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Infrastructure, Development and Neoliberalism in Africa: The Concept of Transport Corridors

Sidy Cissokho

► **To cite this version:**

Sidy Cissokho. Infrastructure, Development and Neoliberalism in Africa: The Concept of Transport Corridors. Lamarque, Hugh; Nugent, Paul. Transport Corridors in Africa, Boydell and Brewer/Cambridge University Press, pp.35-56, 2022, 9781847012944. hal-03845087

HAL Id: hal-03845087

<https://hal.univ-lille.fr/hal-03845087v1>

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TRANSPORT CORRIDORS IN AFRICA



Edited by
Hugh Lamarque and Paul Nugent

TRANSPORT CORRIDORS IN AFRICA

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James Currey is an imprint of
Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF (GB)
www.jamescurrey.com
and of
Boydell & Brewer Inc.,
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620-2731 (US)
www.boydellandbrewer.com

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First published 2022

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84701-294-4 (James Currey paperback)

ISBN 978-1-80010-476-1 (James Currey ePDF)

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‘Power Show’ (cited on p. 211)

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Cover photograph: Trucks and petrol tankers waiting to cross from Katuna (Uganda) to Gatuna (Rwanda) on Northern Corridor, with One-Stop Border Post under construction (2016) (photograph: Paul Nugent)

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CHAPTER 2

Infrastructure, Development and Neoliberalism in Africa: The Concept of Transport Corridors

SIDY CISSOKHO

Introduction

Infrastructure in general, and transport infrastructure in particular, are the focus of an increasing number of social science studies. While most have concentrated on how populations have adopted them, few have looked at how they were perceived before they were established. However, the ways these physical creations are viewed and justified do not merely stimulate a simple narrative with no connection to the uses that can be made of them. Instead, they define much of what they actually are, as well as the limits within which they are created and used. Starting out from this premise, this chapter will trace the trajectory of one of the main intellectual constructs through which roads, ports and railways are conceived by development actors in Africa: the ‘corridor’.

This archaeological work is all the more important because the term ‘corridor’ is used both by those who think and implement these infrastructures in the expert domain, and by those who are responsible for producing a critical discourse about them in the academic domain. This situation certainly concerns other notions of the development world. However, it is not without its problems, for how can a critical discourse be produced on the physical and institutional achievements designated by the expression ‘corridors’ without distancing itself, at least for a time, from the forms of knowledge and presuppositions that contribute to making this category legitimate? The concept of corridors does not refer to a mere association of infrastructures: it gives it a particular meaning. It entails a certain representation of a territory based on regional, not national, divisions. In addition, the rhetoric around the formation of these transnational spaces, which are intended to be free of any constraints that might hinder the circulation of goods, makes free trade the main vector of development, thereby making transport infrastructure the material support for what is an eminently liberal project.

Rather than on infrastructure itself or the science and technology that enable its construction, this chapter focuses on how the narrative that justifies their existence has developed. This will require us to combine archival material with informal conversations and observations made during an ethnographic immersion among expert networks that advocate for this type of policies.¹ It will take us on a journey through scientific and expert publications, summary reports, audit reports, internal correspondences of international organisations (when they are available), and will even follow the work of the individuals and groups who deliver this discourse on the international stage, from one organisation or forum to another. The purpose of this chapter is not to uncover the origin of the notion of ‘corridors’, but rather to identify the starting point(s) of its investment by development practitioners, the variations, hesitations, as well as the contradictions inherent in the elaboration of the discourses with which this category is associated.

When everything is taken together, it reveals the intellectual history of an expression and its uses. It also exposes some of the mechanisms that have enabled the neoliberal agenda to prevail and prosper in the small world of development. Indeed, the rise of the use of the concept of ‘corridors’ has been in fact a response to the exhaustion of the justifications that had surrounded the construction of transport infrastructure in the development field since the post-war period. This made it possible to match the motivations surrounding this type of investment with the neoliberal thought that dominated the intellectual world in the 1970s and made the construction of transport infrastructure a necessary prelude to the creation of transnational free trade zones.² Since the time it was founded, this branch of public policy and the beliefs it conveys have continued their process of institutionalisation at the heart of an ensemble of international actors who still contribute to its existence today. Our review of the various stages of development and dissemination of the notion of corridors further demonstrates that

- 1 This chapter parallels the overview of various territories conducted between 2016 and 2019. It is first of all the product of a compilation of informal interviews, observations and archival work at the World Bank in Washington, D.C. and with European Union personnel in Brussels. It is also the result of observational work at meetings attended by development practitioners devoted to transport infrastructures and trade liberalisation in various West African capitals. To all of this we added the documentary research (reports, publications, documents and projects) we carried out over the course of these three years.
- 2 On the victory of neoliberal ideas during the 1970s, see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (eds), *The Road from Mount Pelerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, London, 2009.

