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Migration Infrastructures in West Africa and Beyond

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Abstract

Infrastructure is becoming an influential field of inquiry across the social sciences as it has been in policy related research for some time. In migration and mobility related research, the recent introduction of the concept of “migration infrastructure” represents an attempt to theorise the infrastructural approach in relation to the multifaceted mediation of migration. This MIASA working paper considers the usefulness and limitations of the concept of migration infrastructures in understanding labour mobilities in various West African contexts. This juxtaposition of West African cases with the Asian examples that informed the articulation of the concept of migration infrastructures suggests that the framework holds potential for moving beyond migrant-centred analysis, while leaving some open questions regarding the role of migrant agency, the discrepancies between intentions and uses of (migration) infrastructures, the significance of culturally embedded migrant imaginaries, and the impact of global migration governance on national or regional regulatory frameworks.

Keywords: Imaginaries; labour migration; methodology; migration infrastructure; mobilities; West Africa

Résumé

Le terme « infrastructure » reçoit de plus en plus d'intérêt à travers les sciences sociales, s'ajoutant à celui montré par la recherche appliquée depuis plusieurs années. Dans le domaine de la recherche sur les migrations et la mobilité, l'introduction récente du concept de « infrastructure migratoire » vise à théoriser une approche infrastructurelle sur la médiation complexe de la migration. Ce document de travail (working paper) de MIASA propose d'interroger la pertinence et les faiblesses de ce concept pour l'analyse des migrations de travail à travers plusieurs exemples en l'Afrique de l'Ouest. En comparant des cas d'étude ouest-africains avec des cas asiatiques, qui sont à la base de la théorie des infrastructures migratoires, nous montrons que la notion pourra contribuer à construire une approche qui se différencie des analyses centrées sur le migrant. Malgré cet avantage, le concept laisse plusieurs questions en suspens, notamment sur l'agentivité du migrant; les divergences entre les usages programmés et réels d'une infrastructure (migratoire); l'importance de l'imaginaire socio-culturel du migrant; et les effets des règlements internationaux de la migration sur les structures nationales ou régionales.

Mots-clés: Imaginaire; migration de travail; méthodologie; infrastructure migratoire; mobilité; Afrique de l'ouest



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1. Introduction

In an ever-expanding migration research field, infrastructure analysis is emerging as an influential conceptual framework. With its focus on the facilitation of movement of people, goods and ideas over time and space, infrastructure analysis offers a way of exploring the mediation of migration as well as other mobility practices. It thereby broadens the scope of analysis to examine what makes migration practically possible. Infrastructure is not a new field of research, of course. There is a long history of studies of, say, public transportation systems, international air travel, mobile telephony, electricity or water supply, examining these infrastructures in their technical capacity – their construction, components, maintenance etc. – as well as in their role as objects and areas of governmentality and rationality (see Larkin 2013; Star 1999; Winner 1980). Such material, technological systems and grids form part of the broad scope of connecting systems that we may think of as infrastructure in an everyday sense, providing “the undergirding of modern societies” (Larkin 2013: 327) or as “matter that enables the movement of other matter” (Larkin 2013: 329).

In this MIASA working paper, we explore infrastructure as a methodological and theoretical approach to study how people move and are moved by others. With backgrounds in anthropology, sociology and migration studies, our interest revolves around practices, perceptions and effects of (migration) infrastructure, and the derived lessons for qualitative and ethnographic methods. Identifying certain phenomena as (migration) infrastructure thus has theoretical implications. As Larkin observes, infrastructures are “conceptually unruly” (2013: 329), being “things and also the relation between things” (2013: 329). Recent work on migration infrastructures extends this understanding of material and technological infrastructure though, most notably, by including social and institutional dimensions. Hence, identifying what is to be considered infrastructure and what is not requires analytical work. To heed analytical precision, we therefore delimit our understanding of infrastructure as characterised by durability “beyond a single event or one-site practice” (Star 1999: 381). Therefore, to ‘qualify’ as migration infrastructure, operations or actors should function beyond their construction and initial use.

