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Reshaping power-geometries?

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# CHINESE PARTICIPATION IN KENYAN TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE: RESHAPING POWER-GEOMETRIES?

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## Introduction

The African continent is undergoing a process of *respacing* through infrastructure development.<sup>2</sup> Railways, roads, ports and airports have increasingly become the focus of national developmental agendas, as well as the developmental agendas of regional actors.<sup>3</sup> These processes are particularly relevant in East Africa, where several infrastructure projects are under way. At present, infrastructure development is one of the main goals of the East African Community, and it also features prominently in the national developmental agenda of Kenya.<sup>4</sup> ‘Kenya Vision 2030’ relies on the development of several large, middle and small-scale infrastructure projects to materialise the promise of *émergence*. Infrastructure has historically been both a tool and a reflection of state power, and current development agendas are contributing to reposition the state as driver of development. The centralisation of decision-making processes concerning infrastructural development in the hands of state and parastate actors is a common trend across the continent, yet diverging agendas and the involvement of private or foreign actors produces a complex and layered political reality.

In the 21st century, following an increase in the demand for infrastructure financing on the African continent, investment from China, recently also under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ulf Engel and Paul Nugent, “The Spatial Turn in African Studies,” in *Respacing Africa*, ed. Ulf Engel and Paul Nugent, Leiden, Brill, 2010, 1–9.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Nugent, “Africa’s Re-Enchantment with Big Infrastructure: White Elephants Dancing in Virtuous Circles?,” in Jon Schubert, Ulf Engel, and Elísio Macamo (eds.) *Extractive Industries and Changing State Dynamics in Africa: Beyond the Resource Curse*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2018, 22–40.

<sup>4</sup> East African Community, “Vision 2050: Regional Vision for Socio-Economic Transformation and Development”, Arusha, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative is a Chinese-lead initiative aiming to foster global connectivity through a sea and a land route.

(一帶一路 – *yi dai yi lu*), has joined the financing from countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and from international organisations, such as the World Bank.<sup>6</sup> Chinese financing is certainly assuming a central role in infrastructure development across the continent, but Chinese contractors are also expanding their activities to projects not funded by Chinese actors, increasing their market share in the construction industry from 9.9% in 2002 to above 40% in 2011.<sup>7</sup> This is the case for Lamu port in Northern Kenya, focus of this paper, currently funded by the Kenyan government and built by a Chinese construction company. The Lamu port project is part of the broader connectivity initiative, the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor<sup>8</sup>, a connectivity initiative aimed to connect Kenya to South Sudan and Ethiopia through the development of cross-border connectivity infrastructure, and key component of the developmental agenda Kenya Vision 2030.

The institutional structure deployed to coordinate and guide the development of LAPSSET Corridor is highly centralised, as it is often the case with developmental agendas' flagship projects. The Office of the President officially introduced the LAPSSET corridor and created a state authority – LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority (LCDA) – to oversee and guide the implementation of all corridor components.<sup>9</sup> The politics of *émergence* opens new avenues for the redeployment of state as the driver of development initiatives, but, at the same time, it also unveils evolving power-relations amongst the actors involved. The Chinese-constructed Lamu port is far more than (yet) another Chinese-constructed infrastructure project in Africa; its role as catalyst for the LAPSSET corridor project and its location make it a viable point of connectivity that has increasingly attracted the attention of the international community, including Chinese actors.

China-Africa research has so far focused mainly on the drivers for Chinese engagement with African nations<sup>10</sup> and on the effects of said engagement<sup>11</sup>, failing to account for the role of African actors in shaping interactions with their Chinese counterpart and for the fragmented nature of

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<sup>6</sup> Emilian Kavalski, "Chinese Normative Communities of Practice: Comparative Study of China's Relational Governance of Africa and Central Asia," in Xing Li and Osman Farah Abdulkadir (eds), *China-Africa Relations in the Era of Great Transformation*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Zhengli Huang and Xiangming Chen, "Is China Building Africa?," *The European Financial Review*, July 1, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> LAPSSET Corridor is a connectivity initiative aimed to connecting Kenya to South Sudan and Ethiopia through the development of cross-border connectivity infrastructure.

<sup>9</sup> Presidential Order Kenya Gazette Supplement No. 51, Legal Notice No. 58, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See for examples Ian Taylor, "China's New Role in Africa", *Choice Reviews Online*, 46, 2009; Chris Alden, "China and Africa", *Routledge Handbook of African Politics*, 2013; Wenjie Chen, David Dollar, and Heiwai Tang, "Why Is China Investing in Africa? Evidence from the Firm Level," *The World Bank Economic Review*, 32, 2018, 610–632.

<sup>11</sup> See amongst many others Jason Z Yin and Sofia Vaschetto, "China's Business Engagement in Africa," *The Chinese Economy*, 44(2), 2011, 43–57; Anzette Were, "Debt Trap? Chinese Loans and Africa's Development Options", South African Institute for International Affairs, 2018.

governance in China.<sup>12</sup> Recently, increasing research began to investigate political practices and socio-economic environments within African nations, highlighting the importance of African agency in shaping Sino-African engagement in infrastructure development.<sup>13</sup> However, the ways in which Chinese participation in infrastructure projects fits within or reshapes pre-existing power relations amongst host-country actors still remain under-researched. Thus, this paper questions whether infrastructure with Chinese participation offers African governments the opportunity to strengthen their hold on the peripheries or gives authorities in the periphery new possibilities to bargain with the national government. In other words, does infrastructure with Chinese participation contribute to the reshaping of geographies of power?

I draw from the work of critical political geographer Doreen Massey to analyse these geographies of power. Her works on the spatiality of power, inequality and uneven development are fundamental to the study of power-relations, as they emphasise the role the socio-spatial plays in shaping geographies of power. Starting from *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, Massey called for a stronger focus on regional differences and experiences, thus beginning to conceptualise spatial core-periphery dynamics as relational.<sup>14</sup> This culminated in a theoretical effort to bring space to the forefront of the analysis. Her conceptualisation of space stemmed from the need to incorporate the political sphere and go beyond a static understanding of space. According to Massey, space is created through interactions and relations, it encompasses multiplicity and emergence (of actors, temporalities, lived experiences and imaginaries), and lastly, space is constantly in the process of making.