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the structures of the market economy, of which transport infrastructures have become the backbone, are the product of an ongoing political effort rather than a spontaneous natural reality.³

The Keynesian Moment: Transport Infrastructures and the Developmentalist Imagination

At the root of the developmentalist discourse in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the link between development and the construction of transport infrastructure was obvious;⁴ however, this link was not made explicit until much later, at the end of the 1960s. It emerged partly from the increasing importance attributed by think tanks to the rationalisation of developmentalist thinking in the US. In the wake of the New Deal and the Keynesian thinking that still dominated certain spheres of thought at the time, heavy public investment in transport infrastructure was seen as a way of compensating for underdevelopment by contributing to the ‘Big Push’.⁵

As the developmentalist paradigm gradually spread in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War financing transport infrastructure became a key activity of the international institutions.⁶ The construction of railways, roads and ports is considered to be one of the essential factors – if not *the* factor – for driving development. In the early 1960s, therefore, the construction of transport infrastructure became one of the World Bank’s main areas of activity. Although Africa remained neglected, the Bank was carrying out important work in this field in Latin America and India. The same was true of the European Economic

³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Boston, 1957.

⁴ Gilbert Rist, *Le Développement: Histoire d'une Croyance Occidentale*, Paris, 1996.

⁵ On this subject, see Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America?*, Chicago, 2012. The expression is borrowed from developmental economist Paul Rosenstein-Rodan, who theorised the idea in the 1940s. It was subsequently used by Walter Whitman Rostow. For its use in connection with the development in the transport sector, see Sergio Oliete Josa and Francesc Magrinyà, ‘Patchwork in an Interconnected World: The Challenges of Transport Networks in Sub-Saharan Africa’, *Transport Reviews*, 38:6, 2018, pp. 710–36, p. 717.

⁶ Some recent works have suggested that the idea of ‘development’ was born in the inter-war period, thereby challenging the timeline suggested by Rist. As we are primarily interested in the institutionalisation of this school of thought, however, we adopt the timeline suggested by Rist. Véronique Plata-Stenger, ‘Mission Civilisatrice, Réforme Sociale et Modernisation: L’Oit et le Développement Colonial dans l’Entre-Deux-Guerres’, *Relations Internationales*, 177:1, 2019, pp. 15–29.

Community (EEC), which was also already one of six main providers of funds in this sector at the time.⁷

Transport infrastructure construction was not supported by any official discourse during this period, however. For the bureaucrats, the significance of transport infrastructures in public development policies was a natural consequence. The construction of transport infrastructure has been important element of the actions taken by the Bretton Woods organisations since their creation in the post-war context, where this type of infrastructure was particularly targeted. Also, many of the employees of organisations that were promoting the developmentalist paradigm – whether they belong to the World Bank or the EEC – had come from colonial administrations.⁸ Still, transport was at the heart of the public policy being led by these administrations.⁹ There was also a second pool of international civil servants responsible for designing public development policies who had come from national administrations in which transport infrastructure was also seen as an important element of growth.¹⁰

It was not until the early 1960s that what had seemed to be obvious actually took the form of a structured discourse in the development sector. Although the EEC was already one of the largest providers of infrastructure construction, it was not in its immediate environment that this discourse was being developed, but rather in Washington, D.C.¹¹ One particular research programme was emblematic of the formation of this discourse: the Transport Research Program, which was financed through a co-operation between the US and the World Bank. It was created in the early 1960s, and distributed its final publication at the end of the

⁷ Wilfred Owen, *Strategy for Mobility*, Washington, D.C., 1964, p. 171.

⁸ Véronique Dimier, 'Politiques Indigènes en France et en Grande-Bretagne dans les Années 1930: Aux Origines Coloniales des Politiques de Développement', *Politique et Sociétés*, 24:1, 2005, pp. 73–99.

⁹ Hélène d'Almeida-Topor, Chantal Chanson-Jabeur and Monique Lakroum (eds), *Les Transports en Afrique XIXe–XXe Siècle*, Paris, 1992.

¹⁰ See, for example, Hugh S. Norton, *National Transportation Policy: Formation and Implementation*, Berkeley, 1967, but also, more broadly, works such as John K. Galbraith, *Le Nouvel État Industriel: Essai sur le Système Économique Américain*, Paris, 1968.

¹¹ Until the 1990s, and even later, the European Union did not make its presence felt as a meaningful producer among the players in international aid. See: Véronique Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire*, Basingstoke, 2014, in particular p. 152.

1980s.¹² One of America's oldest and largest think tanks, the Brookings Institution, was commissioned to carry out the work. In order to do so, it brought together not only its permanent think tank employees but also outside consultants from academia, who were exclusively economists. All together, they exported their conception of transport infrastructure role in economic development forged in the US national context, in the development field.

The arguments that were developed in the various publications associated with this programme are symptomatic of the justifications elaborated during the 1960s and 1970s around the construction of transport infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa. In order to understand the emergence of this discourse at that particular moment, we need to look at the history of the institution from which it originated. The birth of the Transport Research Program corresponded to the shift by many Washington think tanks from national policies to development policies. The Brookings Institution belongs to the first wave of American think tanks created in the US in the early twentieth century by forward-thinking philanthropic businessmen.¹³

After playing an important role in defining the central elements of US domestic policy, these institutions espoused the immediate post-war movement designed by the US, which was increasingly invested in international affairs.¹⁴ The type of discourse think tanks delivered also benefited from the significant status acquired by the expertise gained from legitimising public policy during the war effort. These institutions won numerous foreign policy contracts from the American government and other Washington-based organisations, not just nationally, but also internationally.

