

CORRIDORS OF CONNECTIVITY AND THE INFRASTRUCTURAL LAND RUSH IN LAOS

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Introduction

The global surge in infrastructure construction is increasingly central to land and resource grabs. This is particularly evident as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) responds to global demand for infrastructure, producing complex social and spatial transformations around the world (Oliveira et al. 2020; Schindler and DiCarlo 2022). Securing land is a constitutive feature of many large-scale projects, which necessarily require massive amounts of space for their construction and are intended to extract value from the surrounding area once complete. Projects thus produce wide-ranging social, economic, and ecological changes (Schindler et al. 2019), with megaprojects – from economic corridors to dams, roads, and special economic zones (SEZs) – generating distinct footprints and implications. In Laos, infrastructure expansion – deemed critical to national development – frequently involves land concessions and other government incentives or preferential policies, resulting in acts of dispossession and the taking of land without adequate redress (DiCarlo 2020a; Dwyer 2020; Sims 2021; Suhardiman et al. 2021). We suggest that research on land and resource rushes can benefit from theoretical, methodological, and empirical attention to the effects of infrastructure on land, land governance, and dispossession.

This chapter focuses on economic corridor infrastructure in Laos. Economic corridor development entails not only roads and railways but also electricity transmission, SEZs and processes of capitalist transformation, urbanization, and industrialization. Corridors are intended to connect places considered distant and secure investment and profitability. Proponents claim that they create space for investment in locations otherwise considered risky and thus have the potential to foster sustainable development (ADB 2013). Although corridor projects may generate potential employment, they often lead to exploitation and exclusion. Critics suggest that the reality of corridors is much more extractive and uneven (DiCarlo 2021; Glassman 2010; Thame 2021; Thame and Glutting 2021).

We add to these critiques by arguing that megaprojects are a critical feature and technology of the global land rush. Goldstein and Yates (2017: 209) contend: “for land to be treated as a commodity and made available for investment, it requires a host of institutions, social relations, legal structures, and technologies to be assembled first.” In this way,

megaprojects are increasingly central to the commodification of land as they contribute to the restructuring of regulations and institutions, and project an image of the future that legitimizes acquisitions. Barring some notable exceptions (see Levien 2013), the majority of land grab literature focuses on agricultural production and resource access and control, though – as Oliveira et al. (2021) propose – that is beginning to change. Following Zoomers (2010), we contribute an infrastructure-centric perspective by studying the restructuring of land relations due to economic corridor infrastructure. Through the Laos-China Economic Corridor (LCEC), this chapter examines the discursive, spatial, and material implications of infrastructure for land grabs and agrarian change.

First, we argue that land grabbing is legitimized through megaprojects, as infrastructure allows for manipulation of meanings and categorizations of land to facilitate construction and investment. Second, the spatial and material implications of the infrastructural land rush extend beyond the footprint of economic corridors. Within the corridor, objectives target urbanization and industrialization, while corridor hinterlands experience more classic land grab processes of commodification of rural landscapes and resources. As such, the global boom in infrastructure materially and discursively renders land investable and available – producing an infrastructural land rush whereby possibilities of connectivity spur new streams of investment spanning agriculture, tourism, manufacturing, and other sectors. In our cases, land that was already in use (by, for example, local populations or other development projects) was re-envisioned through infrastructure as in need of ‘development’ or investment.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. In the next, we note a gap surrounding infrastructure in land grab studies and suggest that engagement with it offers insights into drivers and mechanisms of current forms of land appropriation. The construction of infrastructure requires land, and projects have distinct spatialities, uniquely occupying and shaping space. We suggest that an infrastructural land rush is not just a policy or economic question but a spatial one. Following this conceptual positioning, the chapter considers how the corridor model and related megaprojects are designed to territorialize. By examining specific cases within the LCEC, we discuss and illustrate how connective infrastructure contributes to land grabbing and to what effect. We conclude with suggestions on how to expand this research agenda.