Following this understanding of space, Massey also called for a new conceptualisation of geographies of power, which would embrace their nature of “evolving outcomes of processes of socio-political contestation”, what she calls *power-geometries*.<sup>15</sup> In order to investigate the

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<sup>12</sup> see footnote 55.

<sup>13</sup> see amongst others Hezron Makundi, Huib Huyse, and Patrick Develtere, “Negotiating the Technological Capacity in Chinese Engagements: Is the Tanzanian Government in the Driving Seat?,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 24, no. 3 (2017): 331–53; Chris Alden, Cobus van Staden, and Yu-Shan Wu, “The Flawed Debate around Africa’s China Debt and the Overlooked Agency of African Leaders,” *Quartz Africa*, 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1427173/africa-s-china-debt-is-in-the-control-of-its-governments/>; Folashadé Soulé-Kohndou, “Bureaucratic Agency and Power Asymmetry in Benin-China Relations,” in *New Directions in Africa-China Studies*, ed. Chris Alden and Marcus Power (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 189–204; Chris Aden and Daniel Large, “Studying Africa and China,” in *New Directions in Africa-China Studies*, ed. Chris Alden and Daniel Large (London: Routledge, 2019), 3–35; Frangton Chiyemura, “The Winds of Change in Africa-China Relations? Contextualising African Agency in Ethiopia-China Engagement in Wind Energy Infrastructure Financing and Development” (The Open University, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*, 2nd ed, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Doreen Massey, “Concepts of Space and Power in Theory and in Political Practice,” *Documents d’Anàlisi Geogràfica* 55, 2009, 22.

complexities of the relations of power amongst actors, it is necessary to focus on how actors derive their power from their interactions, thus being able to exercise differentiated degrees of agency.<sup>16</sup> Power does not flow between the actors but is the result of their power-geometries, whether imbued with cooperation or controversy. Power-geometries encompass the reproduction of patterns of exclusion, as well as the possibilities for new relations to be forged. The focus on socio-spatial dynamics centres the analysis around power-relations, instead of on “formal spatial rules” of scale.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, Massey’s notion of power-geometries allows the possibility of putting ‘the local’ and ‘the global’ in conversation, blurring the boundaries between them.

To unpack power-geometries, I focus on the controversies that arose in the planning phase of Lamu port. Controversies have captured the attention of political geographers such as Barry or Hönke and Cuesta-Fernandez, the latter of which developed a controversies approach to analyse the disputes emerging in logistics infrastructure, specifically how their development is “negotiated, contested and obstructed in different ways”.<sup>18</sup> By focusing on the controversies emerging during the planning of infrastructure it is possible to shed light on the relations amongst the actors involved, particularly questioning the degree in which the national government is redeploying itself in governing and overseeing infrastructural development. This paper investigates the controversies involving the national government – represented by various state and parastate actors – and the regional government, namely Lamu county government. I reflect on the evolution of relations between the national and county governments, highlighting how the presence of Chinese actors has both reproduced pre-existing geographies of power, but also contributed to the emergence of new power-geometries.

This article is based upon qualitative data collected through fieldwork research in China and Kenya (July 2018 – July 2019), and also on media, government and civil societies’ reports concerning Lamu port and LAPSSET, as well as archival research in Lamu Town Archives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Kenyan and Chinese government officials, representatives from Kenyan state corporations and Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), contractor associations in both Kenya and China, Kenyan activist groups, actors in the global maritime industry, as well

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<sup>16</sup> Doreen Massey, “Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in John Bird et al. (eds.) *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, London, Routledge, 1993, 59–69; D. Massey, “Concepts of Space and Power in Theory and in Political Practice.”

<sup>17</sup> Doreen Massey, “The Geography of Power” in Brett Christophers et al (eds.) *The Doreen Massey Reader*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018, 191–96.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Barry, *Material Politics*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013; Jana Hönke and Ivan Cuesta-Fernandez, “Mobilising Security and Logistics through an African Port: A Controversies Approach to Infrastructure,” *Mobilities*, 13(2),2018): 2.

as construction workers and members of the Lamu constituency. The interviews were conducted in either English, Mandarin or Italian, depending on the interviewee's most familiar language. The paper is structured as follows. First, the article contextualises the Lamu port project and the Chinese participation, highlighting the historical marginalisation trajectories. Second, the paper offers a window into the multifaceted relations amongst the national and county governments of Kenya involved in the controversy around land allocation for the establishment of the Lamu Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Third, the article focuses on the controversy arising from localisation of labour in Lamu construction site, highlighting the room for manoeuvre the county government has gained by negotiating directly with the Chinese contractor. The conclusion offers reflections on the role of Chinese actors in reshaping power-geometries.

## **Contextualising the Chinese-built Lamu port: a continuum of marginalisation**

The origins of the current project for Lamu port can be traced back to a few years after independence. The first talks on the possibility of developing Lamu port were in the 1970s, when French consultant Renardet-Sauti identified Lamu as the best location for a second port in Kenya.<sup>19</sup> This report suggested that, due to the lack of connectivity infrastructure in the area, Lamu port should be considered as a long-term project.<sup>20</sup> Funds were instead directed to the expansion of Mombasa port, which did not require further investment in other related infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> Lamu port was shelved until 2004, when the Integrated National Transport Policy – a government initiative designed to integrate development goals with infrastructure needs – was being drafted. The Kenyan government focused on infrastructure as a tool for integrating the national economy further, and Lamu port was revived as part of the Rail/Road, Oil Pipeline, Oil Refinery, Lamu Port, and Airports (ROOLA) Project – a connectivity initiative aimed at making Lamu the gateway from Sudan to the Indian Ocean – financed by the New Partnership for Africa's Development.<sup>22</sup> This project was abandoned due to increasing criticism to the lack of due process for financing

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<sup>19</sup> Lindsay Bremner, "Towards a Minor Global Architecture at Lamu, Kenya," in Suzanne Hall and Ricky Burdett (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of the 21st Century City*, London: Sage, 2017, 613–29.