¹² A series was published as part of this project. All the published works were reviewed in the various specialist journals of the time. *Strategy for Mobility*, by Owen Wilson; *Transport Investment and Economic Development*, edited by Gary Fromm; *Government Controls on Transport: An African Case*, by Edwin T. Haeefele and Eleanor B. Steinberg; *The Impact of Highway Investment on Development*, by George W. Wilson, Barbara R. Bergmann, Leon V. Hirsch and Martin S. Klein; *Transport and the Economic Integration of South America*, by Robert T. Brown; *Soviet Transport Experience: Its Lessons for Other Countries*, by Holland Hunter; and *Distance and Development: Transport and Communications in India*, by Wilfred Owen.

¹³ Donald E. Abelson, 'From Policy Research to Political Advocacy: The Changing Role of Think Tanks in American Politics', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 25:1, 1995, pp. 93–126; Gerald Freund, *Narcissism and Philanthropy: Ideas and Talent Denied*, New York, 1996.

¹⁴ See in particular the chronology produced in Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, Montreal, 2002, pp. 17–49.

The career path of Wilfred Owen, the director of the programme, makes this interweaving of national administrations, international administrations and networks of experts that was specific to the US capital easier to understand.¹⁵ Wilfred Owen was educated as an economist at Harvard in the early 1930s.¹⁶ Immediately after graduating, he joined the Highway Research Board in Washington, a division of the US National Research Council. Created in the early 1920s, the Highway Research Board advised the US administration at a federal level. Throughout the 1940s, he was one of the experts on the National Resources Planning Board, which Roosevelt had created to support his New Deal policy by providing studies on a number of important topics. He then moved into the private sector and joined the Brookings Institution, where he started out producing analyses of US domestic transport policy.¹⁷ When the organisation became increasingly involved in drafting reports on US foreign policy and foreign countries, Wilfred Owen's career became international. His expertise in transport grew, and he worked on the preparation of reports for the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Asian Development Bank and the Ford Foundation in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The discourse that developed in the various studies from the Transport Research Program was clear. The challenge was to bring the relationship between transport and economic growth up to date, and so transport, and through it the mobility of goods and people, was placed at the heart of the development issue. The construction of transport infrastructure was not the only condition for economic development, but it was a central one. Other intellectual output from organisations on a similar path to the Brookings Institution reinforced this argument, as was the case, for example, with the 'mobility index' developed from the statistical work carried out by the International Road Federation. This organisation had played an important role in disseminating road-building standards in the immediate post-war era, and its experts now collaborated with the United Nations, and even the World Bank, in the 1960s.

The index below reproduces the major distinction between 'developed' and 'undeveloped' countries popularised by the American discourse in the immediate post-war period. It introduces another division between 'mobile' and 'immobile'

¹⁵ See also the career path of Albert O. Hirschman, which is retraced in Jeremy Adelman, *Worldly Philosopher: The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman*, Princeton, 2014.

¹⁶ A piece by Graeme Zielinski published in the *Washington Post* on 6 December 2001 on the death of Wilfred Owen.

¹⁷ Charles L. Dearing and Wilfred Owen, *National Transportation Policy*, Washington, D.C., 1949.

societies. As a result of this rhetorical work, the discourse on infrastructure is directly superimposed on that on development.

Table 2.1. Index of per capita GNP and the mobility of nations, 1961.

Country	GNP	Freight mobility	Passenger mobility
Immobile nations			
Ethiopia	3.2	1.7	1.7
Pakistan	5.5	6.7	8.3
India	5.9	10.0	11.5
Ghana	14.6	10.1	9.5
Columbia	20.8	11.3	9.2
Peru	13.3	12.7	10.8
Algeria	20.6	17.3	16.0
Greece	31.7	17.8	18.7
Mexico	23.0	27.8	22.8
Mobile nations			
Japan	372	30.5	46.3
Spain	275	33.2	34.8
Chile	33.3	38.2	36.2
UK	104.0	86.0	94.5
Sweden	130.8	93.0	104.5
France	100.0	100.0	100.0
West Germany	105.4	99.3	91.0
US	207.3	189.0	147.2
Canada	147.9	223.1	148.9

Source: Adapted from Owen, *Strategy for Mobility*, p. 14.

Beyond the simple correlation between development and mobility revealed by the use of numbers, the challenge at the time was to manage the causal link between the two elements in a way that reflected the canons of scientific discourse as closely as possible. Was transport infrastructures a condition or a consequence of development? In the literature produced by expert circles in Washington, proof of this causal link necessitated repeated calls for examples from American history in which roads and, even more, railways, occupied a

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significant place.¹⁸ In the context of the Cold War, however, the example of communist countries served as a foil. Behind the opposition to it lay criticism of the Soviet Union's planning policies, and to a lesser extent those of China.¹⁹ The leverage effect on development induced by investment in transport infrastructure was also seen as being closely linked to the forms taken by existing political and social structures. The combination offered by the examples of developed countries – the Soviet Union aside – therefore served to define a path to development through transport.

