



**THEMATIC DOSSIER:
MOBILITY AND CIRCULATION IN SUBSAHARAN AFRICA**

Interview



**The “Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia” Transport Corridor (LAPSSET):
contradictions of a circulation mega project in contemporary East Africa**

An interview with Benard Musembi Kilaka

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Interviewee’s biography. Benard Musembi Kilaka is currently a lecturer in Maseno University, Kenya, and a researcher at the School of Global Studies (SGS), University of Gothenburg, Sweden, working on a project focusing on the politics of sand mining in East Africa. He holds a PhD in Peace and Development Research from the University of Gothenburg. His doctoral research focused on emerging controversies around security practices being deployed to protect the Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) project in northern Kenya, most specifically in Lamu and Turkana. He also holds a Masters in Global Studies from Roskilde University, Denmark and a bachelor’s degree in Political Science with IT from Maseno University, Kenya. He also has a rich experience of working with both international and national organizations in East Africa.



An interview with Benard Musembi Kilaka¹

GeoÁfrica Bulletin. *First of all, we would like to thank you immensely for granting us this interview. As every research has a human being behind it, could you tell us about your academic trajectory? What led you to research LAPSSSET? Could you also briefly expose the main arguments of your recently defended thesis?*

Benard Musembi Kilaka: Thank you for expressing interest in my work and providing me with the opportunity to discuss my PhD thesis and academic interests. My academic journey began in Kenya, where I was born and raised. I discovered early in my education that I had a passion for global and Kenyan politics, current affairs, and history. As a result, I excelled in social science and language subjects. This interest continued throughout high school and played a key role in influencing my decision to pursue an undergraduate course in Political Science with IT at Maseno University - a public Kenyan University.

During my university studies, I had the opportunity to complete an attachment at the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC) within the Catholic Diocese of Nakuru. The diocese also covered Baringo County, which has a history of inter-communal conflicts, particularly along the border with Turkana County. Our mandate included peacebuilding activities in volatile areas. This engagement in Baringo and Turkana captivated me as it revealed a contradiction in my understanding of the Kenyan state and nationhood. Growing up, especially during President Moi's reign, I viewed the state as an all-powerful entity. However, through stories and personal observations in northern Kenya, such as the proliferation of firearms among civilians, the apparent neglect by the national government in essential services like education, healthcare, and security, and the prevailing perception of being second-class citizens, my understanding of statehood was challenged. These experiences, combined with my academic background, influenced my decision to pursue a master's degree in Global Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark.

During my time at Roskilde, I developed a particular interest in security studies, which could be seen through my choice of elective courses and research projects. For example, together with fellow students, I worked on semester projects focusing on the war on drugs in Afghanistan after the US invasion and the resource mobilization strategies of al-Shabaab. My master's thesis explored the role of civil society organizations in police reforms in Kenya following the 2007/08

¹ The interview was conducted by email. Answers were received on July 16, 2023.



post-election violence. After completing my master's degree, I returned to Kenya and worked in various positions, including at the UN World Food Programme, Regional Bureau Nairobi, in the Security Analysis division. In this role, I monitored security and political developments in over 11 countries in the Greater Eastern and Central Africa region to ensure the smooth running of WFP's operations and the security of staff and assets.

During my time in Kenya, a close friend shared an advertisement for a PhD position in Sweden within a research project investigating controversies and security aspects surrounding the LAPSSET project in northern Kenya. Coincidentally, I was also involved as a consultant for an international NGO that was implementing a project targeted on improving relations between all stakeholders involved with the newly discovered oil reserves in Turkana, an area through which the LAPSSET project would pass. Therefore, the PhD opportunity aligned perfectly with my personal interest in researching security and governance issues in northern Kenya and was in line with my professional and academic experiences in security and governance matters.

