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EVERYTHING IS BEING DISTURBED': Unsettling the Spaces of Global Infrastructure along the Northern Corridor

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Abstract

Examining the ways through which global infrastructure projects proceed remains a challenging task given the scale, intensity and speed of these initiatives. This article argues for understanding these transformations through a research approach built around the idea of *unsettlement*. This is mobilized in three ways: first, to act as a conceptual orientation that is relational and plural in outlook when addressing transforming urban-regional geographies; second, through a methodological approach to other research that 'follows the global infrastructure project' identifying how all kinds of disparate but connected geographies become unsettled; third, through an analytical approach that develops from thick description made in piecing together the (empirical) conditions of unsettlement. This aims to weave together insights across various analytical registers such as the political-economic, social and ecological. Our findings emerge from two projects underway in eastern Uganda as part of the Northern Corridor: the rehabilitation of the Northern Spur railway and the establishment of the Sino-Ugandan Industrial Park.

Introduction

We approached the first construction site just outside of Tororo, a town in eastern Uganda that grew in the early 20th century as a key junction on the imperial Uganda Railway. Now, over a hundred years later, work was taking place to rehabilitate and upgrade the 'Northern Spur' of the network heading up to Gulu, over 350 km away. The spot was busy with a team of labourers working under a local contractor. Their job was to build a drainage system alongside the yet-to-be-re-laid track that would, when complete, alter the flows of rainwater into adjacent wetlands. Some were breaking up large stones quarried from the surrounding hills. Others were taking these stones and using them with 'New Rock Brand' cement that had come in 50 kg bags from one of the local factories. Further away, workers were digging at the embankment, while a large yellow compactor was flattening the surface, creating a new alignment that cut through the bright red earth. Local youth were busy ferrying buckets of water to the men mixing the cement, receiving some well-earned shillings later from the foreman.

Nearby, where we stood listening to the engineer explain the construction activity, a yellow hard hat lay on the ground. The hat had the initials 'CRBC' on it, denoting the involvement of the China Railway and Bridge Corporation, which had been awarded the USD 53 million contract by the Ugandan Government for the upgrading. At this site, though, there was little indication of Chinese involvement in the construction project. Works were being undertaken by local companies subcontracted by CRBC, employing dozens from nearby communities. There was a joint inspection team made up of Ugandan and Chinese engineers expected the following week, making sure quality standards were upheld along the track and in preparation for the more technically complex work to follow. Meanwhile, food had just arrived from a local kitchen, heralding a quick lunchtime break for matoke and rice. We were somewhat surprised to see so much activity at a Saturday lunchtime and expressed this sentiment to our Uganda Railway Corporation (URC) engineer guide. He responded quickly, pointing out that 'the Chinese don't stop at weekends'. A little further up the train line, we stopped again at another site; there were signs that some structures had been cleared away from the adjacent position by the track. A Chinese engineer was busy speaking to a Ugandan foreman. He was overseeing this more specialist work, measuring the width of the embankment and culvert that spanned underneath the tracks. At this location, another grade of stone was being laid as the base for the new, imported steel sleepers that had been shipped in from China via Mombasa Port and had been stamped with the letters URC to deter would-be metal thieves.

We followed the line to Mbale railway station, a stop that had not seen a train passing through for many years. The security guard suggested the last train came through in 1998, but he wasn't exactly sure, given it had been so long ago. The station is one of the oldest buildings in Mbale, another town that grew with the development of the imperial railway. It was in relatively good shape considering it had not been in use for years. As we walked into the station there were stacks of iron rails marked as scrap and then many more in front of the station that may be in good enough condition to be used for the new works. Nearby was the original 1920s railway worker housing, now inhabited by some local people who may or may not have known that these buildings were scheduled to be demolished. We walked further along the overgrown track to a storage shed that had a church service going on, songs of worship in the local Lugisu language being carried away on the wind. There was a concrete platform that was probably built to unload goods from trains to lorries for distribution into the surrounding areas. It was a man-made hill sticking prominently out of the ground, and nearly invisible given the overgrown vegetation, but, as we were told, it may well find itself repurposed for the new era of the railway. If the station at Mbale remained for decades in a state of obsolescence, its turn at the centre of the construction activity rehabilitating this infrastructure, currently further back along the line, would be arriving soon. The engineer for the URC told us that work teams would come in from Tororo in the south and Gulu in the north within six months. Already, a work compound had been built by CRBC that was housing equipment, and nearby, other construction work was proceeding within the newly established Sino-Ugandan Industrial Park.

Along this railway line, originally built as a highly speculative venture by the British colonialists to open new cotton-growing frontiers, things are in motion. We noticed this at first as an ecological condition in the shape of the shifted, flattened earth and excavated quarry stone, factory-transported cement and imported railway sleepers required for this infrastructure project. However, we were soon struck by how this state of flux extended beyond the immediate materialities of new investment in construction and was noticeable among people such as labourers toiling away at the weekend, households shifted out the way, the new hydrological dynamics of adjacent streams, the presence of Chinese and local firms, as well as the promise that local agricultural products such as cotton or imported grain would soon be in accelerated circulation as well. Everything was up in the air, uncertain, different from before and with nobody quite sure of how things were going to work out. We got a profound sense of the need to think about the spaces surrounding this large-scale infrastructure project beyond a relatively straightforward technical upgrading of the railway. Rather, we were struck by how all kinds of things were being unsettled on the ground, and subsequently in our own conceptual, methodological and analytical assumptions.