Wilfred Owen's adaptation of the famous stages of development of industrial societies, which had been theorised by the economist Walt Whitman Rostow a few years earlier, shows that undeveloped countries corresponded to stages 1 and 2 and communist countries to stage 3, notably due to their emphasis on rail.²⁰ The US corresponded to stages 4 and 5.

First was the period of immobility and traditional society. In this period, it was difficult and costly to develop trade and cultural relations on any large scale except where channels of communications were provided by the rivers and oceans. The pattern of living emerging from these conditions was predominately one of localised agriculture and handicraft industries with a minimum of economic integration and social intercourse. Most people of the world still live in this initial stage of primitive transport, and their efforts to break out of a subsistence environment and to achieve a better life are being thwarted by the same barriers to movement that plagued all generations before them.

A second stage of transport development was the period of internal improvements and the growth of trade. Human and animal power was made much more effective by the development of turn pikes and canals, which reduced the cost of transport by traditional methods of moving on land and water. This period of declining transport cost saw both an expansion of capacity and a lengthening of the radius of trade and travel.

A third stage in the evolutionary process toward greater mobility and higher standard of living was the period of transport mechanisation and industrialisation. This was the period of steam power, which introduced both the steamship and the first railways. It was a period marked by heavy

¹⁸ Robert W. Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History*, Baltimore, 1964.

¹⁹ Ernest W. Williams, *Freight Transportation in the Soviet Union, including Comparisons with the United States*, Princeton, 1962.

²⁰ Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge, 1960, in particular pp. 4–16.

investments in transportation, as well as the establishment of a wide assortment of manufacturing industries.

A fourth period in the evolution of transport has been the development of motorisation and the new mobility. This has been an era marked by growing dependence on trucks, buses and automobiles, and by extensive effort to provide all-weather roads. This is the period when people and economic activity were freed from the limited mileage of fixed routes provided by railways and water ways.

A fifth stage still in the process of development is the air age and the conquest of distance, a period in which the world is being united by transport speeds that are obliterating political boundaries and adding a third dimension to the solution of transport problems. This stage, however, has not yet affected local and short-haul transport that comprises a major part of the transport problem.²¹

We should not over-emphasise the producers' reasoning in this discussion, however, as the extract suggests, for those who believed in the link between mobility and development, the issue of the specificity of the social, political and economic structures of so-called undeveloped countries raised the question of the relevance of this model outside the West. What was being questioned was not the model to be achieved – which was that of the US – but rather the inescapable nature of the steps required to achieve it. According to the prevailing economic theories of the time, the heavy public investment in transport infrastructure had to enable developing countries to catch up, without repeating the mistakes made by their North American 'big brother'.

The role of the US, and especially Washington, in creating schools of thought on the place of transport infrastructure in the development process, may seem surprising in view of the other development topics from the same period. It is linked above all to the available sources, which originated in the American capital and its microcosm of experts, think tanks and national and international officials, the main producers of the discourse associating transport infrastructure with development. Representatives of other organisations located in Europe or elsewhere that were involved in financing infrastructure construction did also have their own vision of the role of transport infrastructure in development. During this period, for example, the media division of the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development of the European Union (*Le Courrier Afrique – Caraïbes – Pacifique – Union Européenne*) kept track of

²¹ Owen, *Strategy for Mobility*, pp. 35–37.

this thinking in opinion pieces produced by European Union officials.²² But it was only in the US that we saw a systematic shaping of this belief in the form of research projects, scientific articles, books, indicators and a field of research in its own right.²³ Over the next few decades, the central importance of Washington only increased, as the World Bank's dominance in the production of development knowledge became more significant.

The Neoliberal Moment: Transport and Free-Trade Infrastructures

The belief in a link between development and the construction of transport infrastructure continued to form the basis for justifying transport infrastructure projects, even though it may have been the subject of heated discussions. The ways in which this belief was expressed modified though to accommodate changes in the developmental paradigm, especially with the advent of the Washington Consensus.²⁴ At the end of the 1980s, the myth that associated the construction of transport infrastructure with development was perpetuated through the notions of 'transport corridors', 'economic corridors' and later 'development corridors'. The formation of transnational spaces in which goods would be able to circulate unhindered became one of the preferred paths to development. More than mobility, it was now free trade that infrastructure had explicitly come to support. This reformulation was essentially the product of World Bank personnel, whose transport discourse dominated the 1990s.²⁵

Apparently, the World Bank's use of the term did not just signal the proximity of the sphere of development to the economy, as it had in the immediate

²² Behind these seemingly rational narratives, it would seem that political interests were at the forefront. Infrastructure was used as a way of buying African elites, who were easily able to capitalise on their construction. See Véronique Dimier, *Recycling Empire*, in particular p. 152.

²³ See, for example, the birth of the *Journal of Transport Economics and Policy* in 1967.

²⁴ Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, 'Le "Washington consensus": Contribution à une Sociologie de l'Hégémonie du Néolibéralisme', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 121–22, 1998, pp. 3–22.

