



## Critical review

## Mobilizing research on Africa's development corridors

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## ABSTRACT

Across Africa, development corridors – networks of roads, railways, pipelines and ports that facilitate the movement of commodities between landlocked production areas, processing zones and global markets – are being built at an unprecedented pace. In mainstream development discourse, these mega-infrastructure projects have been framed as an effective way of creating conditions that are attractive to investors while simultaneously driving inclusive economic growth and development. Yet, recent geographic research on new development corridors has revealed certain tensions and inconsistencies in this win-win narrative, drawing attention to cases where the spatial reorganization of land that has accompanied corridor development has introduced new patterns of spatial exclusion and immobility. This article shows how approaching the study of development corridors using the new mobility paradigm – paying attention to uneven and conflicting mobilities along new corridor routes – stands to generate important empirical and theoretical insights about peoples' lived experiences with corridors, as well as about the trajectories of power enacted through corridor development. Ultimately, it is argued that applying the new mobilities paradigm in future research on development corridors may help researchers to better understand emergent forms of spatial exclusion and immobility created by new corridors.

## 1. Introduction

Globally, there has been an unprecedented expansion of transport infrastructure in recent years. In Africa, much of this transport infrastructure is being built as part of development corridors. Development corridors are networks of roads, railways, pipelines and ports, often accompanied by other types of infrastructure and regulatory reforms, built to enable the movement of commodities between sites of production and economic hubs. By some estimates, there are over 30 development corridors taking shape across Africa; if completed, these corridors will span over 53,000 km in length, crisscrossing Africa and opening vast areas of land for investment in the process (Laurance et al., 2014; Laurance et al., 2015).

The planning and implementation of new development corridors has been driven by an ongoing rush to invest in Africa's natural resources, as investors need transport infrastructure to move commodities between sites of production, processing zones and global markets. Alongside investor enthusiasm, the global development community has also demonstrated a strong level of support for new corridors. This support is premised on the idea that new investments in development corridors can be leveraged to support broader development objectives. As Mulenga (2013) writes, development corridors are understood “not only as a means of transporting goods and services or as a gateway for

land-locked countries, but also as a tool for stimulating social and economic development” (2013: 2). In short, the global development community has attached a ‘win-win’ narrative to Africa's corridor agenda, framing development corridors as an effective way of creating conditions that are attractive to investors, while simultaneously driving local, domestic and regional development.

Yet, recent geographic research on Africa's corridor agenda reveals tensions and inconsistencies in this win-win narrative, drawing attention to the unexpected, diverse and sometimes adverse impacts of corridor development on different segments of the population (for example, see: Enns (2017), Kirshner and Power (2015), Mosley and Watson (2016), Sulle (2017) and Sipangule (2017)). This research might be succinctly described as showing how the spatial reorganization of land that accompanies corridor development enables certain flows of capital, commodities and people to move easier across space, while introducing new forms of spatial exclusion and immobility for others. I argue that employing the new mobilities paradigm – which emphasizes the interdependent relationship between mobilities and immobilities – helps to make sense of what and who moves through corridors and what and who does not, as well as who benefits and who loses as a result of these mega-developments. In addition to enabling researchers to theorize about uneven and conflicting mobilities along new corridor routes, the new mobilities paradigm also serves as a lens

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to examine how trajectories of power are enacted through corridor development. Ultimately, applying the new mobilities paradigm to the study of development corridors presents an opportunity to nuance the ‘win-win’ narrative attached to Africa’s corridor agenda and to draw attention to new patterns of spatial exclusion and immobility that must be addressed if new corridors are to contribute to inclusive development.

To begin, this article briefly defines what development corridors are and then distills existing literature describing the development benefits of corridor construction. Next, the article illustrates how employing the new mobilities paradigm in future research might open additional avenues for understanding both how and why the spatial reorganization of land that accompanies corridor development introduces new patterns of spatial inclusion and exclusion. Then, in the final sections of this paper, I outline three specific directions for future research employing this approach, which includes research that pays attention to: (1) what and who moves *through* corridors and what and who does not; (2) what and who is moved or displaced *by* corridors; and, (3) new forms of movement and mobilization that emerge *in response to* corridor construction.

## 2. Africa’s development corridors

A corridor connects landlocked production areas to urban or coastal processing zones and international markets (Hope and Cox 2015; Smalley, 2017). Development corridors include both “hard” and “soft” infrastructure (Hope and Cox 2015). Hard infrastructure generally refers to transport infrastructure, such as roads, railways, pipelines and ports, as well as accompanying logistical infrastructure, such as transport services, storage facilities and processing plants. Soft infrastructure refers to regulatory reforms, such as one-stop borders, the creation of new implementation and monitoring agencies and investment promotion initiatives. In this sense, “a corridor is more than simply the transport route; the term signals either the concentrated presence of economic activity that is related to the route, or an explicit policy initiative that takes advantage of the transport infrastructure” (Smalley, 2017).