It is the idea of unsettlement that forms the basis of our research approach to global infrastructure projects being deployed in East Africa. Upgrading railways, roads, ports, ICT capabilities and logistical/manufacturing capacity is proceeding apace in many parts of the world and is often tied into the surge of finance and subsequent proliferation of infrastructure corridors (Enns and Bersaglio, 2020; Aalders, 2021; Valz Gris, 2023; Kirshner and Baptista, 2023; Gambino and Reboredo, 2024; Tassadiq *et al.*, 2025). The size and scope of these initiatives present challenges to scholarship as regards how to undertake research. Our starting point is not to attempt to somehow bring all these strands together into a ‘comprehensive’ framework, method or analysis, but to develop a research approach that can operate flexibly across extended urban-regional geographies. We mobilize the idea of unsettlement in three ways: *first*, as an acknowledgment of the impossibility of settling on a particular conceptual way of thinking about global infrastructure—rather we point to the possibilities of piecing together different traditions and articulations to help establish a relational and plural perspective on these transformations; *second*, as a methodology that identifies, traces and follows how these initiatives unsettle all manner of things, which we do through a ‘follow the global infrastructure project’ fieldwork practice that is mobile, dynamic and open; *third*, to analytically connect the people(d) ecological and politico-economic relations that are unsettled in these transformations, which is closely aligned with the methodological steps through which we piece together these pathways. Our analysis demonstrates how conditions of unsettlement may be planned and intended by state-capital actors, or be an unintended outcome that can be both material and affective across environments and populations. Overall, we contend that this framework may unsettle the ways in which studies have examined the space(s) of global infrastructure, pushing us to embrace a more relational understanding of what constitutes these geographies. This means embracing plurality, finding new ways to undertake fieldwork and to think analytically across and weave together different analytical registers. Here we are inspired by Meehan *et al.* (2023: 1535) who asked, ‘What might it mean to become unsettled in geography?’ (see also Kāwika Tengan, 2005 in anthropology). We take this commitment to unsettling into debates

about research and analytical strategies to account for the ‘turbulent presents and precarious futures’ of global infrastructure (Wiig and Silver, 2019).

Unsettlement as conceptual orientation

‘**unsettle**: to alter from a settled state; cause to be no longer firmly fixed or established; render unstable; disturb’

(Oxford English Dictionary)

Over the last decade the proliferation of global infrastructure projects across extended territories of operation has become a defining feature of urban-regional planning, large-scale territorial restructuring and attempts to restructure networked geographies of trade and connectivity (Easterling, 2014; Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2025). Scholarship has approached these transformations in many ways, following a myriad research agendas (Addie *et al.*, 2020) that convey the complex, multi-scalar transformations unleashed.

Work focused on the political economy of global infrastructure projects has demonstrated how politicians, state planners and associated financial interests have been busy unsettling existing networked geographies of global trade. Studies contending with the global scale have sought to explain the underlying motivations through which this unsettling of the prevailing system of logistical circuits, global infrastructure and world trade has unfolded. This includes examining the geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts in the world economy especially in the emerging (networked) rivalry between China and the United States (Schindler *et al.*, 2022) that plays out in the planning and deployment of various networks (Schindler and DiCarlo, 2023). Significant attention has been focused on the surge of finance and investment emanating from state-capitalist economies (Alami and Dixon, 2020) such as China through the ‘going out’ strategy (Lee, 2018) of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Cheng and Apostolopoulou, 2023) and the proliferation of state-owned enterprises involved in major construction projects on infrastructure (Liu *et al.*, 2020). Other regions with newly assertive state-capitalist projects such as the Gulf (Hanieh, 2018) also figure prominently in these debates (Darwich, 2020). Such state-capitalist projects proceed in parallel to new investment programmes from financial institutions such as the World Bank (Dodson, 2017), or the African and Asian Development Banks (Wang, 2019). The restructuring of these global financing regimes has facilitated the emergence of new planning paradigms in many states in Africa (including Uganda) and other parts of the global South that have turned to ‘infrastructure-led development’ (Kanai and Schindler, 2019) as a territorial-based economic development strategy (Agénor, 2010).

The surge of various kinds of finance into global infrastructure in many national spaces marks a noticeable shift from years of economic stagnation going back to the global economic crisis of 2008-09 and further into the decades of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that severely impacted investment into these systems across much of the global South

(Silver, 2023). Studies have unpacked these financial geographies of global infrastructure in depth through investigating the specific financial mechanisms that produce broader transformations. These span from intensifications in the financialization of infrastructure across much of the planet (Bear, 2020; Liu and Dixon, 2022) to the surging role of Chinese loan-based debt (Zajontz, 2022), aid packages (Tan-Mullins *et al.*, 2010) and increasingly commercial arrangements (Van Wieringen and Zajontz, 2023) in many countries from Pakistan (Akhter *et al.*, 2022) to Kenya (Huang and Lesutis, 2023).

Given claims about the world economy now being restructured through this new era of global infrastructure (Dodson, 2017; Shatkin, 2022) studies have also grappled with the historical reverberations with previous regimes and periods of intense investment in large-scale infrastructure systems. For instance, in East Africa the colonial origins of many contemporary projects are considered when thinking about how these initiatives echo the extractive and racialized logics of such plans, but proceed in different political economic conditions (Cowen, 2020). As Kimari and Ernstson (2020: 825) argue, such an analytical focus on these histories demonstrates, 'how imperial remains deeply inform the logics that bring forth contemporary large-scale infrastructures in Africa' also developed in Stoler's (2016) work. Claims of a new era of investment, and the longer histories of these kinds of project coalesce around emerging debates on the temporality of infrastructure (Addie *et al.*, 2024). Overall, we would contend that the political economy of global infrastructure has been unsettled in recent years, with studies providing insights into surging flows of finance, new and powerful actors and rapidly shifting geopolitical conditions

Concurrently, there has been significant scholarship that has examined the ways in which global infrastructure projects 'touch down' in and 'encounter' local space/place. Work has examined the ways in which towns and cities have been restructured around the material geographies of global logistics (Vegliò, S *et al.*, 2025) through new, rehabilitated and expanded railways (Golubchikov *et al.*, 2020), highways and ports (Reboredo and Gambino, 2023). For many researchers the focus on global infrastructure projects at this scale has been to consider the impact on populations along these emergent infrastructure geographies in ways that have charted the new forms of techno-inequality and revisited debates centred on 'splintered urbanism' (Graham and Marvin, 2002). Studies have shown how material geographies become unsettled in several ways. This includes the spatial divisions between the enclaved spaces of global infrastructure and bypassed urban settlements without the same level of infrastructural services (Graham, 2000). This work has centred the unequal infrastructural relations that arise in these areas that, as Hodson and Marvin (2010: 298) have argued, 'by-pass existing infrastructure and build internalised ecological resource flows that attempt to guarantee strategic protection and further economic reproduction'. Studies of enclave urbanism thus demonstrate the differentiated technologies, networks and experiences of global infrastructure space (Murray, 2017; Kleibert, 2018; Nielsen *et al.*, 2021). This work has proceeded concurrently with studies of global infrastructure space amid cities as distinct, securitized enclaves that prioritize global logistical networks over local needs through processes of standardization and regulatory alignment (Easterling, 2014).

