

CHINA-AFRICA INFRASTRUCTURE RELATIONS: BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE AND BROKERING LABOUR RELATIONS

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If the problem is not resolved in the pit [the construction area], then it comes to the HR office. But **things are not fair**. The Chinese supervisor will give a reason to China HR, who will believe him and the person who has an issue has to go home. They call China HR before the worker reaches the headquarters, and there's nothing else that the local HR can do. Once the decision is made by China HR it is final, we [Kenya HR] can't do anything. We went head to head with them at times, but it doesn't help at all. When we go to China HR, we know the decision has already been made.

(Interview, Human Resource Officer, Chinese SOE, Lamu, 15.03.19)

TODAY'S SEMINAR

1. Overview: Sino-African infrastructural development

- ❖ Africa's "re-enchantment" with infrastructure
- ❖ Chinese companies internationalisation processes

2. Building labour relations?

3. A day in the construction site

- ❖ Spatial organisation and labour control
- ❖ Work in the construction site
- ❖ Aspirations of social mobility
- ❖ Job insecurity
- ❖ Communication issues
- ❖ Brokering labour relations



Xinhua News, 2014

AFRICA'S RENEWED FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Since the late 20th Century -> “re-enchantment with big infrastructure” (Nugent, 2018)

This focus on infrastructural development shares similarities with **past calls** for infrastructure-driven development during the early independence stages in the **1960s-1960s** (Wethal, 2019), driven and financed by Bretton Woods institutions (Mold, 2012).

Now, the focus on infrastructure continues to be rooted in the understanding that “**infrastructure development can play a major role in promoting growth** and [...] helping reduce poverty” (Calderón, 2009, p. 1), but this connection is far from obvious and often **questioned** (see for example AfDB, 2018).

AFRICA'S RENEWED FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Continental, regional, and national **developmental agendas** are also focused on the development of infrastructure and systems of infrastructure (i.e. transport corridors)

In the African Union's Agenda 2063: “connect Africa with world-class infrastructure”

To sum up:

“African governments, corporate investors and the international agencies [...] are fixated upon the transformative potentialities of infrastructure” (Nugent, 2018, p. 22)

-> **increased need for infrastructure financing!**

PUSH FOR INTERNATIONALISATION OF CHINESE COMPANIES

The need for infrastructure financing across the African continent coincided with a push towards internationalisation, which began in the 1980s but **intensified in the early 2000s**.

1999's "Going Out" Policy, **why?** (see Hong and Sun, 2006; Sum, 2019;

- ❖ solve national overcapacity issues (in manufacturing and construction sector)
- ❖ access new markets
- ❖ sustain economic growth (of China and of the companies internationalising)
- ❖ geopolitical agendas

The policy also defined **financial incentives for internationalisation**: credit lines, low-interest rates loans or preferential foreign exchange rates...

FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRUCTION IN CHINESE COMPANIES INTERNATIONALISATION

After 2007/8 financial crisis, internationalisation became a way to direct Chinese State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private companies to new projects overseas and sustain the recovery of the national economy!!

Mostly bilateral deals...

Engagement is channelled through the:

Forum on China Africa Cooperation

Belt and Road Initiative

which also serve as platforms to showcase Sino-African engagement and raise interest



WHY INFRASTRUCTURE?



“要想富，先修路”

“if you want to become rich, build a road first”

Chinese slogan used by provincial governments during the 1980s...

From 1992 to 2011, China has used 8.5% of its yearly GDP for the development of the national infrastructure system (Chen, Matzinger and Woetzel, 2013)

BUT... the Chinese experience with infrastructure development is not linear!!