²⁵ For more on this subject, see Josa and Magrinyà's review paper, 'Patchwork in an Interconnected World', at p. 7. The role of this organisation in the formulation of the logic that underlies a large number of development policies has been highlighted in numerous studies. See, for example, Michael Goldman, 'The Birth of a Discipline: Producing Authoritative Green Knowledge, World Bank-Style', *Ethnography*, 2:2, 2001, pp. 191–217.

post-war period, but also to geography, given that the concept actually appeared in that field in the 1960s. Little is known about the shift of this notion from the scientific to the decision-making sphere. In the best-documented North American context, it seems to have been driven by the increased proximity of certain experts in the field to the federal administration after the Second World War.²⁶ Jean Debie and Claude Comtois are the only geographers who have attempted to trace the genealogy of the concept of corridors and, to a lesser extent, the conditions under which it made the shift from the scientific world to government administration. In their view, the notion first appeared in so-called developed countries during the 1970s.²⁷ The concept of corridors was thus used in the development field as early as the 1970s, and therefore at the same time as in national bureaucracies.²⁸ It was used in a loose sense, however, and the word ‘corridor’ was primarily employed as a synonym for terms like ‘transport system.’²⁹ In fact, the word was applied mainly to refer to a simple chain of different types of transport infrastructure.

As a sign of the progressive empowerment of the development industry, the shift from the notion of US and European national administrations to the development world could no longer be explained by the career path taken by individuals such as Wilfred Owen two decades earlier. The porosity between national and international bureaucracies remained, however, in the form of areas that grouped their representatives together on specific topics. In the case of World Bank personnel, which is the best documented situation, this was manifested by the fact that employees of the organisation participated in numerous international conferences, where they sat alongside officials and experts involved in making policies for Western countries. Similar spaces were also developed within the World Bank itself, where weekly training for the organisation’s staff included

²⁶ Thomas J. Wilbanks, ‘Geography and Public Policy at the National Scale’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 75:1, 1985, pp. 4–10. For a more recent review of these relationships between government and geography, see National Research Council, *Rediscovering Geography: New Relevance for Science and Society*, Washington, D.C., 2000, pp. 109–37.

²⁷ Jean Debie and Claude Comtois, ‘Une relecture du concept de corridors de transport: illustration comparée Europe/Amérique du Nord’, *Les Cahiers Scientifiques du Transport*, 58, 2010, pp. 127–44.

²⁸ See, for example, in the case of Latin America: Debie and Comtois, ‘Une relecture’, pp. 127–44.

²⁹ Yann Alix (ed.), *Les corridors de transport*, Cormelles-le-Royal, 2012.

North American or European experts, who were expected to provide potential models for public development policies intended for developing countries.³⁰

It was only from the end of the 1980s that the concept of ‘corridor’ became the subject of a true definition and delimitation of studies. This moment in time combined with two important turning points in the development industry. First, this theoretical elaboration was mainly produced by personnel from one organisation, the World Bank. The construction of a discourse that legitimised infrastructure projects no longer took place outside international organisations, as had been the case in the immediate post-war era with think tanks in the US capital, but directly within the bank. This shift in the location of expertise marked the beginning of the international financial institution’s affirmation as a knowledge producer.³¹ Second, while reflections on the link between transport and development had mainly focused on Asia, and to a lesser extent Latin America, the concept of corridors was being developed based on considerations that were germane to the African continent. This change reflected a move in the World Bank’s interests, and with it those of the entire development industry, towards Africa.³²

When viewed through the World Bank’s archives, the process that led to the reformulation of the link between transport infrastructures and development emerges as being linked to the affirmation of the organisation’s so-called ‘technical’ staff at the end of the 1980s more than to any sort of ideological upheaval.³³ A study of the correspondence by the infrastructure division personnel, who were mainly engineers, suggests that the commitment to the concept of corridors coincided with a dwindling of the prior justifications for the construction of transport infrastructures in developing countries among this group, and the simultaneous rise of a sense of weariness. The personnel questioned the nature of the projects that

³⁰ In particular, the weekly Wednesday seminars at the organisation’s headquarters during a part of the 1980s come to mind.

³¹ This upheaval is represented by the expression ‘knowledge bank’, which has given rise to a significant body of literature. Teresa Kramarz and Bessma Momani, ‘The World Bank as Knowledge Bank: Analyzing the Limits of a Legitimate Global Knowledge Actor’, *Review of Policy Research*, 30:4, 2013, pp. 409–31; Goldman, *The Birth of a Discipline*; Olivier Nay, ‘International Organisations and the Production of Hegemonic Knowledge: How the World Bank and the OECD Helped Invent the Fragile State Concept’, *Third World Quarterly*, 35:2, 2014, pp. 210–31.

³² John P. Lewis, Richard C. Webb, and Devesh Kapur (eds), *The World Bank: Its First Half Century: History, Vol. 1*, Washington, D.C., 1997, in particular pp. 16–21.

³³ S. Cissokho, ‘Reflections on the Washington Consensus: When the World Bank turned to free trade for its transport infrastructure projects’, *Politix*, 128:4, 2019, 179–205.

had been undertaken up to that point, and the recurring failings of infrastructure construction despite the enormous investments that had been made.