Much of the mainstream development discourse on Africa’s corridor agenda has been informed by development economists, transport and logistics specialists and conservation scientists (for example, see: Calderón and Servén (2008), Edwards et al. (2014), Kunaka and Carruthers (2014), Laurance et al. (2014, 2015) and Sloan et al. (2016)). Within this literature, Africa’s corridor agenda promises to serve the interests of investors, governments and everyday people alike. The premise underlying of this perspective is that constructing integrated networks of roads, railways, pipelines and ports attracts investors and drives industrial development in ‘underdeveloped’ rural spaces that ‘lack’ market linkages. This, in turn, drives the growth of secondary and supporting industries in the same spaces, which are key to development. Furthermore, well-planned corridors are also promised to deliver broader development benefits, including improved transportation and market and economic opportunities for rural people and better service delivery in rural spaces. Given the wide array of benefits that these projects are promised to deliver, development corridors have recently been described as “the key to unlocking Africa’s potential” (Aurecon, 2017), and as foundational to “achieving inclusive growth” (World Economic Forum, 2017).

Yet, the hype surrounding development corridors has, at times, turned a blind eye to the diverse, unexpected and sometimes adverse impacts that corridor development has on different segments of the population. There is an overwhelming assumption within this literature that the development benefits of new corridors naturally drive inclusive development – which may or may not be the case. There is a need for more research that acknowledges the impacts of Africa’s corridor agenda for everyday people, including the fact that this approach to development creates new patterns of spatial inclusion and exclusion

simultaneously. Although there are many possible entry points for such research, in the sections that follow I show why the new mobilities paradigm may be a particularly productive lens to adopt in future research.

## 3. Mobilizing research on Africa’s development corridors

During the early 2000s, the new mobilities paradigm emerged as researchers began to pay greater attention to “...mobility in the forms of movement of people (human mobility), social networks and relations (social mobility), trade and capital (economic mobility), and information and images (symbolic mobility)” (Ilcan, 2013: 3). Although it may seem surprising – given that corridors are all about facilitating movement – analyses of corridors in Africa that apply such a critical mobilities perspective remain relatively few.<sup>1</sup> By examining how emergent and familiar forms of mobility and immobility are prompted, produced and interrupted by development corridors, research applying a critical mobility perspective stands to generate important empirical and theoretical insights about peoples’ everyday lived experiences with corridors, as well as how trajectories of power are enacted through corridor development. The remainder of this article outlines three specific research directions that might be pursued towards this end.

### 3.1. Moving through development corridors

Africa’s new development corridors are being built to enhance flows of commodities between landlocked production areas and urban or coastal processing zones. In addition to serving the interests of investors by moving commodities more efficiently to global markets, corridors are also promised to benefit local populations by creating new market linkages between rural and urban spaces. For example, the Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) is anchored by a pipeline to move oil from northern Kenya to the coast. Yet, the corridor is also promised to benefit pastoralists in the region by serving as a cross-country livestock marketing route – and smallholder farmers through the creation of a new agricultural growth zone. Similarly, the core concept of the Nacala corridor in Mozambique is to rehabilitate the rail line that travels between northern Mozambique and the port of Nacala to create a new route for the transport of coal. Improved road infrastructure is also promised to provide improved trade routes for smallholder farmers. The corridor agenda has been constructed on the imaginary of a seamless Africa, as new corridors are promised to enable flows of capital, commodities and people to circulate with ease across space and between scales.

However, it is clear that there is often a significant gap between imagination and reality, as far as Africa’s corridor agenda is concerned. Although corridors might enable *certain* commodities, capital and people to circulate with new ease; not all forms of capital, commodities and people move through corridors with the same ease. For instance, the construction of the Walvis Bay Corridor involves improving road connectivity between the Copperbelt of Zambia and Namibia’s sea port. Container trucks carrying frozen fish now speed along the new highways connecting Namibia and Zambia to distribute fish, flooding supermarkets in landlocked Zambia with seafood. On route, the same trucks barrel by rural fisherfolk who remain largely excluded from the growing, cross-border value chains that have been created by corridor construction and now facing great competition in local markets. Thus, although new corridors contribute to connecting sites of production, consumption and trade, not all people move seamlessly through new transport infrastructure.

The new mobilities paradigm offers concepts to challenge imagined tropes about development corridors and to theorize about why some

<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a body of literature that uses the new mobilities paradigm to study roads in Africa, for example see Nielsen (2012) and Klaeger (2012, 2013).

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