SOME NUMBERS (1): CHINESE-FUNDED INFRASTRUCTURE IN AFRICA

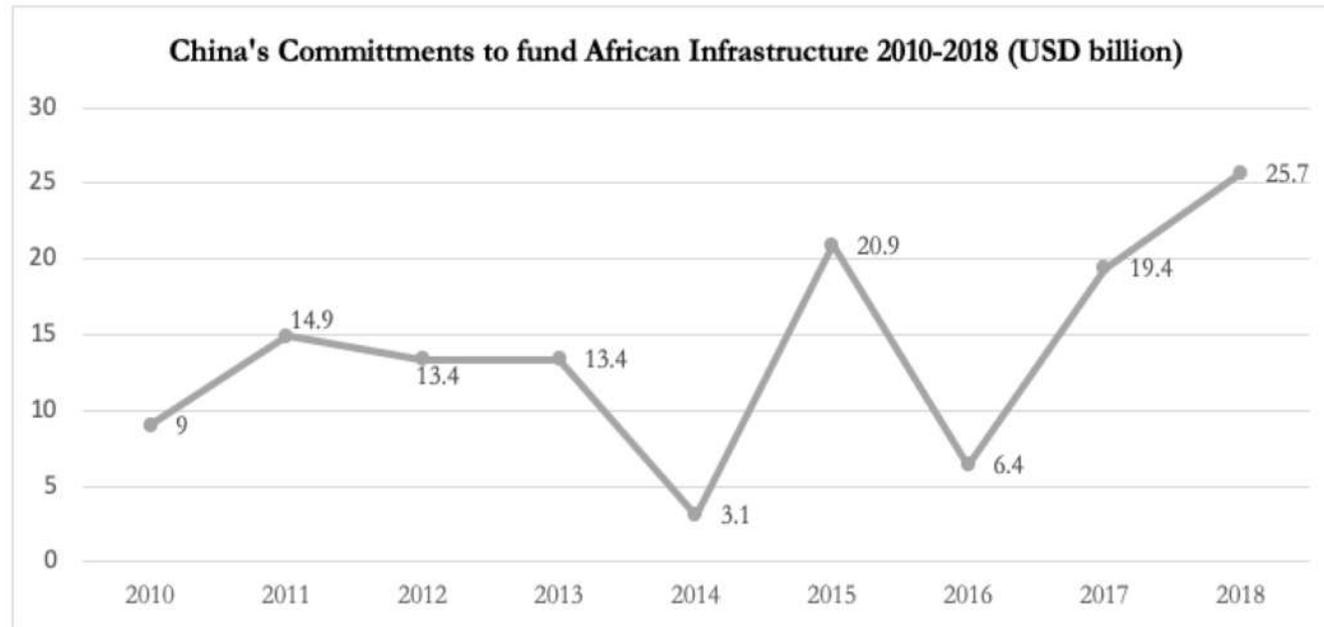
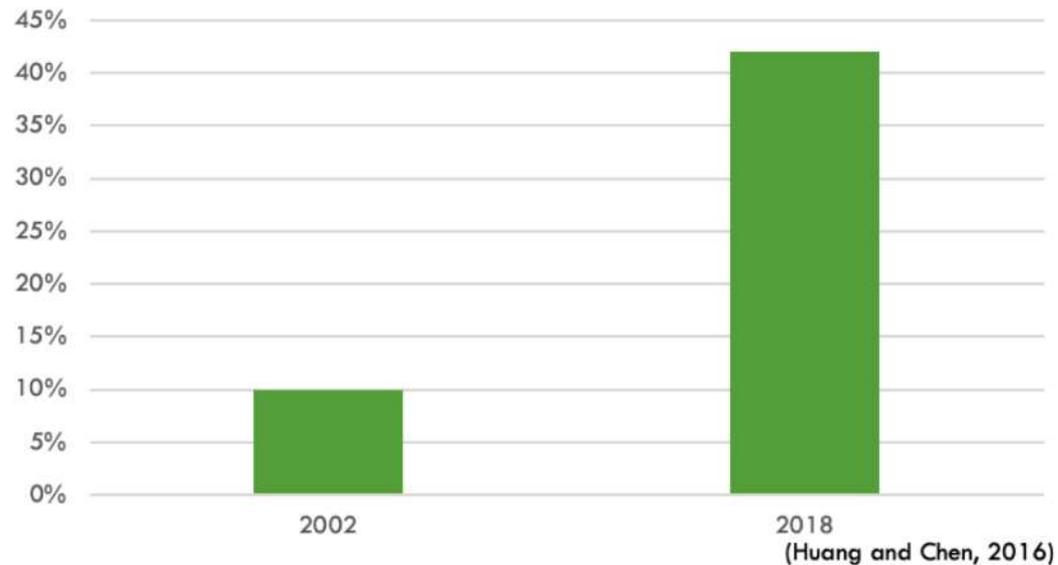