Defining the Infrastructural Land Rush

The notion of land grabbing has a long history that has been traced through pre-colonial times and colonial and settler projects (McMichael 2014). However, what is commonly identified as land grab studies emerged from the 2007–08 global financial crisis and the resulting inflation of food and fuel crop prices. Since the late 2000s, there has been a dramatic increase in state and private sector large-scale land acquisitions to secure access to natural resources (see Borrás et al. 2011; De Schutter 2011), with the intention to commercialize or exploit landscapes for financial gain. Such ‘grabbing’ continues; however, contemporary ‘grabs’ are shaped by new ‘mechanisms, justifications and contexts’ that mark them as distinct (Hirsch 2022). These include, for example, land formalization (e.g., titling and zoning), conservation, agribusiness, mining, urbanization, and tourism. Much academic literature, notably within agrarian studies and political ecology, has examined and critiqued the detrimental effects of such extractivist land deals (Li 2011; Li 2018; Borrás et al. 2011). Adding to this, we suggest centering infrastructure in analyses of land and resource exploitation.

As is common across land grab literature, within Laos less attention has been paid to the role of infrastructure as a technology of land grabs and acquisitions (Pathammavong et al. 2017 is a notable exception). On the other hand, land deals, land grabbing, and their implications for local people are well-documented (Vandergeest 2003; Baird 2011; Kenney-Lazar 2011, 2012, 2018; Dwyer and Vongvisouk 2019; Sims 2017, 2021). The Lao government often comes under scrutiny for land appropriation, in which authorities seize land from people for development projects without paying adequate compensation for lost crops, property, and livelihoods. In other cases, compensation is paid to those with good relations with the local government, while those without political connections tend to be left empty-handed. However, given that one of the government's primary aims is to connect 'landlocked' Laos with the global economy via infrastructure connectivity, there is important, grounded work to be done on how infrastructure acts as a technology of land appropriation.

Taking land grabbing to be about radical changes in land use and ownership, infrastructure must be scrutinized. It occupies vast amounts of space, is used to justify the expansion of capital and investment, and restructures land relations. But what counts as infrastructure? Gellert and Lynch (2003) suggest four categories: infrastructure (ports, water systems, rail, roads); extraction (oil, gas, minerals); production (industrial farming, plantations, processing, manufacturing); and consumption (tourist spaces, malls, theme parks, real estate). Such projects, they write, 'transform landscapes rapidly, intentionally, and profoundly in very visible ways, and require coordinated applications of capital and state power' (2003: 15–16). It is through the coming together of these categories that megaprojects are often framed as both a development and investment imperative. Development discourse has justified land deals by presenting land as unused or under-used (Barney 2009) and also situates infrastructure as key to socio-economic development (Sims 2021).

In Laos, as in many locations, infrastructure is framed as essential for economic growth and poverty reduction. This was amplified in 2004, when the Lao government started to attract foreign investment more actively under the slogan "turning land into capital," to grant land concessions to investors for development. Since 2005, the government has granted hundreds of concessions to foreign actors to develop megaprojects (though not all have been used; see Hett et al. 2020). Still, Laos has witnessed a boom in infrastructure projects and a significant increase in foreign investment (Keovilignavong and Suhardiman 2017). Land concessions are dominated by investors from China, Vietnam, and Thailand, in decreasing order of total investment (Hirsch and Scurrah 2015; Hett et al. 2020). Chinese capital, firms, and policies have become major drivers of land-based investments. Through such projects, Laos – primarily rural and agricultural – is reimagined as hyper-connected and soon-to-be-modern. Infrastructure and economic corridors are central to this vision and deployed to justify the (re)exploitation of land, exemplifying the classic land grab versus development debate that Dwyer (2013) concisely summarizes.

Land acquisitions and grabbing are often facilitated by both public and private sector actors working in concert to develop infrastructure and acquire the land for it. Borrás et al. (2020: 610) suggest that grabs occur through overlapping interests that constitute a 'transnational land investment web.' Megaprojects thus have the potential to serve as a key element in territorialization, though states have also sought to regulate against grabs. Writing on the early 2000s boom in large-scale agribusiness and extractive investment projects, Le Billon and Sommerville (2017) show how these industries open land for investment. In the current period, land is again rendered investable through a global political-economic boom, this time in infrastructure construction. Megaprojects and

infrastructure are major drivers of the current land rush as their very existence depends on modifying property relations for the purpose of commodification. To unpack the transformative effects of infrastructure on land, the following section turns to the economic corridor and its evolution in Laos.