There is also a rich tradition of studies of global infrastructure (including mega-projects) that have examined the displacements that have proceeded in the restructuring of space toward the logics of logistics, interconnectivity and circulation (Gellert and Lynch, 2003). Much of this work has developed empirical insight and accompanying concepts to explain how neighbourhoods and households are pushed aside and expelled from land and livelihoods to make way for infrastructure-led development (Chome, 2020; Apostolopoulou, 2021; Lesutis, 2022; Cupers, 2024). It has also examined the resistance and contestation produced through these projects (Chome *et al.*, 2020; Apostolopoulou, 2024; Larsen *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, scholarship building on these displacements connects to work on various kinds of population resettlement, which has a wide-ranging history within urban-regional studies (Otsuki, 2021), including in this journal (e.g. Johnston, 2014; Wang, 2022). Resettlement has tended to be mobilized within a specific lexicon of forced relocation by (urban) authorities of populations that have been categorized as living in urban spaces without ownership, rights or tenure (Beier, 2024), or as zones of risk to natural hazards (Zeiderman, 2016), or within the zones of capitalist urban development (Gomersall, 2018). As Neu and Fünfgeld (2022: npn) suggest the term ‘denotes a process of typically permanent population transfer in which the movement of people from one location to another is externally guided’.

Scholarship on the material and social geographies of global infrastructure has been wide-ranging, exploring how massive new projects and/or the policy orientations of the state shatter and unsettle the urban worlds of long-established neighbourhoods with a range of socio-economic effects on households. It draws attention to the need to ask who is made to feel unsettled in broader processes of urban transformation and under what socio-economic conditions. However, despite the breadth of work on resettlement the term itself invokes an idea of people (but not things, economies or materialities) becoming settled elsewhere, rather than remaining in a state of constant flux and uncertainty (Zeiderman et al, 2015).

These overlapping but often separate analytical registers develop important analyses of political economy, material geographies and urban lives through distinct ideas of global infrastructure space, whether political-economic, social or material. However, because of this burgeoning work and the scale/scope of the projects, we contend with the impossibility of settling on a particular framing or focus of these different strands of scholarship on global infrastructure. Based on our own fieldwork experiences, touched on in the introduction, we call for a shift toward a relational understanding that traces the *unsettlements* (as empirical conditions) unleashed in the making of these projects. We have highlighted how the political economy literature seems to suggest unsettlement as intended, planned and expected by state and capital in the implementation of infrastructure projects as part of global economic restructuring. We have also identified in the literature on material and social geographies a different kind of unsettlement condition for local environments and populations. This revolves around how unsettlement may also be unanticipated and disruptive, while having both material and affective dimensions. However, there remains the question of how these literatures cross over in ways that might establish a more relational interpretation. While we don’t claim that these existing concepts are in any way insufficient, we do suggest that

unsettlement may help to open these connected but often disparate registers of analysis (political-economic, social and ecological/material).

It's worth considering scholarship that has directly mobilized the term. Unsettlement has sometimes been used in thinking about dense urban topographies and has come to take on a meaning tied to a very social sense of things being disrupted, shifted and in motion across urban space. As Howitt (2020: 194) suggests:

[t]he verb unsettle carries ambiguity. It has overtones of both displacing from settlements that occupy space and make places of privilege and exclusion, as well as troubling the everyday discourses of erasure of the histories of settlement as invasion, occupation, dispossession and violence. It also carries an emotional content: feeling unsettled takes us outside of our comfort zone.

Howitt demonstrates how the verb can be mobilized in a more wide-ranging manner than resettlement, to draw in broader histories and geographies in thinking about displacement beyond the immediacy of the act itself. Another expansive notion of unsettle(ment) is elucidated by AbdouMaliq Simone, who has argued (2022: 81) in relation to urban life, popular neighbourhoods that:

The resultant layers of sedimentation and the aggregations of historical traces combined with present technologies of spatial rule certainly do posit what it is that residents and denizens of a particular district are able to do and what they think they are able to do.

In another article, Simone *et al.* (2024) go on to imply that 'An unsettling ... disrupts clear designations of points of departure and arrival, of movement and settlement, of centre and periphery, of time and space'. This perspective perhaps offers the most productive idea of how unsettlement could be used to both undertake research and analyse the multiple processes, sites and relations that spill across the spaces of global infrastructure in its planning, deployment and operation. And, as Simone's writing on West Papua contends (Simone, 2024: 98), this must focus on 'the ways in which variegated modes of unsettling attempt to unsettle each other' drawing attention to questions about how unsettlement is mobilized by different actors, who gets to feel unsettled, and how unsettlement is experienced unequally. It conveys the dense layers and patterns that spin out of urban worlds, the delicate compositions of sociabilities that create textures, patterns and relations of living through which urban dwellers situate themselves within the constellations of uncertainty that reverberate through and pervade urban life.