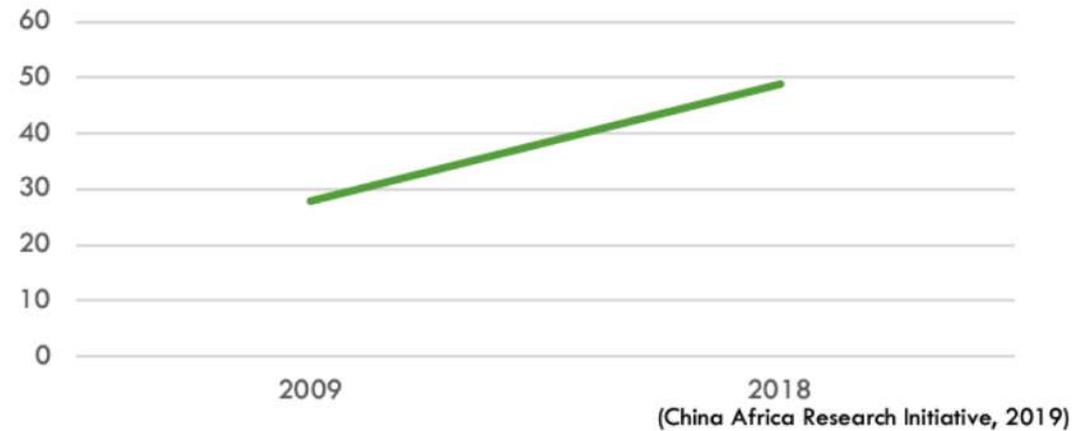
Figure 1: China's commitments to fund African Infrastructure (2010-2018) in USD billion (Yearly reports "Infrastructure Funding Trends" by the Infrastructure Consortium for Africa, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019)

SOME NUMBERS (2): CHINESE-BUILT INFRASTRUCTURE

Chinese contractor's market share in Africa



Chinese contractors' revenues in Africa



WHAT DO CRITICS SAY?

1. China's geopolitical agenda!
 - ❖ African initiatives are being grouped under BRI umbrella
 - ❖ Increasing engagement in port infrastructure
 - ❖ Security (“non-interference principle” ?) see for example Alden (2012)
2. Debt sustainability
 - ❖ Loans have “no strings attached” -> commercial conditions (such as a Chinese contractor) see for example Mohan and Tan-Mullins (2019), Zajontz (2020), Sum (2019), Alden and Large (2019)
 - ❖ Shift from lending (loans) to equity (investment) see for example Alden and Jiang (2019)
3. African agency
 - ❖ African “agency turn” (Mohan and Lampert, 2013), see for example Soulé-Kohndou (2019) on bureaucrats agency in Benin, Chiyemura (2019) on procedural agency in Ethiopia
4. Questionable adherence to in-country environmental regulations, skill transfer and localisation, human rights violations, corruption

