



The Death of LAPSSET and Kenya's Poverty of Imagination

By Paul Goldsmith



The Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor project was officially launched at Magogoni, the site of the new Lamu port, in 2012. The two heads of the coalition government attended.

At the launch, President Mwai Kibaki told the people of Lamu that they had a new constitution and that they should familiarise themselves with its provisions to protect their land rights. Prime Minister Raila Odinga said something to the effect that the train is now leaving the station and either you Swahili can get on board and go forward with the rest of us, or you can remain behind as is your usual custom.

After the launch, LAPSSET progressed in fits and starts. A modern building to house the secretariat was built in Mokowe, an official website came online, and construction of three of the 32 planned berths began.

LAPSSET is by far Africa's most ambitious project. Its [description on the website](#) is a testament to Kenya's central planners' imagination:

This mega project consists of seven key infrastructure projects starting with a new 32 Berth port at Lamu (Kenya); Interregional Highways from Lamu to Isiolo, Isiolo to Juba (South Sudan),

Isiolo to Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), and Lamu to Garsen (Kenya), Crude Oil Pipeline from Lamu to Isiolo, Isiolo to Juba; Product Oil Pipeline from Lamu to Isiolo, Isiolo to Addis Ababa; Interregional Standard Gauge Railway lines from Lamu to Isiolo, Isiolo to Juba, Isiolo to Addis Ababa, and Nairobi to Isiolo; 3 International Airports: one each at Lamu, Isiolo, and Lake Turkana; 3 Resort Cities: one each at Lamu, Isiolo and Lake Turkana; and The multipurpose High Grand Falls Dam along the Tana River.

During the interim, the local community fought back through Save Lamu, a coalition of community organisations. Their objective was to make the Kenyan government hear their voices and to facilitate local participation.

Save Lamu was ignored, harassed, and accused of opposing the region's development. The organisation constantly repeated they were not against the project, but rather, they were fighting for the right of the local community to be consulted over its impact on the environment and local livelihoods. At one point, the office holders were summoned to Nairobi by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID). For two days, CID officers interrogated them about their imputed involvement in the horrific Al Shabaab attack in Mpeketoni. They returned safe but frazzled by the experience.

Several months later, the coalition extended its advocacy to the Lamu power plant, a 1,050 Mw coal-fired electricity project to be built next to the port at enormous cost and protected by Treasury-sapping guarantees for payment of the power whether the electricity was used or not. Although some people in Lamu supported the new port for the prospects of the jobs it would create, the community in no uncertain terms *did* oppose the coal-fired plant.

Compared to the PR invested in the LAPSSET during the previous years, the announcement several months ago that two of the berths at the Magogoni port were completed came with no fanfare and limited media attention. The lack of acclamation reflects the simple fact that the tide has been going out on LAPSSET for several years.

Kenya left holding the baby

In 2016, the Ugandan government announced plans to build a railroad that would connect Juba to another planned rail line from Kampala to the port of Tanga in Tanzania. Kampala explained that although the Tanzanian route was longer, the lower cost of construction justified the decision to withdraw from the planned link-up with the LAPSSET route through Kenya. In September, Ethiopia set in motion plans to build a 1500-kilometre railway to Khartoum and Port Sudan. The planned rail line effectively removing Ethiopia from the LAPSSET equation added another nail in the project's coffin.

In 2009, major Western and Asian governments were queuing up to finance the diverse components of LAPSSET. South Sudan, or more correctly, the oil in South Sudan, was the main prize. At the time of LAPSSET's initial conceptualisation, the country was forced to export its oil through Port Sudan. Newly independent South Sudan was exporting over 350,000 barrels a day in 2012. Although the supply was expected to decline over the decade, exploration held out the promise that much more crude oil would be coming, complementing the even larger deposits found in northern Uganda and eastern Congo.

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The sea of oil reportedly floating underneath the long neglected region made the grandiose infrastructural investment appear sensible at the time. The peak oil theory was making waves. But a matrix of factors, including climate change, the discovery of new oil reserves across the planet, and the falling cost of renewable energy, shifted the calculus. The financiers slowly melted away, leaving the Government of Kenya holding the baby.

This was also due to the other usual suspects: unreliable state partners, the fickle nature of investment capital, and the multiple problems that come with big projects in this and most parts of the world - all of which was compounded by the fact that exporting the thick crude required building the supporting superstructure from scratch, including heated pipelines to prevent coagulation en route. The pipeline to Lamu was estimated to cost US\$ 8 billion circa 2012. China, the primary purchaser of Sudan's oil, told Salva Kiir they would loan him the money for the pipeline but would not pay for it as many local stakeholders had assumed.

LAPSSET was already losing its shine at that juncture, and even before the pandemic, Kenya's investment in big infrastructure (epitomised by the financially challenged Standard Gauge Railway project) was proving to be a [debt spinning mirage](#). If this is not a concern for those playing the front-end game, the Big Project mentality should be a concern for everyone else.

