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Building infrastructure and brokering labour relations

The African continent is undergoing a process of *respacing* through infrastructure development. Railways, roads, ports and airports have increasingly become the focus of national developmental agendas, as well as the developmental agendas of regional actors. In the 21st century, following an increase in the demand for infrastructure financing on the African continent, financing from China, recently also under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative, has joined that of countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and from international organisations, such as the World Bank. Chinese lending amounted to about \$25.7bn and Chinese construction firms are also expanding their activities to projects not funded by Chinese actors, for instance, by value, 42% of World Bank tenders in sub-Saharan Africa and, in project number, 41.9% of all infrastructure in East Africa.

Increasing participation of Chinese actors in the development of African infrastructure has also attracted criticism. The economic and social sustainability of Chinese-sponsored infrastructure is being questioned across the board. Exacerbated by the “debt diplomacy” narrative, the short- and long-term sustainability of debt has caused controversy both in academia and public discourse, as did the employment and labour conditions in infrastructure construction. 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. Across the continent, local employment percentages in Chinese companies range from 60% in Angola to 96% in Nigeria. However, these aggregated percentages disregard many nuances of labour relations of Chinese construction firms.

Thus, this seminar explores labour relations amongst Chinese and Kenyan workers constructing the port of Lamu in Northern Kenya, funded by the Kenyan government and built by the State-Owned Enterprise China Road and Bridge Corporation. I will focus on the narration of an archetypical day of a Kenyan builder to explore everyday encounters and lived experiences of Chinese and Kenyan workers and connect them

to broader political economy discourses. Specifically, I will focus on controversies around the fulfilment of local content requirements, communication issues, brokering, obstacles to unionisation, and “living at work”. In doing so, I will bring to light emerging geographies of power and shared lived experiences inside and beyond the construction site, to then frame them within the broader political economy debates in the China-Africa field.