Corridor Histories in Laos

In 1992, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) initiated the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program and, with it, a corridor model for economic development in Laos. The proposal of the GMS emerged from the successes of the Singapore-Johor (Malaysia)-Riau (Indonesia) growth triangle (Pholsena and Banomyong 2006: 118). An ADB-initiated meeting of the GMS member-states coordinated diplomatic agreements between the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China to promote greater economic regionalism. The GMS is built around three transnational highways: the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC), the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC), and the Southern Corridor. Both the NSEC and EWEC pass through Laos. In its early iterations, the GMS focused almost exclusively on transnational infrastructure, later expanding to programs for agriculture, energy, human resource development, investment, telecommunications, tourism, and trade (ADB 2012). As such, the GMS aims to not only promote transnational connectivity, but to render land available for development and investment projects. Consequently, the areas of influence of GMS economic corridors extend beyond any single route, encompassing an economic zone that runs parallel with and reaches beyond the main transport artery.

The corridor model has been revived under China's BRI. In 2019, the Chinese government sent a cooperation framework to the central government of Laos, proposing the LCEC to deepen cooperation in a range of sectors, from energy and agriculture to mining and tourism. The LCEC follows the Laos-China Railway and Expressway across Luang Namtha, Oudomxay, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane provinces, with the stated goal of connecting China with countries and markets in Southeast Asia. Unlike the two GMS corridors in Laos, the LCEC runs through the center of northern Laos, placing development zones not only in borderlands but in central regions of the country. As the ADB (2008) claimed that the GMS would achieve an integrated, prosperous region free of poverty and committed to environmental protection, so the BRI and Lao government rely on logics of socio-economic development that prioritize a particular vision of modernization. They emphasize the primacy of the market and private sector in leading processes of development and perceive integration with international markets as crucial to development (Sims 2015).

A goal embedded in the LCEC framework is to urbanize and industrialize the immediate areas within and around the corridor. New urban environments, often initiated via SEZs and new cities, are viewed as necessary for the 'success' of the corridor. At the same time, these urban forms produce dramatic transformations of existing socio-economic and environmental landscapes, reshaping local livelihoods. In northern Laos, efforts to establish new urban spaces have centered on casino tourism and a desire to replicate the exceptional profits and revenues generated by gambling economies in Singapore, Macau, and other parts of Asia. Two major casino areas were built along the NSEC near the border with China, and both have been heavily criticized for their detrimental impacts on residents including but not limited to forced displacement, erasure of existing livelihoods, gambling

and asset losses, and violent crime (see Sims 2017). Although rapid investment surrounded the opening of the two casinos, negative effects led to the closing of the Royal JingLan complex in Boten and international criticism of the other in the Golden Triangle for perceived links to narcotic elites. However, with the LCEC, these and other zones are positioned for real estate and urban development as well as logistics hubs (DiCarlo 2020b).

Those championing corridor development point to the ‘spillover’ effects of trade and economic growth. According to proponents, corridors are intended to create conditions that boost trade, investment, and marketization, thus increasing national or regional economic growth with important local effects. Corridors include large-scale transport infrastructure accompanied by adjoining urban and industrial expansion, as well as large-scale agribusiness plantations and other markets that extend well beyond transport infrastructure. As such, they integrate multiple projects together into a networked megaproject that initiates trade and investment along transit routes, rather than simply establishing new pathways for trade between existing urban-industrial centers. In Laos, for example, this has meant facilitating investment flows along the corridor to prevent the country from being relegated to a transit route between existing regional nodes such as Bangkok, Kunming, and Ho Chi Minh City.

However, results are often not as planned. For example, the effects of the GMS’s Northern Economic Corridor strayed far from intentions and excluded vulnerable populations from infrastructure mitigation protections (Dwyer 2020). More than connecting spatial or economic nodes to the expansion of new corridor investments, the corridor model necessitates land access beyond what is required to construct or expand transport infrastructure. The spatial reorganization of land for construction and investment, coupled with soft infrastructure and zoning technologies (see Ong 2006), in turn, produce new forms of inclusion and exclusion. In particular, land acquisitions, often justified by national development agendas, are a key modality by which corridors enable new investments into land. A lens of land grabbing on corridor development brings into focus pervasive displacement and resettlement, showing that land acquisitions are fundamental to corridor development. The LCEC spans some of the most populated and resource-rich regions of northern Laos, expanding across already-used and occupied land that requires acquisitions for new investments – many of which are streamlined via changes to property relations and land governance. Additionally, unequal power dynamics between investors, the state, and vulnerable communities make the injustices associated with the land rush likely.

Modes and Implications of the Infrastructural Land Rush

An examination of corridor megaprojects in Laos demonstrates three characteristics of the infrastructural land rush that require deeper interrogation. First, discourses of development and connectivity surrounding projects legitimize land acquisitions. Second, megaproject implementation initiates land governance changes, and third, related investment produces land appropriation and commodification far beyond the corridor. In other words, the narratives, governance, and materialities of development that surround corridor infrastructure have implications both within and beyond the corridor and its associated infrastructure.