This working paper, in effect, explores the recent scholarship on migration infrastructures, and reflects on its theoretical and methodological implications, as well as its



applicability for understanding how migration is mediated in various West African contexts. We begin by discussing the concept of migration infrastructure as proposed in recent literature on the mediation of Asian migration. Here we discuss the concept as developed by Xiang and Lindquist (2014) and outline its five distinct but interrelated dimensions, followed by a discussion of the planned and political aspects of migration infrastructure (Lin et al. 2017). We then turn to migration and infrastructure in West African contexts. While the concept of migration infrastructure has not received much attention as yet, there is well-established literature on the mediation of mobility, labour migration, informality and social infrastructure that offer relevant insights for our purposes here. After reviewing these literatures, we present two case studies of West African labour migration from Ghana to Libya and from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire, to illuminate contrasts and similarities with the Asian examples. Finally, we reconsider the concept of migration infrastructure in West African contexts, suggesting that we need to pay more attention to the underpinning social imaginaries, improvisation and informality, and overarching contexts of conflict and restrictive regimes of mobility.

2. Migration Infrastructure – Definition and Implications

The concept of migration infrastructure was introduced by anthropologists Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist in 2014, in the 50-year anniversary issue of *International Migration Review*. Edited by Lee, Carling and Orrenius, this issue set out to “advance the research frontier on international migration” (2014: S3). Since then, Xiang & Lindquist’s contribution has become a key reference in the emerging literature on migration infrastructures. An introduction to a special issue of *Mobilities* on migration infrastructures in South and South-East Asia further develops the concept. We therefore devote some space to consider these two articles.

Xiang and Lindquist’s suggestion of a migration infrastructural approach to studying the mediation of international migration grows out of their long-term work on low-skilled labour migration from China and Indonesia. Their aim is to develop an approach that focuses on the intensified mediation of international migration and examine migration as part of broader social processes. It is part of the larger analytical and methodological move that emphasises a holistic approach to understanding the role of mobilities in society (Sheller and Urry 2006), including “the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities” (Hannam et al. 2006: 3); it also questions so-called migrant exceptionalism – the implicit or explicit assumption that migrants constitute analytical units whose subject positions and experiences are qualitatively different from those of other subjects (Dahinden 2016; Hui 2016).

Defined as “the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014: S122), the concept of migration infrastructure hinges on an understanding of migrants as not only moving by themselves but also being “*moved* by others, including brokers, bureaucrats, transport companies, medical clinics, and international organizations” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014b: S131, italics in



original). This framing throws light on how international migratory movements are, to a significant extent, facilitated through and by other actors as well as by a range of material, social, institutional, and technological systems and structures. These multifaceted processes of mediating migration are the central concern of the migration infrastructure approach. It thus implies a “processual perspective that conceptualizes migration as multi-directional and selfadjusting movements” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014c.: S132), rather than foregrounding analysis of migrant behaviour and intentionality. In the next two sections, we present the concept of migration infrastructure in more depth, first outlining and discussing its five dimensions before we discuss it in relation to planning, power and political perspectives.

Five interrelated dimensions

Based on their research on South East Asian labour migration, Xiang and Lindquist identify five dimensions of migration infrastructure with distinct logics of operation: the commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian and social dimensions (2014: S124). Importantly, these do not constitute discrete domains but are told apart through differentiation of “the leading actors, the driving forces, the central strategies and rationalities, and the defining modus operandi” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014d: S124).

The first dimension focuses on actors and agencies that engage in migration for a profit – *commercial* intermediaries in short. These include recruitment agencies, brokers and so-called human smugglers, border surveillance and security companies and others who, one way or another, make a business out of facilitating – or controlling and constraining – migration. This dimension has obvious similarities to the concept of migration industries (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013) that revolves around services, control and rescue of migrants. According to Xiang and Lindquist, however, the commercial dimensions of migration infrastructure has a broader perspective on organising services for migrants, including services such as medical tests or pre-departure training (S133). These organisational aspects of the commercial dimension of migration infrastructure, in this sense, present significant overlaps with the regulatory dimension.

The *regulatory* dimension of migration infrastructure concerns the state apparatus regulating migration: procedures for documentation, licensing, training, data regulation systems etc. This dimension is related to the regimes of mobility (Schiller and Salazar 2013) approach, which also focuses on the regulation and governance of migration. Yet, following Xiang and Lindquist, attention to regulatory infrastructures does not imply teasing out the relationship between migration governance and hegemonic power structures but is more interested in the “internal constitution and modular components of migration” (2014: S132) – in the nuts and bolts of migration regulation, rather than their effect.