At the same time, an internal reform of unprecedented significance modified the functions of these same individuals, giving them greater reach in the development of projects. The new ‘task team leaders’ were responsible for the composition of their teams, the development of the logic behind their projects, the sourcing of funding within the institution to complete their projects and, of course, the task of convincing the bank’s clients and their superiors of the merits of the project they were taking on.³⁴ In other words, they became real promoters of projects within the new reticular organisation of the World Bank, which was unique to the emerging management ideology.³⁵ The bank’s engineers – who had once been confined to technical expertise – seized this reform and the new roles it created to change the meaning of transport infrastructure projects. This was reflected in the creation of a multi-donor research programme – the Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy Program (SSATP) – which was closely controlled by the bank, and brought economists and engineers together to produce an in-depth reflection on public transport policies in Sub-Saharan Africa.³⁶ It was notably in this area that work on defining the World Bank’s transport infrastructure policies, as well as that of all donors in Africa throughout the 1990s, was carried out.³⁷

³⁴ For a more detailed explanation of the role currently being played by the TTL, see Lavagnon Ika, ‘Opening the Black Box of Project Management: Does World Bank Project Supervision Influence Project Impact?’, *International Journal of Project Management*, 33:5, 2015, pp. 1111–23.

³⁵ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, Paris, 1999, pp. 99–167.

³⁶ This situation would lead to a profound crisis at the end of the 1990s and the partial overhaul of the programme. John Bruce Thompson, ‘Africa’s Transport: A Promising Future. A Review of Africa’s Achievements’, SSATP Advocacy Paper, Washington, D.C., 2011, pp. 12–13.

³⁷ In his foreword to the history of the SSATP, John Bruce Thompson, a former European Commission official, writes: ‘The European Commission, as a leading transport donor in Sub-Saharan Africa with activities covering 30 countries, needed a sectoral approach to sustain its major investments. SSATP policy principles and good practices guided my development of the EC transport sector guidelines. Similarly, SSATP experience was shared with the European Union member states resulting in an EC Communication on promoting sustainable transport in development co-operation. Lately, SSATP transport corridor expertise contributed to the EC Communication on the EU-Africa Infrastructure Partnership, which through a Trust Fund fosters interconnection along the Trans-African transport corridors’: Thompson, *Africa’s Transport*, p. vii.

There was also a similar expansion in another, more ideological context, however. The end of the 1980s saw the institutionalisation of structural adjustment policies. It emerges from the archives of the bank's infrastructure division that highlighting these policies and aligning them with those of the World Bank and the objectives it set out jeopardised infrastructure projects as they had previously existed. 'Corridor' projects allowed them to be placed in a broader context than before: the promotion of free trade. This enabled the infrastructure division to maintain the size of its budget, which had been endangered during the 1980s, after an unprecedented growth during McNamara's presidency. In a series of letters to its operating teams, the infrastructure division's management encouraged corridor projects in the hope that thanks to this type of project it would be able to show that it fully supported the organisation's joint effort to restore the recipient countries' trade balances by facilitating interregional trade, thereby benefiting from the lines of credit associated with structural adjustments.

It would be wrong, however, to believe that use of the word 'corridor' inside the bank became a fixture as soon as it first appeared. According to the organisation's official documents, the notion of corridors was first seen as a response to the natural problem of landlocked countries. In the late 1980s, therefore, it was first of all a question of enabling countries with no direct access to the sea to limit their import and export costs by creating road or rail infrastructures with links to one or more ports. At the beginning of the 1990s, the problem of regional integration, which is considered here from the economic point of view alone, became part of the mix. The combination of infrastructures was supposed to enable the creation of new roads, and thus facilitate the formation of regional markets governed by common legislation. Later in the 1990s, what became known as 'first-generation regional transport and trade projects' systematically accompanied the regional-scale infrastructure construction of institutional reforms.³⁸ In this version of corridor projects, infrastructure remained the basis for the projects, but served as a lever to trigger institutional reforms such as the reorganisation of customs services, the harmonisation of laws, or even the creation of public-private partnerships. In addition to the shift in meaning of infrastructure investments, new 'instruments of government' emerged.³⁹

One sign of how the meaning and instruments associated with this solution were solidifying, a 'toolkit' of all the reforms tied to this category was published

³⁸ Abel Bove, *et al.*, 'West and Central Africa Trucking Competitiveness', SSATP Working Paper 108, Washington, D.C., 2018, p. 52.

³⁹ Christopher C. Hood, *The Tools of Government*, London, 1983.

by the bank in 2014.⁴⁰ This type of document is common in the organisation. It encapsulates solutions that are considered to be part of the bank's classic repertoire, and includes condensed government instruments that otherwise exist independently, but that together form this category of public policy. Corridors are seen as a set of measures, laws, institutions, customs reforms and infrastructures that combine to facilitate free trade at a regional level. This type of policies within the bank was also crystallised in way the bank was organised, as starting in the 2000s, a working group specifically dedicated to sharing experiences on corridor projects took shape. Rather than by regular meetings alone, this group's existence was first given substance in mailing lists across which so-called corridor projects circulated so that they could be submitted for a joint review before being examined by the bank's management. Though intangible, these internal networks helped spread these policies through the organisation beyond Africa and infrastructure departments, and established peer reviews of these applications.