The notions of unsettlement that have been articulated by Simone and Howitt are rich in meaning and value, foregrounding the uncertainties and ambiguities of urban life and the ways in which unsettlement can be both mobilized and experienced in highly divergent ways. However, these uses focus more on social relations and centre the human and the local in accounts of urban life. We argue for building upon this work through the utility of broadening this lens both in a scalar sense beyond the urban into the political-economic, and in a political-ecological sense in terms of materialities, social relations and ecologies. We invoke unsettlement as a dynamic condition and relation across the space/time of infrastructural projects. Thus, we might extend this conceptual orientation, developed through studies of the intricate urbanisms of everyday life, to an alternative entry point into the geographies of global infrastructure while embracing the impossibility to settle on traditional ways of undertaking conceptualization. By doing so, we hope to weave together existing strands of critical scholarship toward a more relational, open perspective that incorporates urban lives, material geographies and political economies.

Unsettlement as method: following the global infrastructure project

Our methodological approach to our case studies was developed in the field and draws on longer traditions of mobile geographic research. These include ‘following the thing’ (Cook, 2004) and ‘walking the pipeline’, in which, like Castán Broto *et al.* (2021), our fieldwork focused on following ‘a line, both temporally and spatially’ (*ibid.*: 699). In this case, this meant following the Northern Corridor, the various projects being shaped in its vision and the economies, ecologies and lives unsettled through these transformations. Our aim was to remain unsettled about our specific empirical focus of study while examining these global infrastructure projects. Rather, we were guided by the relational geographies that came into view, the sites and spaces that were, in different but connected ways, being unsettled by these new investments. This led us to use facilitated walks with engineers along the rail tracks, visits to construction sites, meetings in the industrial park in Mbale with Chinese managers and industrialists on factory floors, and interviews with urban governance actors back in town. It prompted us to set up community visits and focus groups to listen to villagers, workers and displaced residents. It took us to archives in Kampala and to struggling agricultural towns, farmers’ fields, cotton ginneries and textile companies, rivers and wetlands, town and country. This methodological approach was not simply about undertaking research but was integral to how we developed our conceptual understanding, given the unsettlements we documented through ‘following the global infrastructure project’.

The Northern Spur, a meter-gauge railway branch line that extended 382 km from the eastern Ugandan town of Tororo and the junction connection to the main route between Mombasa and Kampala, towards Gulu in northern Uganda via the large town of Mbale, was initially built in 1926 as a speculative ‘cotton line’ as part of the wider Uganda Railway and had long been lobbied for by both leading figures in the Protectorate and the cotton industry in Britain seeking new frontiers for agricultural growth (Robins, 2016). In the Protectorate's Annual Report for the year 1907–8, the Commissioner, Sir Hesketh Bell, wrote, ‘Cotton has

already taken the first place in the list of the country's products, and the development of the industry on great scale is only checked by the lack of transport facilities from the interior to the lakeshore'.<FNI> The impact of the construction of the railway was swift with cotton-growing agricultural land increasing rapidly from 129,000 acres in 1928 to 237,000 acres in 1932. M.F. Hill (1961: 19), in his history of the line concluded that 'the railway seems to have encouraged cultivation'. The route north out of Tororo has been out of operation since the late 1990s reflecting the broader stagnation of the Uganda economy and the effects of public disinvestment precipitated by structural adjustment (Whang, 2018). This imposed austerity regime included a concession to the Rift Valley Railway company to run the network. More recently the Uganda Government took back control of Uganda Railways from the private operator and has been busy preparing a series of investments across the system and into the future with a new Standard Gauge Railway to connect to the already partially built system in Kenya, itself funded through Chinese Exim Bank loans (Taylor, 2023). The previous decades of stagnation and decaying railway infrastructures are currently being unsettled into a new era of investment plans, construction activities and operations.

The rehabilitation of the Northern Spur was originally to be financed through a European Union grant agreed in 2020, but this financing arrangement collapsed after the French contractor, Sogea Satom, pulled out of the contract, citing non-payment by the Ugandan Government. After a period of uncertainty about whether and under what conditions this rehabilitation might proceed, a resolution was found. Under the current financing arrangements, the Ugandan Government has mobilized public funds to invest USD 53.2 million to complete these works. The contract was awarded to the CRBC, who had successfully built the Standard Gauge Railway phases 1 and 2a in Kenya, with work beginning in mid-2023 and expected to take around two years. It is a relatively straightforward engineering project involving the upgrading of the existing line, rebuilding various parts of the route and the connection to the mainline at Tororo. The underlying logistical function is to connect the USD 29 million Gulu Logistics Hub in northern Uganda, funded by the EU and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. This hub is expected to facilitate logistical flows through its road connections onward to South Sudan and even the border areas with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic and then along the railway directly to the port of Mombasa and on to the Indian Ocean. It forms a relatively minor but integral part of the wider Northern Corridor plan being constructed across East Africa as a 'multimodal transport corridor linking the Kenyan maritime port of Mombasa to the hinterland countries of Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda' (NCATCA, 2022:1). The railway is estimated to carry a minimum of 500,000 tonnes of freight by the 2025/26 financial year and supports Uganda's ambition, which is, as John Linnon Sengendo, spokesman for URC told Al Jazeera (2023), 'to move all long-distance bulk cargo transportation onto rail from roads in a few years because rail is cheaper in terms of cost and time'.

In recent years the establishment of the Sino-Uganda Industrial Park has proceeded apace in Mbale. The park was leased by the Uganda Investment Authority (UIA) to the Tian Tang Group as part of a broader policy focus on developing industrial parks in the country.

Commented [AY1]: AQ: could you please provide information on where you read the Protectorate's Annual Report, which you've quoted here?