Thirdly, the *technological* dimension of migration infrastructure is perhaps the closest to a common sense understanding of infrastructure as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (Larkin 2013: 327),



such as communication and transport. The expansion, intensification, and acceleration of speed and access to international travel and communication has received much attention in migration research since the 1990s – whether with reference to the fax machine in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Basch et al. 1994) or smartphones in the 2010s. Of course, as some globalisation scholars have reminded us, the same sense of unprecedented speed and scope of international transportation and communication has been evoked for several generations; including the marvel of the steam engine, the telegraph, the railroad, etc. (e.g. Trouillot 2003). But regardless of these precedents, the growing extension of Internet connectivity, smartphones, and social media platforms has made communication between migrants and their social networks faster, easier, and cheaper; the same could be said for communication between various actors regulating and controlling migration. Likewise, new control technologies have appeared, such as biometric identification and sophisticated border surveillance equipment (Jacobsen and Fast 2019).

The fourth dimension of migration infrastructure, the *humanitarian* dimension, focuses on the role that NGOs and international organisations play in shaping migration, whether directly or indirectly. Interventions include moving migrants through search and rescue operations, whether at sea or out of other emergencies or exploitative situations (Aghazarm et al. 2012). These actors are critically examined in the literature on the so-called rescue industry (Plambech 2014), thereby emphasising the overlaps between commercial and humanitarian infrastructures. (I)NGOs and multi-national organisations and agencies also play a role in assisting deportations through so-called Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes; that is, in the effectuation of restrictive mobility regimes, reflecting the intersection with governance infrastructures. Furthermore, migration may be facilitated through migration-development projects or through employment or volunteer stays in NGOs and international organisations. Finally, Xiang and Lindquist highlight how the humanitarian dimension concerns policy interventions and, in concert with mass media, public advocacy on migration-related issues, human rights, and suffering (2014: S134).

The final dimension of migration infrastructure is the *social* dimension. The most obvious aspect here is the pertinence of social networks in the migratory process, such as the role of family members, peers, strangers met *en route*, kinship groups, amongst others. This has been a central point in migration theories since the 1980s with chain migration and New Economics of Labour Migration theories (e.g. Massey 1987; Stark and Bloom 1985). Likewise, the focus on social networks in the migration process is key in studies of transnationalism (Basch et al. 1994; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Cole and Groes 2016). Existing literature on social infrastructure (Kleinman 2014; Simone 2004), however, has offered a slightly different perspective in emphasising improvisation, elusiveness and how social infrastructures cut across established social networks, such as ethnic or kin groups, as we elaborate below.

As this outline of the migration infrastructure approach demonstrates, there are countless overlaps between these five dimensions. Commercial infrastructure may seep through all other dimensions. Studies on the humanitarian interventions, for instance, have



demonstrated how international organisations and NGOs form part of the migration industry, particularly the rescue industry (Augustin 2007; Nyberg-Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013), pointing to significant intersection between the commercial and humanitarian dimensions. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine any aspects of migration infrastructure where technology does not play a role. Finally, the role of social networks cuts across all aspects of life, including migration. To accommodate these overlaps, therefore, Xiang and Lindquist insist that the five infrastructural dimensions “must be considered together [...] to foreground *intersectionality as an operational logic* of how migration is actually constituted” (S135, italics added). In other words, while each of these dimensions can and should be studied in their own right, a migration infrastructure approach implies attention to, and an exploration of, their interrelations, overlaps and collisions. Xiang and Lindquist call this assemblage “socio-technical constellations” (2014: S143), emphasising their multiple interlinkages.

Based on the five dimensions of migration infrastructure, Xiang and Lindquist illustrate the analytical applicability of the approach through a comparative consideration of the experiences of two migrants in their mid-twenties. Outlining the stories of Sun, a man from Liaoning, China, and Putri, a woman from Lombok, Indonesia, they examine how their labour migration to Singapore and Saudi Arabia, respectively, is mediated by differentiated infrastructural constellations. The intersections of infrastructural dimensions in the two cases can be summarised as follows: acquaintances or neighbours (the social dimension) put the prospective migrants in touch with a recruitment agency (the commercial dimension) that organises documents and permissions (the regulatory dimension) for the migrants. In the case of Putri, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Counter-Trafficking Unit assesses her migration experience when she returns from Saudi Arabia (the humanitarian dimension). Throughout information, papers and people are transferred and channelled by various transport and communication means (the technological dimension). The outcomes of their migration projects differ significantly, however, with Sun terminating his contract prematurely and Putri working for the scheduled three years of her contract. Despite these differences, Xiang and Lindquist note how they were both “escorted and encapsulated from the beginning until the end of the migration circuit” (2014: S131). They conclude that we need to pay attention to how migrants are moved by various numbers of actors, institutions and organisations as well as “the transfer of documents, data, and money between actors” (2014: S132). In the interest of a comparative reflection beyond these empirical cases, we may also note that the regulatory, commercial and technological dimensions stand out while the social and humanitarian aspects seem to play minor roles.