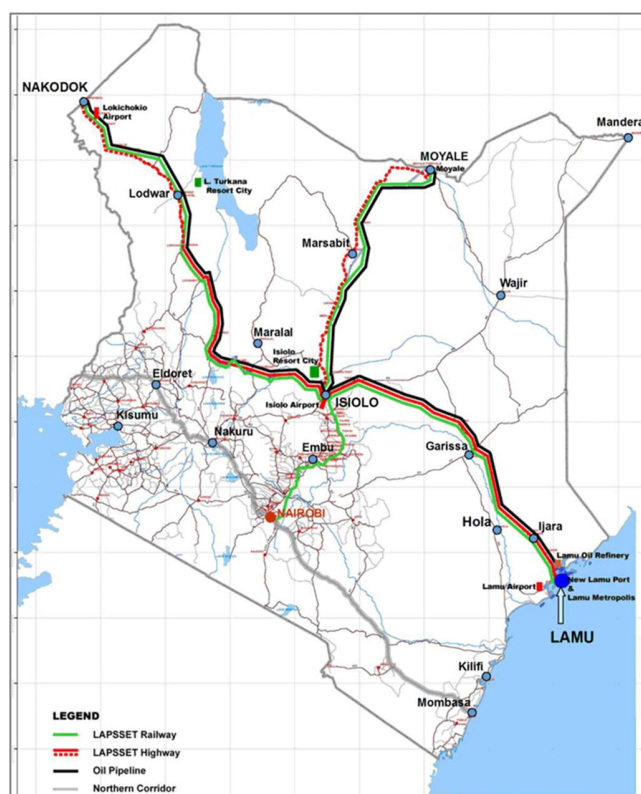
For my PhD thesis, I focused specifically on the controversies arising from the security practices implemented to safeguard the LAPSSET project. Those familiar with northern Kenya understand that this region faces significant security challenges, largely due to the historical lack of effective state presence since the colonial period and the proliferation of illegal firearms. The introduction of the LAPSSET project presented an intriguing puzzle. On one hand, government officials framed the project as a transformative initiative that would address historical marginalization in northern Kenya while emphasizing its role in pacifying and securing the region. However, considering the security situation, it was evident that a project of such magnitude would be vulnerable to attacks, particularly by groups like al-Shabaab. Therefore, what fascinated me was the fact that a project positioned as a solution to insecurity required significant security measures itself.

While in Turkana, I had already witnessed early instances of controversies arising from the security needs of these major investments. To ensure the safety of mostly non-local staff and uninterrupted operations, the government implemented extensive security measures, effectively creating highly secured fortresses and enclaves. These security measures also involved reorganizing existing security arrangements on the ground, which were already strained, in favor of the new investments. This generated controversy as local communities felt exposed and neglected. Thus, my thesis aimed to explore such controversies. In essence, I was interested in



understanding how communities, often portrayed as weak and vulnerable, actively participate in securing and negotiating for their interests. Drawing inspiration from pragmatic sociologists like Luc Boltanski, I sought to argue that people, even those considered weak, are not passive; they actively shape the trajectory of their daily lives, especially during controversies, as they strive to find solutions to their challenges.

Figure 1. LAPSSET Transport Corridor Development Plan



Source: LAPSSET Authority (www.lapsset.go.ke)

GeoÁfrica Bulletin. Unfortunately, Brazilian scholars barely know about LAPSSET. What is the project about? What are the main places, agents, interest and objectives involved? What is the current status of the project?

Benard Musembi Kilaka: The LAPSSET corridor represents a significant mega-infrastructure undertaking with the aim of connecting Kenya, South Sudan, and Ethiopia through various components, including highways, railways, airports, and pipelines. Within Kenya, the project encompasses additional elements such as the construction of a major seaport in Lamu, three resort cities, special economic zones, and a significant hydro-electric dam. The corridor traverses seven



counties in northern Kenya, namely Lamu, Garissa, Isiolo, Baringo, Samburu, Marsabit, and Turkana. The primary anchor sites within Kenya for the project are Lamu, Isiolo, and Turkana.

