

Big push and great letdown: on the ambivalence of development zones and corridors

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Sub-Saharan Africa is in the midst of an unprecedented expansion of infrastructure networks: large-scale technical zones and corridors of industrial ports, roads, railways, pipelines, special economic zones, smart cities, power transmission lines, and agricultural development initiatives take shape across the continent. This expansion resonates strongly with the resurgence of the argument in development discourse of infrastructure as the key for unlocking local, national and regional economic growth. At the same time, large-scale technological projects are permeated with friction. Contestation ensues not only as to their economic impact, but also in regard to their capacity to significantly transform notions of space as well as social and political relations. As much as having the potential to connect and to include, they generate new borders, exclusions and destructions – both physically and socially.

In this proposed panel, we invite papers that provide new insights into how dynamics around large-scale infrastructure systems informs development theory, policy and practice. Potential contributions may speak to one or more of the following questions:

What are issues of contestation around social, environmental and economic impact of large corridors and economic zones?

What are continuities between current discourses and practices on large infrastructure and colonial/imperial tropes of infrastructure expansion and connectivity?

If and how do traditional arguments of modernization theory reverberate in today's discourse of infrastructure expansion?

Which social and symbolic values do governments, donors, private investors convey in their infrastructure master plans and visions?

How are values and promises related to infrastructural integration translated and perceived in settings directly affected by the projects?

Which dynamics of local participation, inclusion, exclusion and violence are engendered in the context of development corridors and economic zones?

How are identities and notions of belonging forged in new landscapes of interconnected localities?