LABOUR RELATIONS

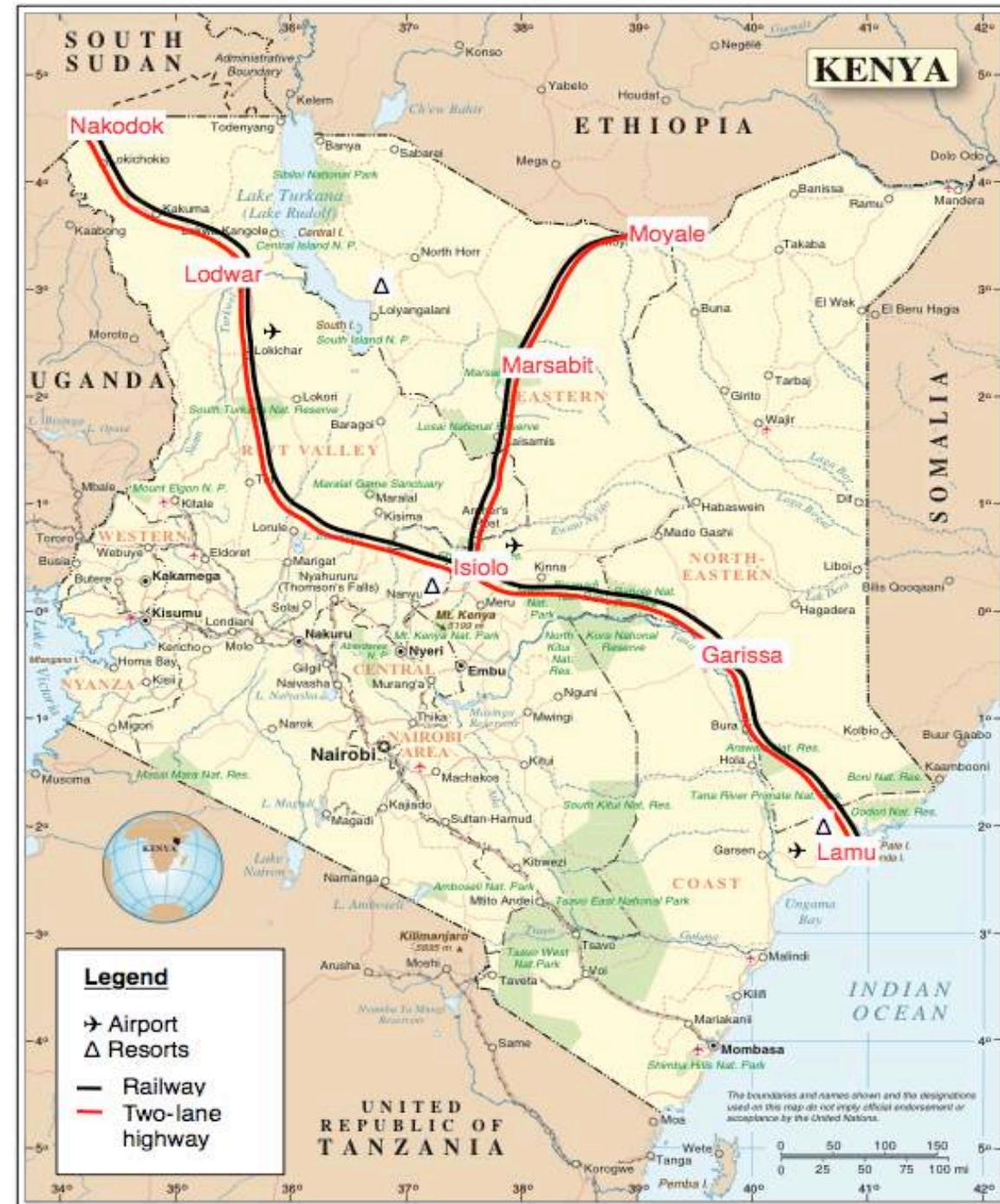


1. “export” of Chinese workers is reducing job opportunities for Africans (Gadzala, 2010; Monson and Liu, 2011; Wegenast *et al.*, 2019)
2. Chinese engagement is also contributing to the creation of employment opportunities and to skill transfer (Tang, 2010; Calabrese and Tang, 2020)
3. Fulfilment of local content requirements?
 - ❖ Local content: in the beginning used in the oil industry, now also refers to construction industry, it applies to personnel, as well as to materials and sub-contracting
4. recruitment and employment practices are related to in-country labour laws, contract requirements, and the Chinese company’s **embeddedness** in the country of operation (Kernen and Lam, 2014; Lam, 2017; Oya, 2019; Gambino, forthcoming)

LAMU PORT

- ❖ built by **China Road Bridge Corporation**
- ❖ financed by the Kenyan government
- ❖ USD 480 mil
- ❖ currently not in operation
- ❖ phase 1 of construction not completed