Planning, power and politics

The concept of migration infrastructure is further developed in the introduction to a special issue of *Mobilities* on migration infrastructure in Asia, co-edited by the same authors joined by two geographers, Weiqiang Lin and Brenda Yeoh, based at the National University of



Singapore. The move from a migration journal to an explicitly mobility-oriented one is reflected in the emphasis on the production of migrant mobilities (although the authors do consolidate the concept of migration infrastructure). In a nod to the new mobilities approach, they position their article as a necessary “perspective that shifts away from the people who move (as most migration and mobilities research tends to fixate on) towards those human *and* nonhuman actors that move migrants within specific infrastructural frames” (2017: 169, emphasis in original).

The article’s primary contribution is the explicit intention to consider the political aspects of migration infrastructures. In particular, the authors emphasise a focus on how “whole regimes of ‘legitimate’ international travel are being formulated today through assemblages of infrastructures that produce different migrancies” (Lin et al. 2017: 168). An “infrastructural approach”, then, aims “to disentangle how migrant mobilities are given significance and direction through the infrastructuring process” (Lin et al. 2017b: 168). As we know from regimes of mobility studies, ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ (or unauthorised, irregular or however we term it) modes of migration are interlinked. In Schiller and Salazar’s words, this prompts attention to “the privileged movements of some and the co-dependent but stigmatized and forbidden movement, migration and interconnection” of other (im)mobile subjects (2013: 188). The contribution of a migration infrastructural perspective, in this sense, is to explore the links between the regulatory and the other infrastructural dimensions in the construction of migrant mobilities, going beyond issues of migration legislation, border control and political debates on migration. Or rather, doing so within ‘specific infrastructural frames’ or ‘infrastructuring processes’, as they write. It is thus a two-step analytical process: to identify these frames and processes and then to analyse how they produce migrant mobilities.

Understanding infrastructure as “socio-technical platforms for mobility” (2017: 167), Lin et al. emphasise the planned, durable and political perspectives. Infrastructures, they write, are “always already inscribed with planning power, which dictates who gets or does not get to benefit from their socio-material arrangements. Naturalised as taken-for-granted systems, infrastructures can and do perform politics in their daily use” (2017: 170). A pointed (and much quoted) example of such planning power is Winner’s study on the political quality of ‘technical things’ (1980). Focussing on public works in Long Island, New York, he analyses how about 200 road overpasses were constructed with a deliberately low height to prevent buses on parkways and hence exclude access to public parks for poor people without their own cars, reflecting “social-class bias and racial prejudice” (Lin et al. 2017: 123; see also Larkin 2013; Lin et al. 2017). With regard to migration infrastructure, a focus on planning power turns our attention to how assemblages of infrastructures facilitate and constrain migrant mobilities: the availability of means of transportation, the accessing power of papers and documents, the technologies at hand, the commercial agents attainable. Holding a high-mobility passport facilitates air travel, while those without it may have to travel in pick-up trucks or rickety boats. The political dimension of this unequal distribution of



mobility is as explicit in today's regimes of mobilities as in the construction of low road overpasses in Long Island: curbing and preventing the mobility of certain groups of people.

Recognition of the political nature of infrastructure is pertinent for any critical study of infrastructure (cf. Larkin 2013). Indeed, as Lin et al. accentuate, the organisation of infrastructures has implications for international migration and the "unequal distribution of 'mobility' as a resource and opportunity" (2017: 170). Access to safe and legal migration and other forms of mobility is indeed one of the major axes of inequality today (Bauman 1998; Hage 2003; Kleist 2017a), (re)produced through infrastructural frames and processes. However, the focus on the 'already inscribed planning power' presupposes that the infrastructure in question is planned and organised with clear objectives to (re)produce such inequalities. To be sure, planned infrastructure may possess such deliberately oppressive qualities by rendering particular groups of migrants clearly identifiable and governable from 'above', through biometric surveillance or low road overpasses. But how would this approach incorporate (migration) infrastructure that has developed more 'organically' from 'below'? This would include many aspects of more improvisational and less institutionalised infrastructures, as will be seen in our discussion of the case of West African migration and mobilities in the sections to follow.