<sup>20</sup> Renardet-Sauti, "Manda Bay Port: Feasibility Study of Kenya's Second Port", Nairobi, 1977.

<sup>21</sup> Brian S Hoyle, *Seaports and Development: The Experience of Kenya and Tanzania*, New York, Gordon and Breach, 1983, 234–236.

<sup>22</sup> Adrian J. Browne, "LAPSSET: The History and Politics of an Eastern African Megaproject," Nairobi, Rift Valley Institute, 2015.

scoping studies.<sup>23</sup> In 2011, the Lamu port project was re-introduced as part of the broader connectivity initiative LAPSSET corridor.



Figure 1: Map of LAPSSET Corridor (Source: UN maps, adapted by author)

LAPSSET proposed infrastructure include Lamu port, a highway and railway system and a pipeline, and LCDA suggests that it will generate economic growth along its routes.<sup>24</sup> LAPSSET corridor's slogan 'building Africa's transformative and game changer infrastructure to deliver a just and prosperous Kenya' speaks to the symbolic and political meaning this initiative has in the national and international discourse. The centrality of LAPSSET to the country's developmental agenda was evident during the initial agenda-setting stages. In looking for funding for Lamu port Phase 1 – the construction of port headquarters and berths 1-3 – international donors were approached

<sup>23</sup> A J Browne, "LAPSSET: The History and Politics of an Eastern African Megaproject".

<sup>24</sup> Silvester Kasuku, "LAPSSET Investment Possibilities," 2013.

first. The World Bank and the African Development Bank both launched studies to gather information on existing traffic in Mombasa port and predicted demand in Lamu from shipping lines active in the country, both national and international.<sup>25</sup> The Western shipping lines (amongst the most active in Kenya) consulted by said donors disclosed concerns over cargo demand in Northern Kenya and South Sudan, and the lack of connectivity infrastructure. When the scoping studies appeared inconclusive, the Kenyan government of former President Kibaki resolved to fund the first phase of construction themselves for a total of USD 480 million. This decision was guided by the necessity to show commitment to LAPSSET corridor to partner countries South Sudan and Ethiopia, and to international donors alike, but also by the desire to reposition the “country’s reputation as the region’s stable economic hub and gateway, which had been shaken by the post-election violence of 2007-2008”.<sup>26</sup>

Silvester Kasuku, Chief Executive Officer of LCDA stated that “doing the seed investment by constructing the first three berths [is a way to] just break the ground and put government commitment and investment and provide incentives for private sector investors to come on board”.<sup>27</sup> The willingness to self-fund was indeed met with interest by the African Development Bank to participate in other components of LAPSSET, for instance funding the engineering design and feasibility study of the road between Lamu and Isiolo.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, concerns over national budget allocation from the National Treasury for the construction of Lamu port already emerged in 2014.<sup>29</sup> In August 2018, President Uhuru Kenyatta visited the construction site of Lamu port, in what the press called an “impromptu visit”.<sup>30</sup> At first glance, this visit might seem a routine inspection of a national infrastructural development project, but it was motivated by the need to ‘champion’ Lamu port and raise confidence in the rationale for its construction, in order to push the National Treasury to inject a new round of funding. About half a year before Kenyatta’s visit, the contractor had demobilised construction activities in the port due to delays in payment from the Kenyan government.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Interview, Regional Manager, International Shipping Line, Mombasa, 14.02.19

<sup>26</sup> A J Browne, “LAPSSET: The History and Politics of an Eastern African Megaproject,” 17.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Drazen Jorgic, “Kenya Says Chinese Firm Wins First Tender for Lamu Port Project,” Reuters, 2013, <https://reut.rs/36Iv5P2>.

<sup>28</sup> LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority, “Brief on Lapsset Corridor Project,” 2016, <http://bit.ly/3aWAq8N>.

<sup>29</sup> George Omondi, “Challenges Stall Grand Schemes to Spur Growth,” *Business Daily*, January 1, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Praxides Cheti, “Uhuru Makes Impromptu Visit to Lamu, Warns Contractors over Slow Works,” *The Star*, August 1, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2RH4Jst>.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Mwita, “Dredging, Financing Slows Lamu Port Construction,” *The Star*, July 30, 2019; Martin Mwita, “Controversy Surrounds Lamu Port Ahead Commissioning,” *The Star*, September 3, 2019; Interview, Programme Officer, State Authority, Nairobi, 30.11.18.



Being a flagship project of the national developmental agenda ‘Kenya Vision 2030’, LAPSSET is also similarly grounded on the rhetoric of ‘opening up’ remote areas of the country and ‘integrate’ them in the national economy.<sup>32</sup> This echoes the Kenyan state’s understanding of LAPSSET corridor. The national government is extending its reach and power over the peripheries in a “practice of territorialisation”.<sup>33</sup> The attempts by the state to project power over the peripheries materialise also in the recent reorganisation through devolution began in 2010, when Constitutional Reform was carried out to address the uneven allocation of resources across the national territory. 47 counties were formed and the reform was accompanied by a devolution of power from the centralised government to the counties.<sup>34</sup> Since power is considered as relational,<sup>35</sup> the establishment of 47 counties should be considered together with the relations they have with other governmental entities within Kenya, as well as the historical trajectories of their formation.

The colonial system of governance included administrative regions, but was focused on retaining centralised power and deploying resources in specific areas inhabited by white settlers or related to their economic activities.<sup>36</sup> At the beginning of the 1960s, during the independence negotiations, minority groups advocated for a constitutional system which recognised different regions (*majimbo* in Kiswahili) of the soon-to-be independent state.<sup>37</sup> At this point in time, minority groups were afraid that the clientelist structure of power that characterised the colonial era would be replicated through power being concentrated in the hands of the most populous ethnic groups (such as Kikuyu and Luo).<sup>38</sup> The first attempt to actualise *majimbo* took place soon after independence, through the support of the Kenya African Democratic Union, which included different minority leaders.<sup>39</sup> However, the first government of the Kenya National African Union led by President

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<sup>32</sup> Government of Kenya, “Vision 2030 Development Strategy for Northern Kenya and Other Arid Lands” (Nairobi, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Gediminas Lesutis, “How to Understand a Development Corridor? The Case of Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia–Transport Corridor in Kenya,” *Area*, no. November (2019): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12601>.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, the county Government was given control over the county community land, yet the national government still retains the power to repossess land when it is not privately-owned (proven by land titles). In addition to public and private land, Kenya has a third category, community land, which can be registered to a group of representatives from a community who has ancestral right to that land or held by the county government.