Goodfellow and Huang (2022: 1469), who examined industrial park development in Uganda (and nearby Ethiopia), suggest that these global infrastructure projects can be understood as improvised because:

A closer look at private investors across both countries reveals a surprising, shared characteristic: none have had direct participation in SEZs or IPs in China. This has significant implications for their capacity to convey policies from the Chinese SEZ experience, because they have not themselves been part of it,

This is the case in Mbale. The private Chinese operator, the Tian Tang Group, has opened various businesses in Uganda over the last 20 years and is a locally situated investor with close links to the Ugandan Government rather than a large state-owned enterprise. The industrial park is located on 619 acres of land along the Mbale–Tororo highway, not far from the railway station. The land required by the industrial park was acquired from 864 claimants recorded by the Chief Government Valuer. Many, but not all, the households agreed to compensation packages for relocation. The site is co-managed by the UIA, working on ensuring local and national support and the Chinese operator, who has focused on attracting Chinese overseas investments, constructing new facilities and developing plans. The land has been leased by the Tian Tang Group for 49 years, which is reported by the *Red Pepper* (2024) newspaper to be paying the Uganda Government only USD 5 per year. As of early 2024, there were 37 new factories on site, all Chinese-owned despite the agreement that other investors were welcome. Further infrastructure works have been designed, given early disruptions to power and water supplies, as well as issues with drainage. The China Railway No. 3 Engineering Group were contracted by the Ugandan Government for over USD 110 million to carry out these works, including 25 km of roads, despite the initial intention being that they should be financed by the Tian Tang Group.

The aim of the industrial park, according to the President of Uganda, is ‘building Uganda’s industrial and manufacturing capacity in order to reduce dependence on foreign commodities and services’. This is a planned unsettling of historic economic conditions of stagnation in the manufacturing sector toward the industrialization of the economy (see Behuria, 2021). The UIA estimates that there are already 4,000 jobs on site, with a target of 12,000 upon completion. The growing operations in Mbale are in stark contrast to another Chinese-run industrial park, the Uganda-China Free Zone of International Industrial Cooperation in nearby Tororo. Announced as a USD 620 million investment by the Dongsong Energy Group. The site remained closed in 2024 after a series of challenges, including legal issues and problems over loan-based funding from the China Export and Credit Insurance Corporation and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China. Finally, it is worth noting the connections between the industrial park and the rehabilitated railway with the UIA lobbying the URC and Ministry of Works to secure a short extension direct to the site. We were told by a government official that, while this wasn’t initially planned, the operators now realize

bringing the line inside the park could lower travel costs and offer further advantages to the factories.

Both cases demonstrate the emergence of an infrastructure-led development regime in Uganda that offers a rupture from previous decades of underinvestment and SAP-induced austerity in which the capacity to deploy global infrastructure projects was minimal. This is an unsettling of the political economy of investment that is intended, mobilized by politicians, engaged with by new investors in Uganda and elsewhere, predicating the entry of construction companies, new logistical and manufacturing capacities and opportunities for various forms of accumulation.

Conditions of unsettlement on the Northern Spur and in the Sino-Uganda Industrial Park

We develop our analysis in this section from different analytical registers—the social dynamics (through urban lives), the material geographies (through the ecology) and the political economy—through which we found conditions of unsettlement. These geographies of unsettlement emerged through the mobilization of plans and investments by governance actors as set out above. We consider how the making and operations of the railway spur and industrial park should be connected to a series of peopled ecological and economic unsettlements.

Unsettled urban lives

On a bright Saturday morning, we travelled to a community hall to meet with leaders from adjacent communities to the industrial park. We discussed a range of issues from the history of the land through to the relocation of the villagers to the current issues around employment, flooding and simmering tensions with the operators. There was a range of community representatives in the room, all with personal experience of living on the land that the industrial park was now situated on, sometimes stretching back generations. One of the elders explained how his people had lost their land and the ways it had unsettled the community beyond the moment of displacement itself:

Many of us were thrown out of this land by the army, many of us did not receive adequate compensation because our land was undervalued. For example, some of us owned more than five acres of land, and we used to grow rice as a source of our livelihoods, and most of us led very comfortable lives. But we received about UGX 1 million [USD 300] in compensation, and that money was not appropriate to allow us to obtain land elsewhere and re-establish ourselves. Because of that, many of our friends and relatives died miserably because they had no source of livelihood and could not have money to buy medicines to treat themselves, and we did not benefit

anything out of the establishment of the industrial park (Community Leader 2 at the meeting in January 2024).

There is a complex land acquisition history. At the same meeting another community representative (9) told us:

This land originally belonged to Kakungulu who was the Governor representative of the Buganda Kingdom. And on this land lived several groups of people, among them were the Baganda and Busoga, until the 1959/60 El Niño rains that led to the flooding of the landscape, dispersing the population for some time. Later, they returned after the floods and continued to live there, but paying ground rent to Kakungulu. One of the descendants of Kakungulu sold the land to Bugisu Cooperative Union.

The area was mainly used for agriculture with rice fields and some yams amid the damp conditions of the wetlands. However, the Bugisu Cooperative Union (BCU) had a debt to an Italian company that wanted the land in lieu of payment, but this debt was paid off by the Government of Uganda around 2007/08. The BCU received none of the financial proceeds as the debt was high, but it meant that the co-operative could continue to operate after encountering difficult financial circumstances. Apart from agricultural land, the area also had many homes in the village of Masanda and some in Doko, estimated at up to 830 households or around 4,000–5000 people who were connected to the BCU but who had no title deeds or legal status and were classified legally as squatters. Most of the households agreed to leave under a negotiated compensation agreement. But others were evicted through force:

They just chased them in the middle of the night, the police and those people. They came at 2 am. Previously they had dug a trench around those houses and said no. Now they came back with a digger and pulled everything down. They started with the kitchens. People were left with nothing. (Community Representative 6 at the meeting in January 2024).

There are ongoing court cases against the BCU and the government for the 30 households that refused to leave under the compensation scheme and were violently evicted. There remains much bitterness and what we felt was a sense of being unsettled, unable to piece back together a viable life after the displacement. This sense of unsettlement was articulated by a community representative (3) who told us how the capacity to buy an equivalent plot of land was simply impossible, given 'a small piece of land of about 100 x 50

feet costs about UGX 30 million [USD 5000]. Therefore the UGX 3 million [USD 500] that I was to be given could not be adequate for my relocation'. Through testimony after testimony, we heard how households remained in a state of unsettlement after the eviction, how everyday social reproduction was challenging given the new conditions these households were navigating.