Colonial conquest and economies of scale

The expanding powers of Europe invaded the continent when the age of industrial capitalism was taking off. Material progress and the conquest of nature became the measure of man and nations. During the first half of the 19th century, world trade doubled; between 1850 and 1870 it expanded by 260 per cent.

Coal and iron fueled industrial commerce. Steamships and railways provided the sinews. The length of European railway tracks increased from 1,700 miles in 1840 to 63,000 miles in 1870, and passed 100,000 miles ten years later. Progress in other infrastructural domains followed a similar trajectory.

The unification of countries, new constitutions, and an increase in civil liberties preceded these developments in Europe. The illumination of the Enlightenment had created an ecosphere of brightness and shadows, unchaining rationality from its religious and superstitious fetters in Europe but shrouding Africa in relative darkness.

The contrast accounts for why the British colonial administrator, Charles Eliot, found little to recommend in the socio-economic domain during his tour of the East African Protectorate. The country's future, he opined, "lay in the vegetative kingdom", but it was infrastructure that led the way. Eliot's comment, "It is not uncommon for a country to create a railway, but it is uncommon for a railway to create a country", conveyed not only the inverted logic of colonialism, but also the outsized impact of the Uganda railroad.

The establishment of industrial capitalism redirected the pathway to include investment in public goods like education and scientific research. The knowledge creation enabling the imperial surge came from a different mindset. The work of Charles Babbage in informatics, the engineering audacity of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and Alexander von Humbolt's quest to map the planet's geographical features all stemmed from an outsized imagination.

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The process supported a complicated system dedicated to the maintenance of growing armies of labourers and soldiers while erecting monuments, heroic statuary, and grandiose houses of worship. For generations, communities bought into the idea because it improved their security and facilitated trade.

The scale of such intellectual agendas is different than the Thinking Big model of development. Expanding vistas of science and the imagination is not the same as building a gigantic dam or assembling the [King of Bahrain's new robot bodyguard](#). Such toys and vanity projects, like Dubai's artificial islands, represent one endpoint set in motion by the capture of surplus, the rise of elites, and the formation of states.

Once upon a time the rise of the state offered a pathway out of a world of fear, superstition, conquest by neighbours, and punishments ordained by the gods. Half a millennium later, the Leviathan became the new god of economic rationality that substituted hierarchy for cooperation, replaced the commons with capitalist extraction, and generally raised the quality of life in exchange for the mega-accumulation benefitting a small group of individuals. All this was done in the name of efficiency and progress.

For five hundred years, the state expanded, culminating in big government experiments, such as the Soviet Union and Chairman Mao's China. Its post-1989 retreat left us with Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Water, Big Data, Big Finance, Big Retail, and even [Big Foreign Policy](#) in the guise of Xi Ping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The skewed rewards of stardom has made competition a [Winners Take All](#) game across the board, from corporate salaries, sports, to social media.

The Big State was colonialism's parting gift to Africa and the neoliberal economy now incentivises its agents to transact resources and to cash in on their geopolitical location.

Mentalities of scale

The United Kingdom's Whitehall model replicated itself across the Empire's colonies. Everything from the formal school system, the conventional assumptions of developmental policies, and the inability of the colonial-designed African nation-state to remake itself following the unsuccessful post-independence alternatives championed by the likes of Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, and Julius Nyerere reinforces this state of mind.

Historically, infrastructural development takes care of itself once the factors of production, exchange, security, and basic rights are in place. No one planned or financed the Great Silk Road but it sustained Central Asia's contribution to world civilization from the pre-Christian era until about two hundred years ago. Even the succession of invasions, conquests, and dynasties that swept over the region did little to disrupt the underlying system that supported the trade network until Russia's colonial ambitions instigated the 19th century imperial great game in that region.

Now China is seeking to build a [grander Great Silk Road](#) spanning the Eurasian Steppe as part of the Communist government's Belt and Road Initiative. It remains to be seen if the outcome will work the way XI Ping's planners anticipate. In the meantime, the mega cities built on the country's margins remain uninhabited and many of the centrally-planned BRI projects are experiencing cost overruns and other problems. The New Silk Road may yet set in motion a revival of the complicated oppositions and conflicts characterising the region's history.

Back in this part of the world, where the historical template is totally different, it is still mind-

boggling that big failures, from the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme to LAPSET, the Galana-Kulalu Irrigation scheme and the Jubilee government's faltering Big Four agenda, continue to propagate themselves. The terms of repayment behind the Jubilee government's Standard Gauge Railway gambit may even reverse Eliot's observation: for the first time, building a railway has unmade a country.

