



The International Politics of Infrastructure and Everyday life¹

Note: An online discussion based in part on this commentary, took place on September 28, 2022. You can view a video recording of the discussion [here](#).²

Infrastructures are an insignia of modernity. They provide the architecture for circulation of goods, utilities, resources, and they also facilitate the connection of people, societies, and places across the globe. Infrastructures are generating the conditions in which everyday life unfolds. Through infrastructure imperial powers have integrated the Global South into the Global world economy. International relations, trade, and war are often animated by infrastructures, which remain crucial to contemporary geoeconomic domination in the Global South. Scholars of Philosophy, Science and Technology Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, and Geography have examined how infrastructures are imbricated in social relationships, and by extension in politics and economics. Their findings are raising critical questions about actors and agency in a physical world, the perils and promise of infrastructure, and interlinkage of affects and materials.

Our project entitled [*Port Infrastructure, International Politics and Everyday life in the Horn of Africa*](#), funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, examines transregional relationships between the Arabian Gulf and the Horn of Africa through the lens of port infrastructures and transport corridors in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In particular, it explores Emirates-based Dubai Ports World (DP World), a leading global port operator and logistics giant, and its investments in modernizing port infrastructure in the Horn of Africa, an endeavor that is taking place in the context of turbulent political transformations in the region. The project focuses on the way political contestations materialize in port infrastructures, explores how infrastructural power contestations shape local, national, and regional politics, and examines the impact of infrastructural developments on the everyday lives of people in three port cities in the Horn of Africa — Berbera, Bossaso, and Djibouti.

The outbreak and protraction of the Yemen war as well as threats of terrorist attacks had increased the costs for using Aden's port and container facilities. DP World turned to East Africa as an alternative nodal hub in its global network of container transshipment, allowing trade from Asia to Europe to avoid the costly detour through Dubai's Jebel Ali port. The

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² This commentary reflects only the project's co-directors and does not represent the views of the Arab Political Science Network or its policies.

Emirati-based company expanded the Djibouti Free Zone and invested in the development of a container terminal in Doraleh. Yet, this joint venture ended in 2018 when the Djibouti Government unilaterally terminated the concession granted to DP World. The growing tensions were already accompanied by a divergence of DP World's interest from the port in Djibouti to those in Berbera in Somaliland and Bosaso in Somalia (Puntland).

In 2017, a concession agreement was signed between DP World and the government of Somaliland to rebuild and modernize the port of Berbera. The first phase of the expansion in the Berbera Port has been completed. Also in 2017, DP World, through its subsidiary P&O Ports, already signed a concession agreement with Puntland to develop and modernize the port in 2017. The modernization stalled due to resistance of local businessmen against the concession agreement, disputes among the Puntland leadership, disagreements between Puntland and P&O Port, and the assassination of the P&O port manager in 2019.

Infrastructures carry promises of development and raise hopes for a better future. The development of ports in the Horn of Africa follows the modern ideal of infrastructures and carries all its promises, hopes, and aspirations. It promises to achieve economic development and fulfill the hopes for improved living conditions and lifestyles of citizens living in these port cities. Yet, the success of these infrastructural projects requires that Ethiopia opens its market to these ports. People's dreams and aspirations are dependent on Ethiopia. With a population of more than 100 million and one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, Ethiopia is among the main drivers of developments in the Horn of Africa. Landlocked since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, Ethiopia relies mainly on the port in Djibouti and ports in neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa for most of its overseas trade. Both pandemic and war slowed down Ethiopia's economic growth, and the stability of the country is on the brink. Ethiopia was once more hitting the global displacement record, with 5.1 million displacements in 2021 alone. While DP World's strategy to control ports along the coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden is already transforming the political geography of the Horn of Africa, the success of its strategy largely hinges upon Ethiopia, and so do the hopes and aspirations of Ethiopia's coastal neighbors.