3. Migration infrastructures in (West) African contexts

Xiang and Lindquist's definition of the concept of migration infrastructure is only starting to be explicitly applied to African contexts. Yet, if we broaden our scope, important work on the various dimensions of the mediation of migration emerges (though these terms may not be used explicitly), such as a longer scholarship on migration and other forms of mobility in West Africa, urban studies, and work on brokering and connection men. Based on these discussions and drawing on insights from our own research on West African migration, we now consider how the conceptual idea and approach of migration infrastructure 'travels', as it were, outside its original Asian empirical case material. In particular, we discuss labour migration practices in and out of West Africa with regard to historical and contemporary patterns, migration brokerage, free movement and the politics of informality, and work on people as infrastructure. We end by reflecting on the comparative merits and weaknesses of the framework for overland mobilities within the sub-region and towards North Africa.

Labour migration in and out of West Africa

Historically, the West African sub-region has been characterised by pronounced labour migration since the independence era of the 1960s (e.g. Cordell et al. 1996; Madiéga and Nao 2003; Rain 1999). Prior to colonialism, mobilities of different scales were no less frequent but were less directed towards wage labour and would sometimes entail the migration of entire communities, either in response to environmentally induced hardships or in relation to conquest or invasion. These large-scale movements famously prompted Igor Kopytoff (1987) to



characterise Africa as a “frontier continent”. In some regions, the transatlantic slave trade caused the forced displacement of entire cohorts of young men and women between the 16th and 19th centuries. During the colonial period, which generally began around the start of the 20th century, colonial administrations combined strategies of forced labour and taxation to violently relocate people within the new colonial territories, primarily in order to recruit labourers for infrastructure projects and plantation agriculture (Asiwaju 1976; Cooper 1996; Cross 2013).

Seasonal or permanent migration from Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea and Mali to more prosperous urban and rural areas in the region as well as cross-border trade continue to be important economic and social phenomena. These forms of regional labour circulation are not only an important livelihood strategy for individuals and households; they have also constituted the backbone of the world’s largest cocoa producing economies in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. These forms of self-initiated mobilities are thereby a constitutive element of labour recruitment processes and of professional identities in a variety of sectors (Bertrand 2011). Cross-border circulation and the skilfulness required to navigate the opportunities and risks offered by borderland areas are essential for many traders (Ayimpam 2015; Flynn 1997). Artisanal miners are dependent on their capability to follow new discoveries and to relocate rapidly from one mining camp to another, and they constitute a moving “mining frontier” (Werthmann and Grätz 2012) that contributes to expanding the sector across the whole region. Combatants from the region’s armed conflicts have been known to circulate across countries and between sides (Hoffman 2011a), and seasonal agricultural labourers have shown a similar ingenuity in their search for employment opportunities across longer and shorter distances.

Migration brokerage

The first dimension of migration infrastructure considered above was the commercial dimension, which denotes the intermediaries who facilitate various forms of mobility for a profit. What is notable across the diverse cases of West African labour migration mentioned above is the relative absence of brokerage as a constitutive dimension of migration infrastructure. Perhaps with the exception of combatant mobilities – in which military chains of command include designated recruiters who make their living travelling across national borders to locate new recruits and seasoned combatants (Bjarnesen 2016; Hoffman 2011b; Utas 2003) – the facilitation of regional labour migration tends to take place within extended kin and other social networks, and to rely on cultural institutions of fosterage and patronage rather than commercialised brokerage.

To some extent, this has also been true of interregional destinations, such as Libya and other North African countries, as well as off-continent migration – initially to the former colonial centres but from the 1980s also to other European countries, North America, the Gulf states, China and Latin America. In such cases, however, migration brokers such as connection men (as they are called in anglophone West Africa) have played a role in procuring



and facilitating various travel documents, organising (parts of) the journeys, and perhaps initial accommodation and employment (Alpes 2017; Kleist 2017b; Lucht 2011). As pointed out in the literature on migration industries, such services may be of a legal or illicit nature, ranging from fabricating passports to obtaining authorised visas. These businesses generally seem to be of a smaller scale and less institutionalised nature than the mafia-like human smuggling industry that is often presumed in European political and policy debates to be behind West African migration.