- ❖ 1200 workers
 - ❖ around 200 Chinese workers
 - ❖ around 1000 Kenyan workers

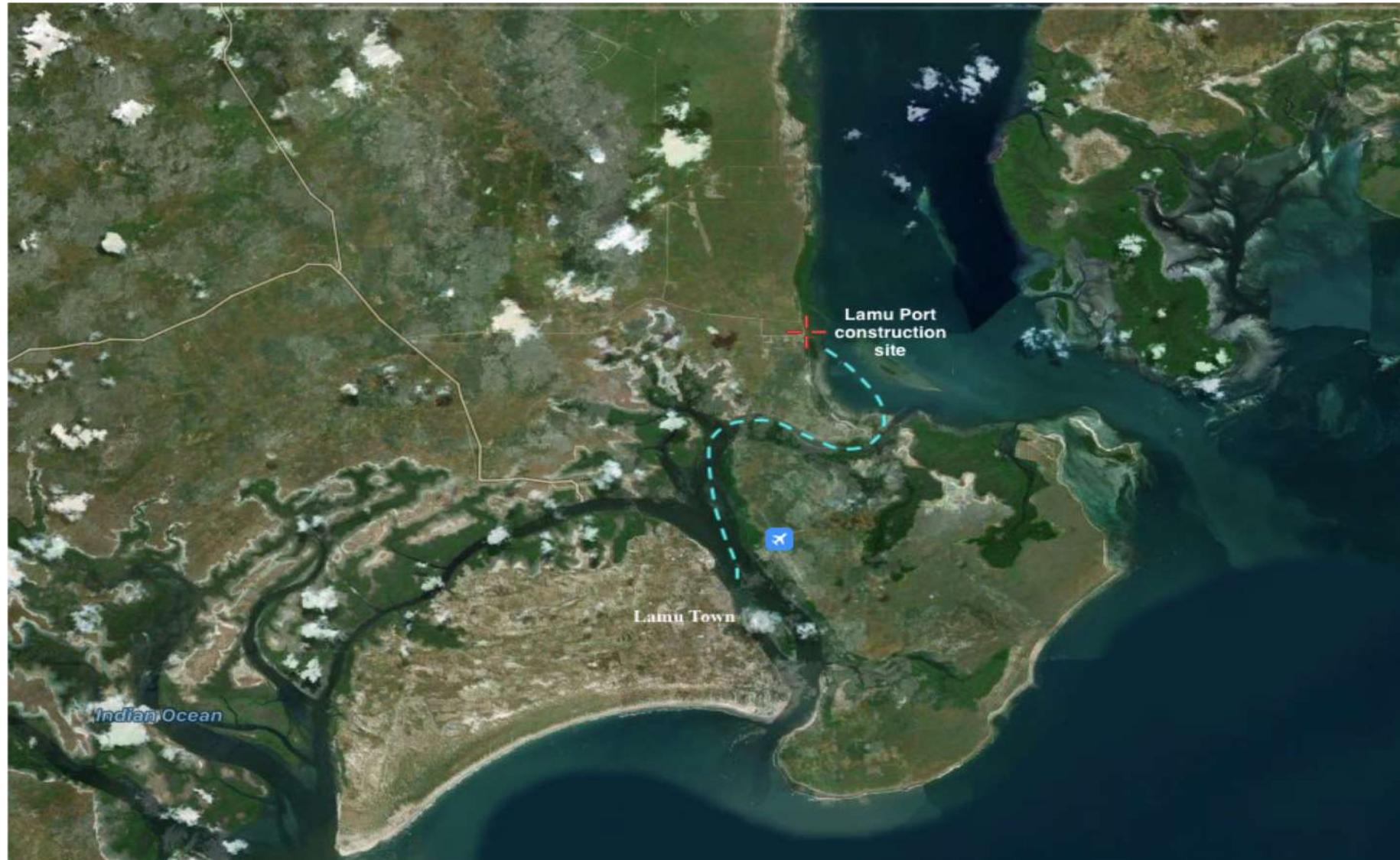


BROKERING

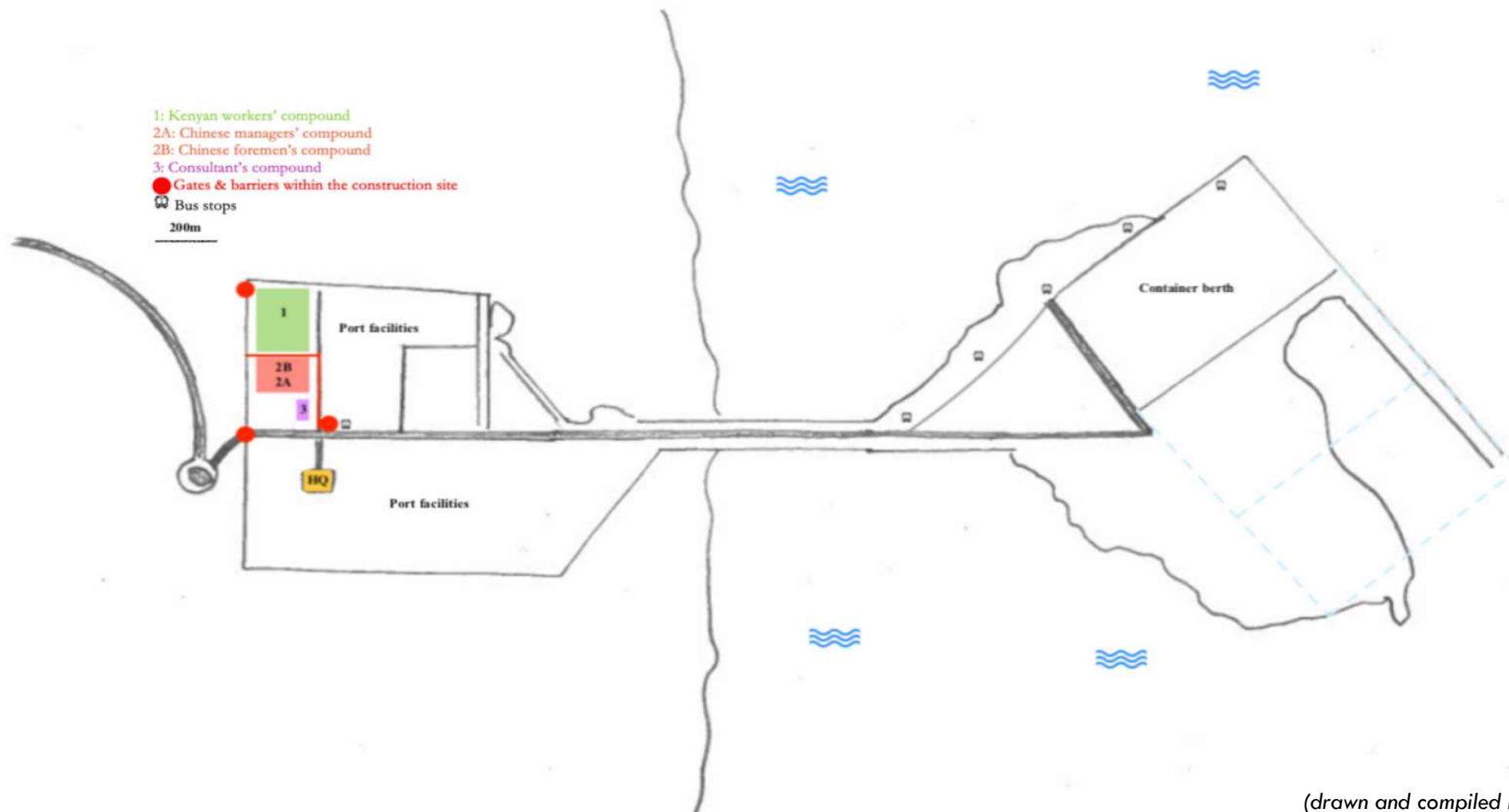
- ❖ brokerage emerge in “settings in transition” (James, 2011, p. 318)
- ❖ brokers “shape the interactions amongst actors who have unequal power relations and diverging interests” (Koster and van Leynseele, 2018, p. 803).
- ❖ initially, they were considered as mediating figures acting as an interface between marginalised, powerless or silenced communities and state power and market forces

BUT brokers also encompass seemingly contradictory qualities as individuals (see for example Mosse and Lewis, 2006; James, 2011)

Brokers activate “the continuing interplay between apparently irreconcilable discourses and practices” (James, 2011, p. 335).



Adapted from google maps, 2020



(drawn and compiled by author)

KAHAWA NA MANDAZI... AND OVERCROWDING

“Breakfast is a long line”
- Kenyan worker (Lamu, 2019)



THE GATED COMPOUND

1. terrorism threat

- ❖ near the Somali border
- ❖ al-Shabaab terrorist activities in the area
- ❖ January 5th 2020: construction is halted after a terrorist attack to the Kenya-US naval and air force base Camp Simba

2. Security guards and guarded perimeters

- ❖ Chinese security managers
- ❖ CCTV
- ❖ security check, including body / bag search at every gate for Kenyan workers