<sup>35</sup> D. Massey, “Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place.”

<sup>36</sup> Karuti Kanyinga, “Devolution and the New Politics of Development in Kenya,” *African Studies Review* 59(3), 2016, 155–67; Patricia Stamp, “Local Government in Kenya: Ideology and Political Practice, 1895-1974,” *African Studies Review*, 29(4), 2018, 17–42.

<sup>37</sup> David M Anderson, “Yours in Struggle for Majimbo’. Nationalism and the Party Politics of Decolonization in Kenya, 1955–64,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40(3), 2005, 547–64; K Kanyinga, “Devolution and the New Politics of Development in Kenya.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> K Kanyinga, “Devolution and the New Politics of Development in Kenya.”

Jomo Kenyatta (1964-1978) abolished regional administrations, leaving less-developed areas unable to access funds or other resources.<sup>40</sup>

The re-emergence of the call for *majimbo* in the 1980s and the 1990s was influenced by both internal discontent and external factors. In the 1980s, decentralisation policies were supported by international donors and organisations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.<sup>41</sup> During the Structural Adjustment Programmes, the idea that centralisation was the leading cause of inequality, marginalisation, conflict, and the lack of development gained consensus amongst Bretton-Woods institutions.<sup>42</sup> Particularly in regards to development initiatives, international donors argued that without actualising decentralisation, the national government would be unable to distribute resources in all its territory.<sup>43</sup> The 2007-2008 post-election violence was a turning point in the history of Kenya's *majimbo*. Leading up to the elections, both opposition leader Raila Odinga and Mwai Kibaki were focused on gaining political power in order to retain control over resource allocation.<sup>44</sup> Over-centralisation of power resulted in unequal allocation of resources, marginalisation, and a different focus on development initiatives across the country.

The power-geometries at this point in time were unequal geographies of power. The 2010 Constitutional Reform represented an “ambitious and rigorous experiment in democratic decentralisation”, and an initiative to foster the formation of a cohesive political structure.<sup>45</sup> With the goal of equal distribution of resources and power, resources had to be allocated to reduce the inequalities that characterised the relations of the past, hence the promotion of development initiatives in “new frontiers” of Kenya.<sup>46</sup> This means that historically marginalised regions are now spaces for national developmental initiatives. Nonetheless, the emerging power-geometries after devolution are highly pluralised and characterised by competing agendas. For instance, the

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*; Ornit Avidar, “Half-Hearted Devolution: A View of Kenya’s Water Governance from Siaya County, Kenya,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 9 (4), 2018, 319–38; Michelle D’Arcy and Agnes Cornell, “Devolution and Corruption in Kenya: Everyone’s Turn to Eat?,” *African Affairs* 115 (459), 2016, 246–73.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> M D’Arcy and A Cornell, “Devolution and Corruption in Kenya: Everyone’s Turn to Eat?”

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*; Agnes Cornell and Michelle D’Arcy, “Plus Ça Change? County-Level Politics in Kenya after Devolution,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8(1), 2014, 173–9.

<sup>44</sup> Susanne Mueller, “The Political Economy of Kenya’s Crisis,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2(2), 2008, 185–210; Susanne Mueller, “The Resilience of the Past: Government and Opposition in Kenya,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 48(2), 2014, 333–52.

<sup>45</sup> Rotimi Subera, “Federalism and Decentralization,” in Nic Cheeseman, David M Anderson, and Andrea Scheibler (eds), *Routledge Handbook Of African Politics*, London, Routledge, 2013, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Jason Mosley and Elizabeth E Watson, “Frontier Transformations: Development Visions, Spaces and Processes in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 2016, 452–475.

imaginaries of the future brought through infrastructure development diverge greatly.<sup>47</sup> When expectations are not met, as in the case of labour localisation discussed in this paper, controversies spark. It is not surprising that the Office of the President continues to lead the implementation of LAPSET by centralising the decision-making processes amongst national-level state actors. The decision-making processes are in the hands of the board of LCDA, established in 2013, and comprising state actors (National Treasury, the Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, and the Ministry of Lands and Physical Planning) and parastate agencies (Kenya Ports Authority, the National Environment Management Authority and the National Land Commission).

The controversies amongst state actors is also connected to the increasing presence and interest of Chinese actors in participating to the Lamu port project. The public tender for the construction of the first three berths of Lamu port was published by LCDA and was awarded to the Chinese State-owned Enterprise (SOE) China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) through its subsidiary China Road Bridge Corporation (CRBC) in 2013. The technical and financial capacity of CRBC and their lower mobilisation costs were key factors for the committee – composed of representatives from the Kenya Ports Authority, the Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development, LCDA, and National Treasury – selecting the winning bid for the Engineering Procurement Construction (EPC) contract. The lower mobilisation costs were a competitive advantage gained through more than 35 years of operations in Kenya. In the country since 1984, CRBC has drastically increased its business, starting from participating in road construction as a sub-contractor, to winning public tenders for larger projects. Most notably, in 2017, CRBC completed the construction of the Nairobi-Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), a 472-kilometers railway financed by China Export Import Bank, although no tendering process<sup>48</sup> took place for this project.<sup>49</sup> The growth of CRBC's activities in Kenya means that the company can utilise machineries and deploy technical personnel from previous projects, such as SGR construction, thus reducing mobilisation costs.

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<sup>47</sup> Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 327–43, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522>.

<sup>48</sup> China Export Import Bank requires 70% of content be Chinese, while a recent study shows that 89% of Chinese-funded projects have a Chinese contractor according to a recent study by Jonathan E. Hillman, "The Belt and Road's Barriers to Participation," *Reconnecting Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2GGoquo>.