The project has multiple objectives. At the regional level, it aims to promote regional integration and facilitate improved trade and mobility among the three countries involved. Nationally, the LAPSSET corridor is a flagship project within Kenya's long-term development plan, Vision 2030, which seeks to drive rapid economic transformation. At the local level, the project aims to address the historical marginalization that northern Kenya has experienced under previous regimes.

Currently, most of the developments have taken place within Kenya. Each country involved is expected to take the lead in implementing projects within their respective jurisdictions. Kenya has chosen to implement the project in phases. The initial phase consisted of four key initiatives: the construction of the Lamu port, securing the project's route, the tarmacking of the Lamu-Garsen highway to connect the new port with the hinterlands, and the establishment of the Lokichar-Lamu crude oil pipeline. Notable progress has been achieved thus far, including the operationalization of the new Lamu port, following the completion of the first three berths, completion of the Isiolo airport, tarmacking of the Lamu-Garsen route, and initiation of the land acquisition process for the LAPSSET project. Additionally, ongoing work includes the construction of the Lamu Port-Isiolo highway.

GeoÁfrica Bulletin. *Chinese involvement with circulation projects in East Africa dates back to the 1970s with the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia railway. What are the similarities and differences between TAZARA and LAPSSET projects? As other countries in the South also invest in East African circulation (e. g., Brazil in Mozambique), what are the similarities and differences between South-South Cooperation in the 1970s and today?*

Benard Musembi Kilaka: Indeed, Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects in East Africa has a longstanding history. However, there are notable similarities and differences in how this engagement has unfolded over the years. A comparison between TAZARA and LAPSSET highlights these distinctions. While both projects involve Chinese participation in implementation, the level of intensity varies between them. In TAZARA, the Chinese played a central role as financiers and implementers of the project. Conversely, in the LAPSSET project, the Chinese are primarily engaged as contractors, as the Kenyan government has been the sole financier of key components such as the Lamu Port, Lamu-Garsen Road, and Lamu-Isiolo Road. Furthermore,



TAZARA was initially conceived as an aid project, whereas the LAPSSET project is a domestically driven initiative conceptualized by leaders from Kenya, South Sudan, and Ethiopia.

In recent years, we have witnessed a deepening of South-South relations, exemplified by the increased involvement of countries like China, Brazil, and India in Africa. When comparing to the past, there are significant similarities and differences. Like earlier collaborations, this engagement continues to be influenced by narratives of shared histories and the desire to address inherent injustices within the international system, which is perceived to be heavily influenced by the Western world. However, a notable difference is that recent engagements are primarily driven by commercial and extractive motives, departing from the past where ideological motives played a larger role. Currently, we observe investments by both governments and large companies from China and Brazil in highly profitable sectors of the economy.

Moreover, while previous engagements were predominantly between governments, the range of actors involved in circulation projects has significantly expanded in recent times. These new actors include large state-owned companies, private individuals, and other private enterprises. Additionally, there is a trend where many of these companies harbor long-term ambitions, staying engaged in Africa even after completing their initial projects. Major Chinese construction companies, for example, are now emerging as leading bidders for new projects.

***GeoÁfrica Bulletin.** Currently, we have abundant literature on the “coloniality” and the “promises” of infrastructure deployment in Africa. What is the role of circulation for African development? Is there still room for development corridors as desired by NEPAD and encouraged in the AfCFTA? Are there alternative modes of circulation to be developed?*

Benard Musembi Kilaka: Africa still faces significant infrastructure deficiencies, which have adversely affected the connectivity and movement of people and goods. Consequently, governments and investors often justify infrastructure projects by highlighting their potential for enhancing connectivity, trade, job creation, and global market integration. The circulation of goods and people is crucial for Africa's growth and development, particularly due to the considerable potential of intra-regional trade. For example, Uganda is a key trading partner for Kenya within East Africa, and improved infrastructure would further strengthen these economic ties. Moreover, despite their geographic proximity, the lack of efficient infrastructure has impeded trade between East and West Africa. The LAPSSET project, for instance, aimed to address this issue by establishing a land bridge linking East and West Africa.