The unsettlements producing uncertainty and exacerbating inequality were ever-present in our thinking about the affective dimensions of these projects, given the testimonies were heard from Masanda villagers. We also identified other forms of people(d) unsettlement that reverberated out of these investments, expanding our evolving conception of global infrastructure space. Both the railway rehabilitation and the industrial park have generated new jobs for local people, making us think about the livelihood and labour dimensions of global infrastructure space. When we followed the railway route, we saw hundreds of workers operating under different contractors. An assortment of local companies undertaking sections and tasks, some working on drains, others on culverts and then more still on the line itself. This infrastructural labour was being sourced locally, but the work would not last beyond the period of the railway's rehabilitation. Hopes of future employment around the developing Standard Gauge Railway were voiced by some, but that possibility remains uncertain and would itself also be temporary in nature. At the industrial park, authorities claimed an average wage for an unskilled labourer of around UGX 300,000 (USD 100) per month. Employment opportunities are open to the families of those who have been displaced as a form of support and in accordance with promises made during the eviction process. The local economic effect is potentially significant. For instance, with the 500 workers at the textile manufacturer earning USD 100 per month each or USD 50,000 per month in total, this would amount to USD 600,000 a year that would then be spent in the local economy on food, housing and other things and could then be spent again (e.g. when a farmer sells produce and then purchases equipment at a local store).

This wage was disputed by those who knew people working in the factories. A community leader explained 'For example, our children are paid UGX 6,000 (USD 2) daily, and they use about UGX 4,000 (USD 1.50) on transportation to and from work, and they can only save about UGX 2,000 (USD 0.75)'. Accusations of exploitation, lack of labour rights and exposure to various kinds of harm were voiced to us by workers. Even though we were unable to verify these claims, there remained the sense that this employment remained precarious and was hardly able to sustain nearby households, including those recruited from Masanda village and was essential for supporting their families after the relocation. Again, the idea of unsettlement felt useful in structuring our thinking about how existing labour conditions in Uganda were being renegotiated in the industrial park, and the lived experiences of those having to navigate these imposed transformations.

Finally, we wish to draw attention to another type of people(d) unsettlement, that of the demographic composition of Mbale. The city has a long history and presence of Indian populations and businesses around the town, including local temples and restaurants that are part and parcel of everyday life. The recent investments in the industrial park and the contracting of the CRBC for the railway works have helped to establish a new Chinese

migrant presence in, or at least adjacent to, the city. The Chinese workers and managers remain living on site, accessing a purpose-built hotel, with a nearby supermarket and restaurant. For the railway works, several smaller compounds have been built along the route that house the engineers and foremen. At present, then, the migrant population remains relatively cut off from the wider life of Mbale, but each day new relations are being negotiated and navigated between the city and the newcomers, in interesting and intriguing ways, with little sense of how this new community might come to shape city life. We witnessed interesting moments of exchange beyond the capitalist–worker relations that are visible on the factory floors. These included Ugandans trying Chinese food for the first time, Chinese workers shopping in local markets buying local textiles and discussions about development programmes and other emerging ‘friendships’ that, in all kinds of cultural and social ways, gave an impression of an unsettling being underway.

Unsettled materialities

We found a sense of unsettlement not just through its affective state experienced as a social condition by people involved in these global infrastructure projects but also in a material state through the surrounding environmental conditions. This unsettling of the ecologies surrounding such investments may be highly visible and sometimes turbulent, creating new types of people(d) unsettlement in the process. For instance, we visited a site at Masanda village adjacent to the industrial park where we were told a drainage channel had been diverted by the operators. Expecting a small excavation as we approached the works, we realized the scale of it was vast: it must have taken months of furious work by large construction machines. The justification for these earthworks was a fear that the drainage channel that goes directly through the industrial park would not be able to hold all the water during the rainy season. The operators set about digging a diversion to shift the water outside the boundaries of their zone to secure the operations of existing factories and ensure future demarcated land could be fully developed.

The results of these earthworks for households in Masanda village were significant. A vast canyon channelling water outside the industrial park, which now sat on the other side of the cliff-like terrain, threatened to collapse the ground from under the villagers’ feet. These earthworks had separated the former boundaries of the industrial park, denoted by posts from the actual space itself. A few buildings were dangerously close to this new terrain. We saw how there were already cracks in some of the houses, suggesting a slow-motion collapse was in progress. The land was not stable at all but rather unsettled and likely to move or even collapse in the future. In the past the villagers could pass from where we were standing to the gates accessing the industrial park and even drive this way, but now that is no longer possible. The canyon was a physical barrier impossible to cross. Again, in our fieldwork encounters, we came back to the idea of unsettlement, this time regarding the movement of the earth and the villagers that lived upon it. We got a sense of why the community were so angry from a local political representative (6) who, again at the meeting in January 2024, said;

They had dug so much they had not left anything for flooding. When I asked certain people, they said I should be quiet and support this, as it was national economic development. By the time I came back, I visited the site. There were electric poles in the water. 'R' brought NEMA to the site, and this stopped the works. Since then, there has been a series of negotiations built around a series of demands. The government sent the Min of Works to conduct surveys and valuations. It seems the IP people will now need to purchase further land, but the villagers are adamant that this needs to be done very differently to what had previously occurred.

The earth upon which this part of Masanda village stood was clearly unstable and prone to movement and even collapse. New water flows were reshaping the wider wetlands and establishing new fluvial dynamics that had yet to settle and were likely to have agricultural implications. The risk of further collapse of the land upon which the village lay was real and could occur at any time. There had been an unsettling of the rules to allow the Chinese operators of the industrial park to embark on unauthorized construction work to divert the water. While it had eventually been halted after appeals from the municipality to the National Environmental Management Agency, this had come with immense reverberations for those who now lived close to these earthworks.