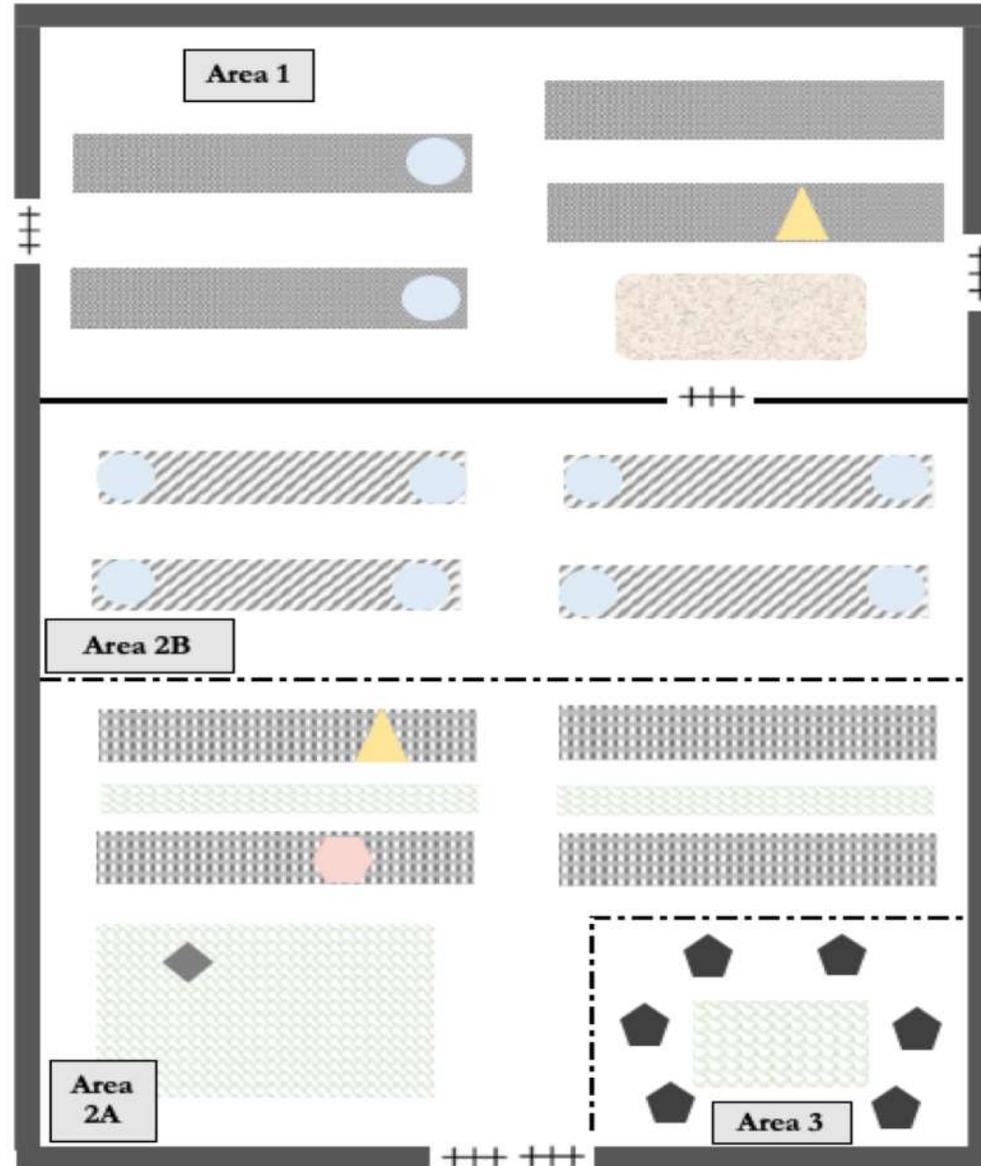
3. Living at work

LIVING AT WORK

- Non-reciprocated access
- Spatial division based on nationality, type of contract and hierarchical management structure!

Spatial organisation to achieve managerial control over labour

(also see Fei, 2020)



- Legend:**
- 6 pax portable site accommodation blocks
 - 2 pax portable site accommodation blocks
 - Double-storey brick accommodation blocks
 - Single-storey detached house
 - Shared Sanitary facilities
 - Recreational room
 - Gym equipment
 - Canteens
 - Garden
 - Football field
 - Guarded gate
 - Wall
 - Fence with guarded gate
 - Fence with open gate

(drawn and compiled by author)



THE WORK IN THE CONSTRUCTION SITE



“THIS IS THE TIME WE CALL HOME”