<sup>49</sup> Yuan Wang and Uwe Wissenbach, "Clientelism at Work? A Case Study of Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway Project," *Economic History of Developing Regions*, (34)3, 2019, 280–99.

The financial capabilities of CRBC turned out to be crucial as well. Although the contract awarded to them is an EPC contract, the company is currently advancing the necessary funds for construction, and then billing the Kenyan counterpart on an annual basis.<sup>50</sup> This funding scheme is comparable to a ‘pay as you go’ service, but questions remain regarding its effectiveness. Concerns over the necessity of funding the subsequent phases of port development led LCDA to open a call for Privately Initiated Investment Proposals<sup>51</sup>, which resulted in Lamu port and LAPSSET catching the attention of other Chinese actors more broadly. In April 2019, LAPSSET corridor was nominated as a “project catalysing connectivity” during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.<sup>52</sup> In the same year, ChemChina UK – a subsidiary of the SOE China National Chemical Corporation – won the bid to purchase the first exports of Turkana crude oil, expected to be transported through the planned Turkana-Lamu pipeline.<sup>53</sup>

In 2019, China Merchants Port, a subsidiary of the SOE China Merchants Group, submitted a Privately Initiated Investment Proposal to the Kenyan government, expressing their willingness to negotiate a Public Private Partnership to cover the remaining cost of Phase 1 (approx. USD 200 mil), build berths 4-6, carry out port operations, and develop a city/industrial park,<sup>54</sup> a type of SEZ. The development of a city and industrial park adjacent to a port infrastructure is an engagement practice that Chinese officials refer to as Port+Park+City Model (港口+园区+城市, *gangkou+yuanqu+chengshi*).<sup>55</sup> This model – now an official blueprint of the Belt and Road Initiative

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<sup>50</sup> Interview, Senior Manager, State Corporation, Mombasa, 03.12.18; Interview, Deputy General Manager, SOE Nairobi, 05.07.19.

<sup>51</sup> Privately Initiated Investment Proposals differ from public tendering processes as they are not public and the proposals are evaluated on a case-to-case basis.

<sup>52</sup> Belt and Road Forum, “第二届‘一带一路’国际合作高峰论坛圆桌峰会联合公报 *Di Er Jie Yi Dai Yi Lu' Guoji Hezuo Gaofeng Luntan Yuanzhuo Fenghui Lianhe Gongbao* [Joint Communiqué of the Leaders’ Roundtable of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation]”, Xinhua News, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2S4g9pf>.

<sup>53</sup> Business Daily, “Kenya Sells Its First Oil to China,” August 16, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Interview, in Lamu, 24.02.19

<sup>55</sup> In 2017, CCCC and China Merchants Group – the parent companies of CRBC and China Merchants Port respectively – signed a Cooperation Agreement to develop their international businesses (see China Merchants Group, “Co-Operation Agreement between China Merchants Group and China Communications Construction,” 2017). This suggests increased cooperation between these two Chinese SOEs to construct and operate port infrastructure overseas. The port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka – built by CCCC and given in concession for 99 years to China Merchants Port after the Sri Lankan government defaulted on the loan repayments – is an example, but it should not necessarily be considered a pattern. In fact, it is important to highlight that the decision-making processes taking place in overseas headquarters of Chinese SOEs, in this case CRBC Nairobi, are significantly disconnected from Beijing politics when the funding is not from Chinese banks. The governance structure of Chinese SOEs has evolved greatly throughout the decades, seeing a continuous effort to grant SOEs abroad relative operational autonomy from policy-making processes in Beijing. I explore this aspect in-depth in my doctoral thesis, drawing from the seminal works in Chinese studies on the fragmentation of Chinese decision-making processes. See Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, “‘Fragmented Authoritarianism’ or ‘Integrated Fragmentation?’,” in *Chinese Politics as Fragmented Authoritarianism*, ed. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard (Lon: Routledge, 2017), 38–55. I suggest that the influence of Chinese state actors should continue to be taken into account, but so should the 40 years of economic and institutional reforms

– encourages Chinese actors to not only participate in port construction, but also to develop a network of related infrastructure surrounding the port, specifically SEZs.<sup>56</sup> China Merchants Port’s proposal prompted the necessity to allocate land for further development initiatives, sparking a controversy amongst the national and the county governments.

## Land allocation for Lamu SEZ

The location hosting the construction of Lamu port and the proposed SEZ, carries “territorial legacies”<sup>57</sup> not only in regards to its longstanding maritime history dating as far back as 1000 AD,<sup>58</sup> but also to the historical marginalisation of this region. Lamu County is in the bottom ten counties in Kenya in terms of poverty indicators, and controversies which arose during the planning of Lamu port reflect pre-existing tensions and imbalances of power.<sup>59</sup> An historical trajectory of power-geometries imbued with marginalisation can be traced in the relations between Ministry of Transport and the communities inhabiting the Lamu regions concerning infrastructure construction. For instance, the landing jetty that leads from Manda island (which hosts the airport) to the channel facing Lamu Town collapsed on several occasions, and delays in allocating resources to repair it caused discontent and distrust in the Ministry of Transport, which had the mandate to choose a contractor for this project. The jetty first collapsed in 1986, but four years later a contractor had still not been allocated the contract, and the tourism sector was suffering deeply.<sup>60</sup> By that time, residents had raised money for its repair through an *harambee*, a self-help crowd-funding practice common in Kenya.<sup>61</sup> It is estimated that in the 1970s, funds raised through *harambee* made up 10% of the national funds spent for development projects.<sup>62</sup>

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that have greatly reshaped the relationship between the Chinese state and SOEs. The reforms have encompassed economic reforms focused on furthering market liberalisation, SOEs reforms (also in managerial terms) to foster their internationalisation, and arbitrary funding and de-funding of public companies, resulting in increasing information asymmetry between SOEs and the state, and, in turn, relative operational autonomy of overseas headquarters. The relative operational autonomy gives room for manoeuvre to Chinese directors and managers in overseas branches to participate to international EPC tenders without the direct involvement of state actors.