This additional but unanticipated project that emerged adjacent to the industrial park offers a vivid example of the ecological unsettlements proceeding amid the planning, construction and operation of this project. The construction of the Northern Spur railway that we opened with in this article offers other examples of this ecological unsettlement: the supplies of local and global materialities required for the construction, the movement of earth and the making of embankments, the installation of culverts, diversion of water flows and so forth; and later, upon completion, the operation of the railway and the acceleration of various goods through cargo shipments that might intensify local extractions and agricultural production in eastern Uganda. We saw how the ecological unsettlements that were unfolding around these projects overlapped with and shaped the various people(d) unsettlements also underway and led us toward a focus on the economic to better comprehend this turbulence and uncertainty being produced.

Unsettled political economies

We visited several factories in the industrial park, including a facility focused on textile production. It had only been in operation for three months. Garments were being produced for the domestic market, and already 500 people were working on a clearly segmented process set out in different zones. The workers were busy, hired directly from the gates on Monday mornings or through local politicians asking for jobs. A company official explained that the future of the company included plans to export to wider East African markets. Furthermore, they indicated how the jeans being produced meant clothing in Uganda, 'will no longer come from outside'. This was a form of unsettling that reverberated out into the clothing supply chains in Uganda, which had long been dominated by the flood

of imported second-hand clothes from Europe and North America toward a ‘revival of domestically oriented industrial policy’ (Behuria, 2021: 369). The Ugandan President had spoken about a full ban on these imports that hindered attempts at local production, building on the introduction in 2022 of a 35% tax on imported clothes. The government estimated that this would result in 50,000 direct new jobs and 250,000 indirect jobs, and help generate USD 650 million in additional export revenues’.<FN2> We spoke to one of the managers in the factory about their business that had been established in Sichuan and was attracted to operations in the industrial park through the Chinese operators, the encouragement of the Ugandan Government and what they identified as an emerging market. What was perhaps most intriguing was the aim to shift to local cotton supplies in the future, given that the factory was reliant at this stage of its operation on importing Chinese cotton through Mombasa port and along the Northern Corridor and because of the importance of this crop in the infrastructure histories of the region.

To consider this objective of using local cotton supplies in more detail, it is important to highlight what a critical economic agricultural activity this crop used to be for colonial and then post-colonial (eastern) Uganda and how this is no longer the case. To understand the unsettlements reverberating out of the establishment of the industrial park and specifically the aim of this one factory to use local cotton supplies, we visited a ginnery just out of Mbale, built in 1989. A ginnery collects raw cotton from farmers and, through processing, separates the fibres from the seeds, making cotton suitable for further production into textiles. It had been the biggest in the area and a physical representation of the 100+-year history of the cotton economy in the region. The gate was closed when we arrived. Upon stepping through, we found a shutdown facility, no machinery operating, no moving vehicles, no workers and no cotton; not the hub of productive activity that we had expected. Our hosts told us that the facility was functioning until two years ago, but was not able to sustain operations and was now being converted to coffee by the owners—coffee production having become a more economically feasible activity in this part of Uganda. We were told that the ginnery equipment was being disassembled and moved elsewhere. ‘F’ told us that ‘the old way of cotton’ is no longer viable, which he attributed to the period since the BCU became less active and farmers’ lack of capacity/power to negotiate a (good) collective price. This lack of collective bargaining power meant the price of cotton was not competitive for farmers, especially as new types of crops that suited the climate, such as soya, had become more exportable, gave better prices and are more straightforward to produce.

We spoke to others about this economic collapse of the sector. Some told us how the Cotton Development Authority has set regulations to stop any new ginnery opening in Uganda, while also regulating the price at which cotton could be sold by farmers. The price of cotton, shaped by the ups and downs of the world market and national regulators, was further hit by the collapse of the local African Textile Mill, which bought much local supply and proved to be the last financial blow for this ginnery, even as new opportunities seemed to be presented at the nearby industrial park. Today, Uganda produces 150,000 bales of cotton per year, yet in 2008, at the time of drafting the National Textile Policy, the country was producing 254,000 bales annually and had the capacity to produce one million bales.<FN3>

Recent years have therefore involved an unsettling of an economic sector that suggested an irreversible decline.

We followed the Northern Spur line out of town to other sites in the production and supply process to ascertain how the new factory in the industrial park might unsettle the existing moribund cotton economy. Visiting some of the cotton growing areas, such as at Kachumbala, a small rural stop that had been a drop-off point for cotton farmers in the past, we were told that many farmers had grown cotton locally for decades, but now hardly anyone was. However, our view of an irrefutable decline in the sector was challenged upon visiting an Indian-owned ginnery in Kachumbala that was operating successfully. As we walked through the gates, several tractors and carriages were standing in the yard, solar panel lights and security cameras were positioned at various points, and there were small bits of cotton all over the yard. We were introduced to 'P' who was managing the operation. The reason it was quiet is that the cotton had just been harvested and transported, and the new growing season was just about to begin. 'P' described the scale of the operation, which was impressive. The ginnery has built up a network of 10,000 farmers supplying cotton from surrounding districts that are using around 18,000 acres of farmland to grow. The price was now at UGX 2,000 per kilo, which is a good price for the farmers after some very difficult years in Uganda. The Kachumbala ginnery had been purchased by Indian buyers in 1999 from the local cooperative, which we felt represented a broader process across the region through a shift from collective ownership to private modes of production. Many of these private cotton businesses were not putting in the investment required to make these viable, as we had previously seen, but there were clearly anticipations of future business at this site. 'P' explained how the company had replaced the old US-built Murray equipment, which seemed to be the industry standard across the region, with newer Indian equipment representing a USD 100,000 investment. This had facilitated the ginnery producing 1,000 bales, which had recently been sold on to a textiles company in Jinja, and was also perhaps a reflection of an unsettling of global economic relations in Uganda.