- Distance between accommodation facilities and furthest point of construction: 2.5 km
- one bus available to Kenyan workers
- the commute is reserved to call loved ones
- “queue or get fined” system
- This reflects the constant strive of Chinese contractors to **improve productivity** through the use of different types of **deterrents** **and incentives**



吃苦耐劳 *CHIKU NAILAO*: ‘BITING THE BULLET’

- ❖ 吃苦 *chiku*: “eating bitterness” & 耐劳 *nailao*: “working hard”
- ❖ the bitterness is also a “newly developed flavour inherent in their marginal position in an increasingly affluent China” (Driessen, 2019, p. 158)
- ❖ the work on construction sites in Africa is a ‘bitterness’ that Chinese workers are ready to ‘eat’ in the **hope of social mobility in China** (see also Driessen, 2016; Lee, 2018, p. 100)
- ❖ construction projects across Africa are glorified by state media (Driessen, 2019, p. 17)

AFTER THE NIGHT SHIFT

Bonny is trying to reach the Chinese foreman at the end of the structure, where he is smoking a cigarette with another Chinese worker. We arrive and Bonny greets him with a 早上好 [zaoshang hao, good morning in Mandarin], the worker smiles. Bonny points at the superstructure, the Chinese foreman points at a Kenyan worker and says “no work!”. There is an issue. The Chinese foreman says ‘他 [ta, Mandarin for he/him] go home!’, he is still pointing at the worker. (Fieldwork diary entry, Lamu, 15.03.19)

BROKERING TERMINATION OF EMPLOYMENT



ARBITRARY DECISION-MAKING & JOB INSECURITY

The arbitrary decision-making powers Chinese managers have in the construction site has a considerable impact on the relations between Chinese and Kenyan workers, similarly to relations observed in other contexts across the continent (see for instance Giese and Thiel, 2011, 2014).

Reflected in HR, but **materialises in many ways...**

COMMUNICATION

[Bonny] points at the area with a circular movement, then lifts two fingers to his eyes to signal “to look” and then he lifts four fingers and says “at four”, the Chinese foreman nods. Bonny then points further away, the Chinese foreman says “不 [bu, Mandarin for no], later.” Bonny explains to me he had asked the Chinese foreman if it was okay to have the consultant come to inspect at 4, then he had asked him if the section behind was also ready, and the Chinese foreman had said no, that will be done later. (Fieldwork diary entry, Lamu, 15.03.19)

COMMUNICATION ISSUES

- ❖ brief presence of translators
- ❖ rumours amongst Kenyan workers that the Chinese contractor was afraid Kenyan would “know their secrets”
- ❖ true or not, this suggests that the Chinese contractor is not interested in smooth communication
- ❖ newly-arrived Chinese workers spend weeks learning the 'codes' used in the construction site, which are almost unintelligible to outsiders.

THE CHAIN OF COMMAND

Chinese foreman

Team leaders

Don't speak English

Temporary contracts



Chinese engineers

Overrule Chinese foreman

Speak English

Permanent contracts

❖ incentive/deterrent regime has a **different meaning** for Chinese foremen and engineers

1. Chinese foremen: limbo of “permanent temporariness” (Swider, 2016, p. 139)
2. Chinese engineers: stepping stone for their career in CRBC

FREE FOOD AS BROKERAGE?



...SOCIAL CONNECTIONS ?

- ❖ Kenyan workers' support networks beyond job seekers
- ❖ “informal” training and advice giving
- ❖ supervisors sometimes try to “teach workers a lesson”

TO SUM UP...

- ❖ brokering communication 'codes'?
- ❖ brokers emerge amongst Kenyan supervisors, Chinese engineers, Chinese foremen
- ❖ living at work not only implies control and oversee, but it is also a space for the forging of connections
- ❖ Brokers have diverse interests, roles, objectives, identities, and motives.

Brokers embody and reshape seemingly contradicting narratives, discourses and practices, while simultaneously being embedded in them.

CONCLUSION: ZOOMING OUT

Labour relations are influenced by dynamics **within** and **outwith** the construction site.

Chinese SOEs' **capital accumulation** (through spatial expansion) is contingent and reliant upon their **embeddedness** -> Brokering of labour relations is part of the **'learning' process** of Chinese SOEs abroad

Brokering labour relations is also space where contestations, diverging narratives and contrasting agendas meet -> **the political unfolds**