The concept of corridors thus allowed the faith in the links between transport infrastructure and development to continue to thrive in a renewed form at the end of the 1980s. In a context in which neoliberal thinking now dominated the developmentalist discourse, it allowed the World Bank employees responsible for infrastructure projects to create a connection between the achievements of their project, free trade and development. Once again, the centre of gravity of this discursive production seemed to be Washington – or more precisely the World Bank – thereby following a path that resembled the way development knowledge was produced. This discourse has, however, now been taken up on several occasions by a number of international organisations, whose policies it echoes.

Well-established Belief

The actions of the bank's staff alone are not enough to explain why this category and the tools of government it embodies still endure. In fact, they are also supported by a network of actors stretching beyond the World Bank's circle of employees. Representatives of the European Union, national co-operation agencies, the African Development Bank, regional economic communities (RECS), all kinds of consultancy firm, national administrations, and even the business community all form an ensemble of actors who exist because of this solution just as much as they contribute to its existence. The challenge of this last section, which takes the form of an epilogue, is not to create an exhaustive

⁴⁰ Charles Kunaka and Robin C. Carruthers, *Trade and Transport Corridor Management Toolkit*, Washington, D.C., 2014.

mapping of this set of actors and the places where they come together.⁴¹ It is more modest than that: it is a question of using our interviews and observations in an attempt to sketch out a few hypotheses to explain what may have governed the spread of this approach beyond World Bank programmes alone since the 2000s.

Hegemonic Discourse

The cultural hegemony of the bank's discourse is first and foremost the product of the balance of power in the development world. In terms of corridors, this hegemony is reinforced by the opaque nature of speeches on transport infrastructure policy by donors such as the European Union. Although the European Union's aid policies focused on this type of achievement at the outset, officials at DG DEVCO adopted the instruments and discourse developed by the Bank during the 1990s.⁴² Subsequent staff cuts at the Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development from the end of the 1990s only increased the dependency of this area of the European Union's administration on the World Bank. The dominance of the bank's infrastructure discourse has been further enhanced by the growing value of co-financed projects that have associated the bank with national co-operation agencies such as those of Germany (GIZ), the US (USAID) and Japan (JICA), for which the challenge is to use these collaborations as a way of magnifying the impact of their own projects.

The success of this category may, however, be due to how it has been shaped. In a context in which development aid is increasingly subject to measured targets, the turnkey quantification instruments provided with this type of public action facilitate its spread to other national co-operation organisations concerned about being able to quantify their actions and impacts.⁴³ The malleability of the concept, and even the blurring that surrounds this category, is a

⁴¹ See for example on this subject, studies using social network analysis: SWAC/OECD, *Cross-Border Co-operation and Policy Networks in West Africa*, Paris, 2017, pp. 67–75 and 162–91.

⁴² Dimier, *Recycling Empire*, in particular p. 152.

⁴³ Kevin P. Donovan, 'The Rise of the Randomistas: On the Experimental Turn in International Aid', *Economy and Society*, 47:1, 2018, pp. 27–58; just like international public policies: Patrick Le Galès, 'Performance Measurement as a Policy Instrument', *Policy Studies*, 37:6, 2016, 508–20. See, for example, the standardisation proposed in Kunaka and Carruthers, *Trade and Transport Corridor Management Toolkit*, pp. 29–69.

‘catch-all’, making corridors ‘boundary objects.’⁴⁴ It unites professionals from different development circles specialising in infrastructure, transport, borders, regional integration and the free movement of goods, all of which can be found in one or more of the components of this type of standard public policy.

The scale of regional actions this category embraces has a certain resonance among a number of international organisations that lack recognition. Representatives of the RECs and the African Union see promotion of the regional level as a means of asserting their authority by strengthening the regional integration process and providing their respective administrations with the resources they lack. They enable representatives of the continent’s regional organisations to rely on the influence of donors to make their respective organisations’ regulatory production effective at a national level. In addition, we see the production and dissemination of idealised representations of the continent in the formulation of projects such as the Trans-African Highway, NEPAD, PIDA and more recently the AfCFTA.

The notion has also been established in advocacy speeches by interest groups representing the economic world, with the support of national co-operation agencies in both West and East Africa. Over the years since 2010, organisations like the Borderless Alliance in West Africa and the East African Business Council in East Africa have seized on the notion in order to pressure national governments and RECs and advocate for lower export taxes. The sensitivity of national administrations to the discourse of business-oriented interest groups has also been reinforced by the increasing importance of indicators such as the ‘Doing Business Index’, which is directly based on business perceptions, as well as by the new conditionalities associated with International Monetary Fund funding and the ‘improvement of the business climate.’⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See also the seminal article by Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, ‘Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39’, *Social Studies of Science*, 19:3, 1989, pp. 387–420. In the development field, see the Camille Al Dabaghy’s work on the Malagasy decentralisation programme: Camille Al Dabaghy, ‘Pour ou Contre les Centres d’Appui aux Communes: Controverse sur les Instruments dans le Tout Petit Monde Transnationalisé de la Décentralisation Malgache’, a presentation at the AFSP congress in Bordeaux in 2019.