There is a difference between tapping economies of scale and scalability. This also applies to the world of ideas. We live in a world where the critique and testing of concepts and beliefs that long underpinned human processes is being reduced to the circulation of memes. This is reducing political discourse in the democratic West to the capture of single-issue constituencies and battle lines based on [memetic tribes](#).

In Kenya, the political arena has long been dominated by a dynamic based on the control of the monolithic state. In these conditions, the problem of scale is not a function of small-to-large, even though the educated elite have been conditioned to think in these terms. Politics in these conditions descended into a monetised exercise based on ephemeral ethno-linguistic coalitions.

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This approach has proven to be poorly suited to the challenge of fitting together multiple units of different sizes into a synergetic economic configuration. The history of the pre-colonial era provides an alternative political economy template. Kenya's constitutional reform marked a step in this direction, but replicating the dynamics patterned on regional initial conditions will remain a work in progress as long as the power concentrated in the centre works to break creative devolution and participatory development.

We are witnessing shifts in workplace and settlement patterns that make it possible to envision the process reaching an equilibrium point where entities based on the old clan and new tribe continuum may reemerge as an asset. But who is thinking about the future in terms that question the conventional assumptions about organisation, or that tap into the co-evolutionary potential inherent in Kenya's cultural mosaic?

Kenya's superstructural poverty

In social science, superstructure refers to the ideational domain - the world of concepts, languages, myths, ideologies, science, religion, superstitions, beliefs, and shared assumptions that define the societal mind. Culture is an overlapping concept that is typically defined in terms of a population's superstructural orientations and the behavioural patterns they generate.

The influence of superstructure and the cultural domain occupies a secondary role in materialist and evolutionary analysis. For example, the use of tools and fire resulted in the reduction in the size of early human beings' jaws because they no longer had to use their mouths to rip and chew meat. This in turn led to the rise of language, a primary enabler of cultural development.

Things were simpler during the Paleolithic. Today societies are complex systems where prediction based on infrastructure variables, such as the development of roads and communications, is confounded by the influence of non-linear dynamics and unpredictable forces. This is because superstructure is a mutable domain. It acts as both a critical source of both system maintaining and system changing feedback. This is a key element of societal transitions that allows us to translate

our collective experience into resilience. Once deemed an epiphenomenon, evolutionary ecology studies now document the role of culture in accelerating the slow process of biological evolution.

The colonial model superstructure worked to stabilise Kenya's development during the first decades after independence. When the rigid organisational order began changing due to a [release phase during the Moi era](#), the ground began to shift under the received paradigms of development. Before that the socialism versus capitalism dichotomy contributed to the intellectual debate about Kenya's and the developing world's progress in general. Both sides of the discourse acted as mechanisms selecting for the regional ideological convergence we now take for granted. Promoting integration is a good idea but the utility of the current top-down approach is debatable.

A recent journal article examining LAPSSET and three other similar infrastructure corridors described the political economy of corridors as "contests over the framing of development interventions influenced by a range of social and technical *imaginaries*". Kenya's politicians' and policy makers' embrace of large-scale centralised planning comes with high costs; the benefits of Kenya serving as Eastern Africa's hub are slipping away. Kenya's reputation of maintaining an even-handed regional foreign policy has also been marred.

The passage of the 2010 constitution set the stage for a new phase of [transformational reorganisation](#), allowing Kenyans greater scope in defining their future. But the critical thinking required to guide the transition has lagged far behind. Preachers, social media, and identity politics expanded into the vacated superstructural space. The influence of the Chinese model contributed to passive acceptance of the techno-infrastructure developmental pathway. Behind-the-curtain dealings have generated the funding.

As a result, Kenya's public-private cartels continue to benefit from a succession of revenue-draining projects and a succession of massively overpriced feasibility studies that render local stakeholders invisible. The Infrastructural Master Plan for the LAPSSET Corridor and Lamu Port, for example, is a thousand-page document that does not mention the regional population and communities affected. The attempt to build a technologically obsolete pollution-belching coal plant next to one of the planet's most unique near zero-carbon urban settlements and a UNESCO World Heritage Site is proof of what can happen in the absence of a countervailing developmental narrative.

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This is not to say the objectives of projects like LAPSSET will not be realised. The issue is not so much thinking big but the actors and incentives behind it. The corporate-empowered developmental state many African governments aspire to be should not be conflated with the moonshot mentality behind so many of humanity's greatest achievements. The regional links will coalesce over time, Old Silk Road style.

In the meantime, Kenya's superstructural deficit is compromising the nation's socio-economic transformation. Elite-driven opportunism has suffocated intellectual debate and multicultural vibrancy that once characterised the flow of ideas in this part of the world. Unlike infrastructure, investment in the exchange of ideas is not costly. The time is ripe for a Big Conversation.

We will discuss some of the concepts and practices framing the new developmental narrative emerging across the world in the second part of this epistle—which will also locate Kenya as an important player in our collective transition to the Anthropocene.

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