There is still ample room for the expansion of development corridors as envisioned by NEPAD and encouraged by the AfCFTA. However, based on our observations of existing development projects, it is likely that these initiatives will be implemented in phases and in ways that differ from NEPAD's original plans. Countries prioritize infrastructure projects based on their own specific needs, which may not always align with NEPAD's overarching strategy. Additionally, planned projects often encounter various challenges that hinder their progress, such as financial constraints, regulatory and administrative barriers, coordination issues among stakeholders, and potential environmental and social impacts.

Currently, there is a strong focus on road infrastructure, but I anticipate a growing interest in the development of railroads and seaports in the future.

GeoÁfrica Bulletin. *So-called megaprojects directly affect local populations: people are displaced; they often lose their usual mobility and security; and the local environment is threatened by several factors. However, local populations are not just passive agents, as they resist and sometimes shape these megaprojects. Could you tell us about these dynamics in LAPSSET deployment?*

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Benard Musembi Kilaka. Yes, the potential and actual impacts of mega projects on people's livelihoods are a significant cause for concern. However, our research on the LAPSSET project reveals that the commonly held belief, propagated by activists and some scholars, that communities are passive, weak, and vulnerable is not always accurate. Instead, we have observed communities actively mobilizing themselves to participate in the project or challenge specific aspects they deem problematic. It is crucial, therefore, to avoid oversimplifying community reactions.

In certain cases, protests should not be solely interpreted as opposition to the project since they may also signify an attempt by the people to engage in the project, particularly when they feel neglected. To illustrate, in Lamu, the community's response against the top-down implementation of the Lamu port led to the formation of the Lamu port steering committee. This committee involved representatives from the national government, community, civil society organizations (CSOs), and local government, facilitating coordination of port-related matters. Our collaborative work (with Jan Bachmann, Per Knutsson and Theodor Aalders) also highlighted how communities invest their aspirations and hopes in the project by among other things, speculating on its potential route and constructing structures to benefit from compensation. As a result, community responses have been multifaceted and driven by diverse interests. Their reactions underscore that



communities are not passive bystanders, but are rather proactive in safeguarding their interests, even when confronted by powerful actors.

GeoÁfrica Bulletin. *If you want to comment on any other subject that we forgot to ask and you think is important, please feel free to do so here.*

Benard Musembi Kilaka: None at the moment. Thank you for this interview.

Some publications by Benard Musembi Kilaka

AALDERS, J.T.; BACHMANN, J.; KNUTSSON, P.; KILAKA, B. M.. The Making and Unmaking of a Megaproject: Contesting Temporalities along the LAPSSET Corridor in Kenya. **Antipode**, v. 53, p. 1273-1293, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12720>

BACHMANN, J; KILAKA, B. M.. Kenya launches Lamu port. But its value remains an open question. **The Conversation**, 2021. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/kenya-launches-lamu-port-but-its-value-remains-an-open-question-161301> . Accessed on 17 jul. 2023.

BACHMANN, J; KILAKA, B. M.. Kenya: Behind disputed election, signs of growing democratic resilience. **Nordic Africa Institute Blog**, 31 aug. 2022. Available at: <https://nai.uu.se/news-and-events/news/2022-08-31-kenya-behind-disputed-election-signs-of-growing-democratic-resilience.html> . Accessed on 17 jul. 2023.

Upcoming book chapters

KILAKA, B. M.. Contested Practices: Controversies over the Construction of the Lamu Port in Kenya. In: HÖNKE, J.; CEZNE, E.; YANG, Y. **Infrastructures: South-South Transformations in Practice**. IAI-Hurst's African Arguments series (Forthcoming, October 2023)

KILAKA, B. M.; SCHUBIGER, E. Manoeuvring Enchantment of Megaprojects in Northern Kenya: LAPSSET and the Crude Oil in Turkana County. (Forthcoming Fall 2023)

- *Part of a book on Mega Infrastructure Projects edited by Prof. Tobias Haller, Prof. Christoph Oberlack and Samuel Weissman (University of Bern)*