Megaprojects Legitimize Land Appropriation

Through modernizing ideologies and promises of economic growth and poverty alleviation, infrastructure is discursively powerful. Governments and implementing actors often deem

megaprojects to be priority or strategic initiatives. Take, for example, the Gwadar deep water port, the Central Asia gas pipeline, Khorgos dry port, or the Laos-China railway. Such projects have elite or political support and immense capital input, making them ‘too big or important to fail.’ This logic is evident within the LCEC, where promises of future prosperity related to the railway cannot be understated. In both Lao and Chinese, the railway is referred to as a ‘priority project’ – ໂຄງການບູລິມະສິດ (*khongkaan boulimasit*) or 重点工程 (*zhòngdiǎn gōngchéng*). Within Laos’s authoritarian political context, priority projects are synonymous with the government and are thus difficult to question or contest. Both authors’ interviews with local people and government officials at all levels affirm that certain projects are conceived as ‘untouchable,’ at times to the extent that displaced residents and members of government will often not talk about them at all.

The framing of a project as essential to and a priority for national development offers a discursive legitimation that is difficult to challenge and shapes how people negotiate displacement, compensation, resettlement, or other perceived injustices. Residents who do not want to relocate are represented as ‘selfish’ for preventing a public, national good. This is particularly important in socialist contexts such as Laos, where communalism and public good are upheld as shared values. When resistance to a project is perceived as futile, energies are instead channeled into different strategies for acquiring compensation or seeking other positive outcomes through resettlement processes. For example, residents displaced to accommodate a 2012 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) hotel villa project rejected offers of legal aid on the basis that the project had been approved ‘at the highest levels.’ Rather than seeking to oppose their displacement and resettlement, they endeavored to gain direct, unofficial access to senior government members and resettlement administrators to negotiate favorable compensation. In some cases, they emphasized that they did not seek to prevent ‘development’ from occurring; rather they wanted adequate compensation for lost assets and livelihoods. Similarly, in Luang Prabang, residents displaced for the upgrade and expansion of the city’s provincial airport – another national priority project – also expressed that any opposition to, or public criticism of, the project would be futile and would place them at risk. In both cases, threats of state violence aligned with celebrations of new infrastructure projects to legitimize their development contribution in ways that insufficiently account for their violent and harmful effects (Sims 2015).

Megaprojects Restructure Land Governance

Megaprojects have the power to motivate new policy or regulatory arrangements, restructuring governance and government surrounding land acquisitions. Infrastructure, particularly large-scale priority projects, spatialize and territorialize in part through law and policy. As priority projects gain momentum and power, regulatory frameworks are devised or modified specifically for the project, either to speed up implementation, appease powerful actors, establish new norms, or, more commonly, circumvent or waive existing legal frameworks. One example is Laos’s largest dam, Nam Theun 2 (NT2) hydropower project. NT2 was touted as a ‘model’ project that would transform institutions and improve public debate: ‘proponents hoped that through strengthening the national legal framework, the country would move toward more inclusive and socially and environmentally responsible development’ (Singh 2018: 217). In effect, however, it demonstrated that regulations could be written for one project, then discarded for the next if they do not fit future plans. In

authoritarian contexts such as Laos, governance reforms are more easily achieved, and land grabs are embedded in the national and local political landscapes.

Within the LCEC, many revisions to laws that would impact railway construction were related to land governance. In the case of the Laos-China Railway, for example, land, resettlement, and compensation regulations were restructured to speed up construction. As NT2 modified legislation, regulations, and institutions for its administration (Singh 2018), the railway motivated new regulations to facilitate construction and investment. From the time the railway concession agreement was signed in 2016, a flurry of laws and decrees related to land, compensation, expropriation, and investment promotion were amended or drafted. Prime Ministerial Decree 192 on Compensation and Resettlement of People Affected by Development Projects (2005) was initiated by NT2 and was the first decree of its kind. The same year that railway construction began, it was replaced by Decree 84 (2016), which could complicate compensation processes due to the need for a land title. In 2018, just two years after Decree 84 was approved, the Lao National Economic Research Institute (NERI) suggested the government review and improve this policy because many people were not compensated for the loss of land to Special Economic Zones (Vientiane Times 2018). The same year, on August 1st, the Law on Resettlement and Vocation was signed, elevating some contents from Decree 84 to the status of a law. Although projects instigate new regulations, such regulations are not always applied to those or future ones. Instead, infrastructure may circumvent existing regulations. The railway impact assessment, for example, was passed without review, as those working in the responsible ministry were told ‘it’s a priority project’ and the government could not afford it to be delayed by red tape. Finally, as megaprojects lead to changes in governance, local land rights become even more opaque and are easily subordinated to national development plans.