We returned to the Chinese-owned textile factory thinking about the economic unsettlements that proceeded in and around the manufacture of clothing (including its supply chains); the new producers entering the markets, unsettled cotton supply networks inside and outside the country, the shifting logics of agricultural production and the contrasts between those Ugandan-owned ginneries facing hard times and closure and the Indian-company-led investments in new machinery at Kachumbala. Financial relations in the region are being unsettled by new inflows of finance that reflect not just the local economies but the rise of South-South relations (Mawdsley, 2019) in the Ugandan economy. A senior politician in nearby Tororo made this most clear to us when he drily responded when we introduced ourselves during the fieldwork that, 'The British influence is minimal nowadays; China is a rising superpower.' The Northern Spur conveys this perspective, given that the initial funding and contracting through European partners might be understood as representing some form of continuity in centre-periphery relations. However, these had broken down, and now the Ugandan state and a Chinese contractor were the main stakeholders in rehabilitating the railway. It echoed President Museveni's politics of blaming the West and seeking to find

alternatives. This unsettling of global economic geographies being played out across these projects and the multiple spaces, such as cotton production that spun around them, hinted at the broader patterns of economic restructuring across the world economy. We could see the material geographies of the shift toward Chinese and other global South actors through new global infrastructure investments in eastern Uganda.

Conclusion

In this article we have focused on two initiatives in eastern Uganda that allowed us to critically reflect upon ways in which to undertake research and analysis across the multiple spaces through which global infrastructure projects proceed.

Conceptually, we engaged with a broad array of scholarship, which offered varied and valuable perspectives, standpoints and approaches to consider these massive transformations. However, we were drawn to the notion of unsettlement as a *conceptual orientation* through our fieldwork practice and the conditions we encountered. We became convinced of the need for a refusal to settle on a particular strand of scholarship as we encountered the relational spaces of global infrastructure. We returned repeatedly to the contingent, ever-shifting and interconnected ways in which all kinds of things had been destabilized and made anew, but were yet to find a final state of being settled. While this initially struck us in a material or ecological sense, amid the construction works of the Northern Spur, we soon experienced this in a social and affective sense through our conversations with villagers who had been profoundly unsettled by their displacement to make way for the industrial park. This led to a mode of thinking that allowed us to follow up on the various (empirical) conditions of unsettlement that we encountered in ways that helped move us beyond the boundaries of existing frameworks in our research focus. We contend that the idea of unsettlement offers a way to relationally piece together critical understandings of the planning, operation and experiences of global infrastructure. We hope that this notion of unsettlement, drawing on and advancing more socially orientated ideas of this term (Simone, 2013; Howitt, 2020), might work to navigate often disparate empirical conditions and associated concepts—in ways that may not be possible by remaining wedded to other frameworks.

Methodologically, we identified and traced these unsettlements through our ‘follow the global infrastructure project’ fieldwork practice that builds upon longer mobile geographic research traditions of following the ‘thing’ (Cook, 2004) or the ‘pipeline’ (Castán Broto *et al.*, 2021). This enabled us to identify and navigate between different conditions (and associated strands of scholarship) that came out of our research process. Between everyday lives and geopolitics, physical changes to terrains, economic histories and the displacement of households. Such fieldwork practice repeatedly led us back to the question of what and who is being unsettled. The investment in the industrial park and railway is explicitly designed and mobilized by governance actors such as the Ugandan Investment Authority, Uganda Railways and the Chinese investors to unsettle existing political economic conditions (of, for instance, underinvestment in public infrastructures, lack of logistical connectivity, broader

economic stagnation and low growth in the manufacturing sector). This is a noticeable shift in the 'settled' state of the Ugandan and local economy along with the infrastructure/investment geographies of the region in recent years. This unsettlement reflects broader economic and geo-political transformations of urban spaces through the BRI (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2025) and newly assertive African states around manufacturing and connectivity initiatives (Chiyemura *et al.*, 2023). However, the implications of such decision-making spill out in various ways that produce material and affective unsettlement that might not have been fully foreseen in the planning of these global infrastructure projects, but nevertheless means those with little political or economic power become unsettled. We demonstrated this unequal experience of unsettlement through the displaced villagers in Masanda, unsettled from their land and livelihoods to make way for a new economic vision, exploited labourers facing precarious work conditions and municipal workers unable to quickly intervene in destructive 'national' projects. Our findings suggest these unequal experiences of unsettlement are a class-based process in which villagers', workers and local officials' interests are put aside for the interests of the infrastructural state and capital.

We centred unsettlement in our *analytical approach* to the empirical conditions because it allowed us to extend our focus beyond the people (and social relations) that become adversely unsettled in the making of these projects. We demonstrated how the new earthworks and excavations transformed the actual terrain of Mbale, including the physical geography of those living close to the zone. We pointed toward the extended supply geographies of various construction materials for the railway, such as local gravel or imported rail tracks, and the shifting cotton production and supply materialities that are being unsettled. We would contend these must also be considered in the relational space(s) of global infrastructure constituted through the making of the industrial park and the rehabilitation of a former imperial railway in a new economic era of South–South co-operation, flows and circulations.

Unsettlement as a research approach or framework comprehends how global infrastructure projects transform urban-regional geographies in multiple different ways. It offers an alternative entry point into spaces that are relational and ever shifting, drawing in wider networks of actors and connections, spaces and sites, materialities and much more. Here, we are clear that unsettlement as a conceptual orientation, method and analysis does not reject the different strands of scholarship or fail to bring together such theories on global infrastructure into a 'whole'. Rather it should be viewed as an acknowledgment of the impossibility of settling on any of these conceptual, methodological and analytical preoccupations in how we examine and narrate the ways in which these spaces are constituted and experienced. Through a 'follow the global infrastructure project' methodology that seeks to build descriptive-led, analytical accounts of these settlements, we find a new process of undertaking research and analysis that can weave together various existing concepts, ideas and theories. Given the size and scale of the extended spaces of global infrastructure, there can never be a complete telling, but rather stories and narratives that can emerge through composing pathways across various conditions and associated scholarship. Doing so brings

into view questions of who/what is unsettled, whether this is planned and intended or an unintended outcome that produces forms of inequality and injustice.

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