudes toward the two countries are positively rather than negatively correlated, i.e. people who are feel positive toward China are also more likely to view the United States positively, and vice versa. However, China's perceived influence has decreased over the past five years, and many citizens are concerned about their government's indebtedness to China. In the end, Africans still prefer the United States over China as a development model for their country, and English remains the international language of choice across much of the continent. But Africans appear to welcome foreign engagement that meets their priorities, whether it originates in China or the United States.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Months when Round 8 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov-Dec 2019	-
Botswana	July-Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Ethiopia	Dec 2019-Jan 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb 2020	2015, 2017
Ghana	Sept-Oct 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov-Dec 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	Aug-Sept 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Malawi	Nov-Dec 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Namibia	Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Nigeria	Jan-Feb 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Tunisia	Feb-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept-Oct 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017

Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny is the Afrobarometer regional communications coordinator for anglophone West Africa, based at the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) in Accra. Email: jappiah@afrobarometer.org.

Edem Selormey is director of capacity building for Afrobarometer. Email: edem@afrobarometer.org.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace.

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