<sup>56</sup> Belt and Road Initiative Portal, “一带一路”建设海上合作设想 *Yi Dai Yi Lu Jianshe Haishang Hezuo Shexiang* [Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative],” 2017, <http://bit.ly/2GFPQAr>.

<sup>57</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London, Sage, 2005, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Mark Horton and John Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell, 2000, 73.

<sup>59</sup> Kenya National Bureau of Standards and Society for International Development, “Exploring Kenya’s Inequality”, Nairobi, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Coast News, “Broken Jetty Hits Industry,” May 14, 1990.

<sup>61</sup> Coast News, “Broken Jetty Riles Residents,” November 5, 1990.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara P. Thomas, “Development through Harambee: Who Wins and Who Loses? Rural Self-Help Projects in Kenya,” *World Development*, 15(4), 1987, 463–81.

Already in the 1970s, the first Lamu port proposal revealed a promise of development made from Nairobi – the centre – to Lamu – the periphery – that never materialised. The promise of infrastructural development lingered in Lamu newspapers long after it had been abandoned, still being discussed in the late 1980s.<sup>63</sup> This unrealised initiative reinforced the geographies of power between the national government and counties in the periphery, and according to some members of the county government, Lamu port and LAPSSET still leave the county government and Lamu people as “mere spectators”.<sup>64</sup> A pivotal moment in the national-county government relations was a court case from 2012, for which in 2018 the High Court of Kenya ruled that the exclusion of the county government from the conceptualisation of Lamu port was a violation of the new 2010 Constitution.<sup>65</sup> Yet, the historical marginalisation remains an important aspect of evolution of relations amongst national and county governments, and thus current power-geometries.

In Lamu county, grievances related to land date back to the resettlement programmes for Internally Displaced Persons started in the 1970s. Soon after independence, President Jomo Kenyatta inaugurated the Mpeketoni Settlement Scheme to resettle landless Kikuyu people from central Kenya in the coast of Lamu. At the same time, Lamu indigenous Swahili communities living at the border with Somalia, were forced to move South due to increased violence and conflict, but no land was allocated to them.<sup>66</sup> The Kikuyu settlers became land owners when the Jomo Kenyatta’s government assigned them land rights over what was considered public land, although Swahili communities consider it their ancestral land.<sup>67</sup> When land repossession to construct Lamu port began, activists and elders representing indigenous communities accused LCDA of “taking land directly from the National Land Commission, without consulting us [the communities]”.<sup>68</sup> Land has always been a cause for debate and contestation in Kenya,<sup>69</sup> and LAPSSET components have been no exception.<sup>70</sup> The SEZ planned in Lamu is one of the three SEZs included in the ‘Kenya Vision 2030’, under the mandate of the Ministry for Industrialisation, and is expected to include

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<sup>63</sup> The Nation, “Manda Port Plans Pending,” November 29, 1988.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, Senior Official, County Government, Lamu, 13.07.19

<sup>65</sup> High Court of Kenya, Petition n22 of 2012 (2012).

<sup>66</sup> Paul Goldsmith, “Constitutional Reform and Minority Exclusion,” in Ridwan Laher and Korir Sing’oei (eds) *Indigenous People in Africa. Contestations, Empowerment and Group Rights*, Pretoria, Africa Institute of South Africa, 2014, 85–103.

<sup>67</sup> Abdirizak A Nunow, “The Displacement and Dispossession of the Aweer (Boni) Community: The Kenya Government Dilemma on the New Port of Global Land Grabbing II,” in *Global Land Grabbing II*, 2012; Mazera Ndurya, “How Squatters Became Land Owners in Lamu,” *Daily Nation*, June 29, 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Interview, Chairman, Civil Society Coalition, Lamu, 13.03.19

<sup>69</sup> see for example the works by Catherine Boone and Karuti Kanyinga.

<sup>70</sup> Ngala Chome, “Land, Livelihoods and Belonging: Negotiating Change and Anticipating LAPSSET in Kenya’s Lamu County,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, no. 2 (2020): 310–331.

an industrial hub (heavy and medium-light industries) and freight logistics hub.<sup>71</sup> The allocation of land to the construction of the Lamu SEZ became a pressing matter when the Privately Initiate Investment Proposal submitted by China Merchants Port reached the LCDA board. The proposal included the request for land to be acquired for the Port+Park+City complex.<sup>72</sup>

LCDA had begun acquiring land for the SEZ together with the land for the port construction, through the National Land Commission of Kenya, but the process is yet to be concluded.<sup>73</sup> By March 2019, LCDA had acquired the necessary land for the heavy industry hub and were beginning the acquisition of land for the medium-light industry hub.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, the Lamu county government had begun designating land for the SEZ.<sup>75</sup> Yet, the land designated for the construction of the SEZ by LCDA and Lamu county government are not the same. Whether the land occupied by the SEZ is owned by LCDA or by the county government makes a difference in terms of rent and tax revenues. The SEZ on national government land would mean that companies leasing land to open industries would be paid to LCDA, bypassing the county government. In terms of taxation, the county government would have to agree with LCDA a revenue sharing scheme, similarly to what happens for natural resource extraction.<sup>76</sup>

Although both the national and county governments report less sporadic interactions, also as a response to the 2018 ruling of the High Court, the replication of efforts in allocating land for the establishment of the Lamu SEZ suggest that these efforts are far from completion. The current decision-making processes for the Lamu port project, and SEZ land allocation particularly, reflect the historical power-geometries of the core-periphery. The state continues to attempt to incorporate the periphery within the broader national development agenda, thus suggesting a continuum of marginalisation. Nonetheless, the establishment of new relations can contribute to the evolution of the geographies of power, as it is the case for Lamu county government in the localisation controversy.