⁴⁵ Timothy Besley, ‘Law, Regulation, and the Business Climate: The Nature and Influence of the World Bank Doing Business Project’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 29:3, 2015, pp. 99–120.

The Formation of a Small Community

Beyond these various reappropriations, the institutionalisation of this category and the instruments of government it conveys depend on the forums in which they are debated. Again, World Bank staff play a leading role in facilitating and organising these networks. At a continental level, one of the major forums is the SSATP, which is still hosted by the bank as we are writing these lines. Based on the annual meetings of the programme, it was decided in 2004 to create an annual conference that would bring the various actors from the public and private sectors that are supposed to be involved in the development of corridors together at a continental level. This forum is known as the REC-TCC (Regional Economic Communities Transport Coordination Committee). It is reinforced by numerous other forums organised by business representatives in West and South Africa.⁴⁶ While these may be less prestigious, they also see representatives from the private and public sectors come together on the subject of corridors with the same frequency.

According to our observations,⁴⁷ these social spaces are undoubtedly areas of confrontation between different visions of what corridors are or, more broadly, the general level of interest in them. This includes opposition between representatives of the private and public sectors, between the different areas of the national administration, between regional and national administrations, and even between competing regional bureaucracies such as between representatives of WAEMU and ECOWAS in West Africa. However, they are also – and perhaps above all – places where there it is possible to disseminate ideas and good practices associated with this category policy. Against the backdrop of PowerPoint presentations or less formal discussions in reception rooms or hotel buffets, the same arguments are repeated, the same examples circulate, and the same people meet. The spread of this type of policy also flows from a certain type of elite sociability that is re-created in these forums, akin to that of clubs, and common to representatives of the private sector and the internationalised public sector.⁴⁸ This community is further reinforced by the existence of other similar spaces at national and regional levels, where presentations are held and debates are organised on related themes in the meeting rooms of the same hotels,

⁴⁶ Borderless Alliance, East African Business Council.

⁴⁷ Cissokho, S., 'Fabriquer son "accès" à l'État: Ethnographie d'un espace de rencontre international entre représentants du secteur privé et public (Afrique de l'Ouest)', *Anthropologie et Développement*, 51/2021 (to be released).

⁴⁸ Dominique Connan, 'Une Réinvention de la Différence Élitaire: Un Rotary Club dans le Kenya de Mwai Kibaki', *Critique Internationale*, 73:4, 2016, pp. 133–55.

and bring together representatives of the same national administrations, the same international organisations and the same interest groups. These sociabilities are further perpetuated in the management organisations that embody most corridors today.⁴⁹

These spaces embrace certain skills and resources that enable the movement of individuals from one organisation to another. National administrations thus serve as a reservoir not only for international organisations, but also for expert firms with which national co-operation organisations contract in order to set up their programmes. This is the case with the most senior customs officers, who are particularly envied for the networks of officers they have at various border crossings and for their knowledge of the complex rules governing the movement of goods. They can thus be found in large numbers in both RECs and organisations representing the interests of business communities at a national and regional level, such as the Borderless Alliance in West Africa, or in funds that bring together donors of all kinds, such as TradeMark East Africa.⁵⁰ These forums are therefore also, and sometimes first and foremost, places where national administrative staff seeking to internationalise are recruited, as well as places for discussion. As in other areas of public development policy, this situation cannot exist without generating professionalisation, once again making a contribution if not to the spread, then at least to the maintenance of this category, which is now associated with the interests of a specific social group.⁵¹

Conclusion

The story of the journey of the corridor concept in the development industry provides more than just a reflection on infrastructure or even the construction of a category of policy: it offers a perspective on how the neoliberal agenda has prevailed in the development field. This process includes the already well-known role of the World Bank, which, as in many other areas of development, is the

⁴⁹ These organisations exist for the Abidjan-Lagos, North, Central, Walvis Bay, Maputo and Dar es Salaam corridors. For more information, see: Yao Adzigbey, Charles Kunaka and Tesfamichael Nahusenay Mitiku, 'Mécanismes Institutionnels de Gestion des Corridors en Afrique Subsaharienne', SSATP Working Paper 86, Washington, D.C., 2007; or John Arnold, Gerald Ollivier and Jean-Francois Arvis, *Best Practices in Corridor Management*, Washington, D.C., 2005.

⁵⁰ See, for example, the recent ECOWAS Task Force project.

⁵¹ See, for example, the work on transitional justice by Sandrine Lefranc and Frédéric Vairel, 'The Emergence of transitional justice as a professional international practice', ECPR International Congress, Reykjavik, Iceland, August 2011.

main producer of the conceptual framework that is bringing this reversal about. More unexpected, however, are the phenomena behind the dissemination of this agenda. Across the transport infrastructure sector, they are not so much the product of an ideological battle as of the affirmation of certain categories of employees within the World Bank. In addition, the dissemination and maintenance of this new framework is not a matter of conviction, but rather a set of beliefs and institutions based on a certain type of sociability and expertise.

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This book is based on research from a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant for the project entitled African Governance and Space: Transport Corridors, Border Towns and Port Cities in Transition (AFRIGOS) [ADG-2014–670851]

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