Megaprojects Transform the Corridor and its Hinterlands

Corridors, whether for roads or rail, create new economic hinterlands by facilitating increased connectivity and access. Many land deals in Laos are located closer to transportation arteries (Messerli et al. 2014; Hett et al. 2020), and as these expand so does interest in land-based investments. As such, land rushes first follow corridor infrastructure as they pave the way to places once considered marginal to capital. However, the political-economic influence of infrastructure on land extends well beyond connective infrastructure. GMS proponents claim that the extension of feeder roads off central economic corridors generates local economic benefits. Such extensions further the commodification of land and resources outside of the corridor itself. For example, rapid road building of over 3,000 km in Laos between 1990–2000 (Pholsena and Banomyong 2006) and the push to attract foreign investment in the early 2000s have, in combination, resulted in a boom in land-based investments. In his analysis of the ADB’s northern economic corridor (NEC), Dwyer (2020: 8) explains that the “space left open between the NEC’s narrow geography of mitigation and its wider geography of impact became, during the boom years of the mid-2000s, a fairly good approximation for where the global land rush hit the ground.” The opening of corridors facilitates increased access to Laos’ abundance of resources. As one of the most resource-rich countries in Asia – with over 570 mineral deposits, including gold, copper, zinc, and lead – minerals constitute 45% of the country’s exports (Ngangnouvong 2019). In addition, a study of land concessions between 2007 and 2017 notes that the three most common sectors of investment are gold, rubber, eucalyptus, gravel, and limestone – the first

three comprising 58% of all land granted for investment (Hett et al. 2020). Rubber, gravel, and limestone constituted 43% of all projects surveyed and are the most exported.

Although it is not yet possible to precisely calculate how the LCEC and railroad-oriented value chains will reshape rural Laos, several initiatives indicate that the early stages of hinterland marketization are unfolding. In anticipation of the railroad, for example, Luang Namtha provincial authorities instituted a “one district, one product” program, which seeks to integrate villages across the province in corridor production networks through niche crops and handicrafts. According to an official from the Luang Namtha Provincial Office of Industry and Commerce, the Laos-China Railway Company provided funding to support five such provincial projects. These projects replicate similar One Village One Product (OVOP) and One Tambon One Product (OTOP) projects that have been implemented in Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, and elsewhere (Hoang Thanh et al. 2018). Further south in Luang Prabang province, the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) promoted pineapple production to export to China. While envisioned as a means for local farmers to benefit from the corridor, the costs to transition to a single cash crop in terms of available land and capital input are barriers for many Lao farmers. As a result, some districts have sourced land to foreign investors, often from China, to undertake niche crop operations. In addition, as connectivity increases, cattle exports to China have expanded. Notably at the time of research, a US \$300 million joint venture was building infrastructure – including a farm, a quarantine site, a slaughterhouse, and a processing plant in Luang Namtha province – to sell 400,000 heads annually.

As connective infrastructure within the corridor is used to promote more niche agricultural production, mining, and resource extraction, resulting and related land acquisitions appear more like a classic case of land grabbing that commercializes and commodifies a landscape. In this way, land grabs and acquisitions follow infrastructure rather than the other way around. In sum, global patterns of infrastructure booms facilitate additional land or resource rushes, conjuring new resource hinterlands through connective infrastructure.

Megaprojects Reshape Local Landscapes and Lives

The restructuring of land relations through economic corridor development has implications for the surrounding environment and people. One way that infrastructure connectivity has driven economic growth across Southeast Asia is through increasing natural resource extraction. Given the challenges of weak governance, corruption, and economic dependence on resource exports, it is unsurprising that such extraction often results in environmental decline. Correlations between transport infrastructure and ecological deterioration are apparent across the Global South (Alamgir et al. 2017; Laurance et al. 2015). Consequences include impacts to fauna, soil erosion, water turbidity, landslides, as well as fires, logging, poaching, mining, and habitat fragmentation (Alamgir et al. 2017). Beyond immediate effects, new connectivity corridors also foster the expansion of monoculture plantations and logging. In northern Laos, the rapid expansion of rubber plantations from 2003 onwards has led to forest and habitat loss (Kenney-Lazar 2016).