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<sup>71</sup> LAPSET Corridor Development Authority, “LCDA Unveils Investment Opportunities during the Launch of the Lamu Planning and Investment Framework,” 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Interview, Head Officer, State Corporation, Lamu, 24.02.19; Interview, Chief Representative, SOE, Hong Kong, 31.05.19.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Programme Officer, State Authority, Nairobi, 28.03.19

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Interview, Officer, County Government, Lamu, 18.03.19

<sup>76</sup> Revenue sharing schemes are agreements between the national and the county governments which establish the revenue which should remain within the county where resources are extracted. This is a lengthy process, as exemplified by the delays in agreements concerning revenue sharing for the oil extraction project in Turkana county Joseph Akwiri, “Kenya’s First Crude Oil Export Sparks Demands over Revenue Sharing,” Reuters, August 26, 2019, <https://reut.rs/2UckwRL>.

## The localisation of labour in Lamu construction site

The localisation of labour employed in Chinese construction company is an example of new room for manoeuvre that Lamu county government has created, and it also offers a window into the role the presence of a Chinese contractor plays in the emergence of new power-geometries. In Kenya, several bills were passed – the most recent in 2018 – introducing regulations on decision-making processes concerning local content, the specifics of which are then discussed and agreed on an *ad-hoc* basis. The term local content was initially used in the natural resources sector, but this concept has been deployed prominently in infrastructure construction projects alike.<sup>77</sup> Most commonly, local content includes sourcing of local materials and activities, such as sub-contractors and labour.

The fulfilment of local content requirements, particularly in relations to labour, has been one of the aspects of Chinese construction projects in Africa that has received increased media and scholarly attention. Chinese companies' activities on the continent are commonly associated with the practice of bringing labour force from overseas, thus hindering the chance of local workers to access employment opportunities, with rumours claiming that Chinese workers are in fact convicts.<sup>78</sup> Across the continent, local employment percentages in Chinese companies range from 60% in Angola to 96% in Nigeria.<sup>79</sup> However, these aggregated percentages disregard many nuances of local employment by Chinese companies. As an example, a study comparing Chinese and American firms' employment contractual coverage shows that more than half Kenyan employees working in Chinese companies do not have a contract of employment.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the low presence of African managers, as well as the (poor) working conditions within Chinese sites occupy a main part in the China-Africa discourse.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> African Union, "Africa Mining Vision" (Addis Ababa, 2009); Silvana Tordo et al., "Local Content Policies in the Oil and Gas Sector," 2013; Jill Wells and John Hawkins, "Increasing 'Local Content' in Infrastructure Procurement. Part 1," *Proceedings of Institution of Civil Engineers: Management, Procurement and Law* 163(2) 2010, 65–70; Jill Wells and John Hawkins, "Increasing 'Local Content' in Infrastructure Procurement. Part 2," *Proceedings of Institution of Civil Engineers: Management, Procurement and Law* 163(2), 2010, 71–75.

<sup>78</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "China Has Used Prison Labor in Africa," *the Guardian*, 2010; K Lam, *Chinese State-Owned Enterprises in West Africa*, 73.

<sup>79</sup> Center for Chinese Studies, "China's Interest and Activity in Africa's Construction and Infrastructure Sectors", Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch University, 2006.

<sup>80</sup> Zander Rounds and Hongxiang Huang, "We Are Not so Different: A Comparative Study of Employment Relations at Chinese and American Firms in Kenya," Washington DC, China Africa Research Initiative, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Herbert Jauch and Iipumbu Sakaria, "Chinese Investments in Namibia: A Labour Perspective" (Windhoek, 2009); Angela Dziedzom Akorsu and Fang Lee Cooke, "Labour Standards Application among Chinese and Indian Firms in Ghana: Typical or Atypical?," *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 22, no. 13 (2011): 2730–48; Miriam Driessen, *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019); Carlos Oya, "Labour Regimes and Workplace Encounters between China and Africa," in *China-Africa and an Economic Transformation*, ed. Arkebe Oqubay and Yifu Justin Lin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 239–63



The contracts for the CCCC projects Nairobi-Mombasa SGR and Lamu port construction required a set percentage of local workers constructing them, namely 40% for SGR and 75% for Lamu port.<sup>82</sup> Yet, Chinese companies were many times the subject of critiques and protests, some of which turned violent. In 2014, protesters in Voi blocked the highway – vital for the exports and imports through Mombasa – to voice concerns over the scarce job opportunities the construction of the Chinese-funded SGR had brought to them.<sup>83</sup> Two years later, protesters from Narok County entered the SGR construction site targeting Chinese workers, some of which were later hospitalised.<sup>84</sup> The motives behind these protests were the same: “*baki yetu*” (our rights).<sup>85</sup> Chinese-constructed projects tend to stretch across multiple counties, thus raising difficulties in distributing labour opportunities, as for the SGR construction. When the construction was finished in one section, the labour force would be retained and they would move to the next section of construction.<sup>86</sup> This practice allows the Chinese company to avoid having to train new workers while at the same time respecting Kenyan contractual obligations concerning the employment of local labour force.

The construction of Lamu port is relegated to one county alone, yet similar concerns are raised by Lamu indigenous populations. First, the notion of ‘local’ as a category of practice is multifaceted and quite fragmented, thus being difficult to define.<sup>87</sup> To a Chinese contractor in Kenya, any Kenyan is as a “local worker”. However, Chinese Senior Engineers in Lamu are aware that most of the workers are not from Lamu, but mainly from upcountry. When asked “who is a local?”, officials from the Lamu county government indicate the members of their constituency, while Lamu archipelago residents make a distinction between Lamu archipelago – mainly inhabited by Swahili people<sup>88</sup> – and the rest of the county. Representatives from Swahili communities currently fear the possibility of loss of political representation due to increased migration from other regions of Kenya for the construction of the port. Lamu indigenous groups have mobilised to advocate

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<sup>82</sup> Y Wang and U Wissenbach, “Clientelism at Work? A Case Study of Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway Project.”; Interview, Officer, SOE, Lamu, 25.02.19

<sup>83</sup> Joseph Akwiri, “Kenyans Protesting over Jobs Block Highway from Mombasa Port,” *Reuters*, October 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/36JpurJ>.

<sup>84</sup> Lily Kuo, “Kenyan Rail Workers Are Protesting against Their Chinese Employer for a Raise - to \$5 a Day,” *Quartz Africa*, August 3, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2RNfxFL>.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Interview, Executive, Chamber of Commerce, Nairobi, 20.11.18

<sup>87</sup> Aidan Barlow, “The Politics of the Temporary: Tanzanian Local Content in the East African Crude Oil Pipeline,” *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7, no. 2 (2020): 738–47.

<sup>88</sup> The majority of the population of Lamu County is made up by indigenous Swahili groups. The major ethnic groups in the county are the Bajun, Sanye, Anweer (also known as Boni), and Orma. Bajun people are the most populous group, traditionally associated with the fishery industry and inhabiting the Lamu archipelago. The Sanye and Anweer groups have historically engaged in mangrove cutting and trade, as well as hunting activities; their ancestral land and forests are in the coastal region of Lamu County. The Orma people derive their livelihoods from livestock keeping in the areas of the Tana River delta (SaveLamu, “The Lamu County Biocultural Community,” Lamu, SaveLamu, 2018).

for participation in the development of LAPSSET corridor components, so to reap economic benefits and protect the biodiversity of their land and marine environment.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, the percentage of Lamu archipelago workers in the construction site remains close to zero. During my research in the construction site in the first half of 2019, Human Resources were only able to identify a handful of employees (out of about 1000 Kenyans) indigenous to the Lamu archipelago.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, unskilled worker positions make up the great majority of hires within the construction site, with managerial roles being filled by foremen or engineers of Chinese nationality.

Lamu indigenous populations have raised complaints over marginalisation in the selection process. To mitigate this controversy, a strategy already in place during the construction of the SGR was deployed by the Chinese contractor, whereby the contractor communicates job openings to the relevant county government, which would then recommend workers to the company.<sup>91</sup> This now also happens in Lamu, where CCCC is in direct communication with the county government concerning employment opportunities, so as to receive candidates who were pre-selected by county government officials.<sup>92</sup> This process not regulated by the EPC contract, and it allows for the emergence of new relations between the county government and the Chinese contractor, reshaping pre-existing power-geometries of exclusion in which national government agencies would be the only actors communicating with CCCC.

At the beginning of the construction of the port, most of the workers were Chinese nationals. Later on, after the ground work had been set up, CCCC began employing Kenyan workers, hiring more than required by the contract.<sup>93</sup> At the time of writing, more than a total of 1200 workers are on the construction site, about 1000 of which are Kenyans.<sup>94</sup> Overcompensation of percentages of Kenyan workers has not helped mitigate controversies between the national and county governments. On the one hand, LCDA sees the overcompensation over time as a positive, as the percentages of local content stipulated in the contract are now being respected. On the other hand, Swahili populations of Lamu county still feel marginalised as they do not benefit from the opportunities created by this infrastructure development project. They voice their discontent to

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<sup>89</sup> The most notable campaign was against the Chinese-funded Lamu Coal Plant. The activist group DeCOALonize brought the National Environmental Management Authority to court as they had failed to carry out a “proper environmental impact assessment” for the project BBC, “Kenya Halts Lamu Coal Power Project at World Heritage Site,” June 26, 2019, <https://bbc.in/38UoWAP>.

<sup>90</sup> Interview, Officer, SOE, Lamu, 25.02.19

<sup>91</sup> Kiarie Njoroge, “Chinese Firm Says Nearly 20,000 Kenyans Working on Rail Project,” *Business Daily*, March 28, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2UcSVju>.

<sup>92</sup> Interview, Senior Official, County Government, Lamu, 19.03.19

<sup>93</sup> Interview, Senior Manager, State Corporation, Mombasa, 03.12.18

<sup>94</sup> Interview, General Manager, SOE, Lamu, 25.02.19

the county government, which is then left to mitigate its position in relation to both its constituency and the national government agencies, and the establishment of direct relations with CBRC should be seen through this lens.

## Conclusion

Deploying Massey's conceptualisation of power-geometry, this paper explored the geographies of power amongst actors involved in the development of the Chinese-built Lamu port in Northern Kenya. Corridor initiatives such as LAPSSET play a key role in the state's efforts to materialise their developmental agendas. At the same time, they offer the state an opportunity to redeploy itself as a driver of *émergence*. However, diverging agendas persist in spite of the centralisation of decision-making processes, and can lead to controversies amongst the state actors involved. This landscape is further complicated by the presence of Chinese actors, as it is the case for Lamu port. In order to analyse the processes of emergence of new power-geometries, I focused on two controversies taking place during the initial phases of construction of Lamu port. First, the controversy arising between LCDA and Lamu county government for the allocation of land for the construction of the SEZ adjacent to the port. Second, the localisation of labour within the construction site to fulfil the local content requirements stipulated by the contract.

The first controversy analysed highlights the importance of the centralisation often characterising the development of large infrastructure projects. LCDA is reacting to the possibility of receiving an investment from China Merchants Port, but they are (once again) only marginally involving the county government, which is reproducing efforts for land acquisitions. This is an instance of reproduction of historical power-geometry of marginalisation of the Lamu region, which leads to the questioning of the degree to which the marginalisation of the peripheries of Kenya has been addressed. The second controversy relates to the necessity of the Chinese contractor to fulfil the commitment made in the contract with Kenya Port Authority with regard to local content requirements. What emerges from the analysis of said controversy is the picture of Lamu port as a project done in Lamu, yet struggling to be for Lamu. The percentages of local content are now respected in terms of number of Kenyan employees – even though skilled workforce remains of Chinese nationality – but Lamu indigenous communities still do not benefit from such opportunities. To mitigate this controversy, the county government is now in communication with the Chinese contractor concerning job openings, and actively involved in the recruitment process.

In conclusion, high degree of centralisation of the decision-making processes concerning Lamu port suggests that current power-geometries often reproduce pre-existing patterns of marginalisation as the state tries to incorporate the periphery in the national developmental agenda. The presence of a Chinese contractor, on the other hand, provided the county government with some room for manoeuvre to negotiate on behalf of the residents. The localisation of labour employed in Lamu offers a window into the role the presence of a Chinese contractor plays in the emergence of new power-geometries.