Resource extraction is not just a by-product of connectivity efforts and state-building, but a fundamental component of these processes. Kenney-Lazar (2016) emphasizes that “the allocation of land to foreign investors has become a critical component of the state’s resource-led development strategy” (2012: 1024). Similarly, the political culture and development of logging are directly connected to the enrichment of the political elite

(Hodgdon 2008, 58). Economic liberalization in Laos has contributed to the empowerment and wealth of military elites as well (Dwyer et al. 2015). To drive such processes, the government of Laos implemented a policy of state land leases and concessions to foreign investors that have resulted in devastating social and ecological impacts, few employment opportunities, and challenges to the country's already poor food security (Baird 2010; Kenney-Lazar 2012).

Attention to the human-environment costs of corridors reveals the uneven distribution of benefits and harm that are playing out across the region in much more subtle, complex, and multifaceted ways. Threats to forests, river systems, and other environments pose risks to the livelihoods and food security of the millions of people across Southeast Asia who rely on them for daily sustenance and income (Kenney-Lazar 2012; Lagerqvist et al. 2014). The relationship between human and natural vulnerability, however, plays out in a myriad of other less obvious ways, such as the violence that Li (2018) and Tsing (2005) suggest is embedded within Indonesia's palm oil and logging industries.

Conclusion

The Laos-China Economic Corridor shows how infrastructure produces new dynamics and spatialities of land appropriation, authority, and spaces of accumulation. This chapter suggests that looking through the lens of infrastructure to understand land grabs allows us to think beyond 'classic' land grabs for agricultural production and toward a land rush connected to infrastructure. We make this point by highlighting the spatiality of infrastructural land appropriation: first, as land is appropriated for the construction of connective infrastructure and nearby zones, and second, as it renders a broader landscape investable for agriculture, business, tourism, and manufacturing. The effects of the corridor on land extend well beyond the infrastructure itself. The corridor as a transnational infrastructure becomes a thoroughfare for urbanization and connectivity, connecting peripheral areas of resource extraction to global markets.

As literature on land deals would benefit from theoretical, methodological, and empirical attention to infrastructure, we conclude with reflections on the role of infrastructure in land appropriation to suggest directions for research that consider the urban and agrarian futures they promote. First, connective infrastructures become megaprojects when we take land transformations into consideration. In other words, while a transportation project itself is a large infrastructure, projects produce the corridor as a megaproject by rendering the broader landscape available for other infrastructure and resource investments. Infrastructure motivates changes in property and governance regimes that make this possible. Second, while transnational infrastructure is intended to promote trade and connectivity, this is only possible through access to and tremendous alteration of local land and lives. As is well-documented, land grabs entail dispossession, social differentiation, and environmental destruction. Rather than static events, we need interrogations of the lived experiences and relations that make possible and are imbricated in an infrastructural land rush. How does a land rush linked to infrastructure change social relations in ways that are different from agricultural rushes?

Third, while China has featured prominently in land grab debates concerned with agribusiness, few studies engage land rushes explicitly for large-scale infrastructure development, despite the substantial rise in Chinese-backed infrastructure investments. The scaling up of global infrastructure investment is on the rise, with the BRI and the G7

announcement of “Build Back Better World” to invest US \$41 trillion in large projects. In this landscape of global infrastructure competition, the relationship between land grabbing, infrastructure, and territorialization cannot be overlooked. In addition to rendering land available and investible, infrastructure plays a role in extending state power. While this is not the focus of our chapter, future research will benefit from insights into traditional land grab and agrarian studies literature in the ways they have paid close attention to multiple actors that constitute the state (see Wolford et al. 2013).

In sum, connective infrastructure often requires vast amounts of land, and acquiring it involves public and private actors and powerful elites who facilitate both industrial expansion and territorialization. Thus, land acquisitions are an essential component of economic corridors and infrastructure megaprojects, not a side effect. They are a central and necessary process for achieving aims to drive new investment. The intention is rarely to test ‘keep’ existing livelihoods and economies. Rather, they are to be replaced by bigger, more productive, or extractive and profitable industries. This may bring employment, business, or income-generating opportunities for existing residents, but only following their physical displacement and the displacement of their former livelihoods.

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