The recent increase in undocumented migration from sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe has been accompanied by the proliferation of migration brokers in response to the increased demand for access to the EU countries (see e.g. Alpes 2017; Andersson 2014). In this regard, the consolidation of commercialised migration brokerage – not only on the North African coast but also in sending countries throughout West Africa from where migrants initiate their journeys by air, sea, or land – is intimately related to the changing patterns of migration governance. Or, to evoke the infrastructural approach more explicitly, it intersects with it. This brings us to the regulatory dimension of migration infrastructure in a West African context.

Free movement and the politics of informality

Contrary to the tendencies in most parts of the world in recent years, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has recently reaffirmed its principle of free circulation of people across the borders of the West African sub-region, which was ratified originally through the *1979 Protocol relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment*. This principle envisions West Africa as an integrated space that transcends the divisions inherited by colonial rule and stimulates economic initiative in a unified market. It also reflects a long history of regional labour migration – from the movements induced by the Atlantic slave trade to later uses of forced and ‘free’ labour by colonial powers – and its fundamental role in shaping demographic, economic, and socio-political structures in West Africa until the present day. Between the lines of the reaffirmed commitment to the principle of free movement, furthermore, lies a recognition that most of West Africa’s borders have been relatively porous and easy to cross, and that this unregulated circulation by and large has been beneficial for the regional economic community and its individual members states.

However, exceptions to the principles of free circulation within the ECOWAS have been numerous (Cross 2013); for example, when wealthier member states have reinforced their border control out of concern for the influx of migrants from the region’s weaker economies, or in the context of armed conflict or other forms of political instability. Likewise, EU policy has increasingly encouraged national border control in the fight against regional terrorism and – more dubiously – as a strategy to contain migrants heading towards the North African coast, and onwards towards Europe across the Mediterranean Sea (Andersson 2014). At the regional level so-called “parallel trade” and informal economies have prospered in



borderland areas as a consequence of incomplete regional integration (Meagher 1997). Moreover, travellers, migrants and traders still have to deal with the extortive practices of border police and customs officials. In other words, the regulatory dimension of migration infrastructure in this regional context offers important facilitators as well as constraints to the principle of free movement but in many instances, it is necessary to look beyond formal institutions, policies, and bureaucratic roles to appreciate these effects.

In this sense, the infrastructural approach runs the familiar risk of conceptualising African realities through its comparative deficiencies. This recurring weakness of African studies and development policy alike has haunted our understanding of social dynamics in different African contexts for generations. An analytical framework that reproduces or reinforces such perspectives would not pass the litmus test of academic rigour at a time when calls for the 'decolonisation' of African higher education, as well as of academic traditions in the global North, are multiplying. A central question to ask of the infrastructural approach in order to assess its applicability to West African contexts, then, would be whether it is possible to conceptualise the regulatory dimension of migration infrastructures in ways that do justice to these diverse dynamics.

Of course, this question has been asked by research relating to work and labour in African contexts for quite some time, usually centred on the notion of in/formality (see e.g. Lindell 2010). Informality is often associated with uncertain occupational statuses and blurred professional identities that may reinforce patterns of vulnerability and exploitation; at the same time, it leaves room for workers' strategic behaviours and capacity to adapt, for example by creatively combining various forms of income and occupation, often straddling formal and informal sectors. The reflection on informal economies has also become influential in policy circles, for example among development institutions. These assessments confirm that the informal sector provides, to date, a significant share of employment and of national incomes in West Africa as well as in most sub-regions of the African continent (Medina et al. 2017; Vanek et al. 2014).

In terms of regional mobility within, and off-continent migration from, West Africa, the most common framing is through the notions of everyday mobilities and irregularity. Regional mobility, in part due to the principles of free movement, is rarely criminalised but rather seen as driven by viable and somewhat ungovernable livelihood strategies enacted by individual migrants and/or households. In a broader reading of the literature on informality in African contexts, this attitude is also characteristic of the state's handling of other livelihood sectors. For example, urban informal workers such as small-scale traders are also, in many cases, breaking laws by hawking on street corners or setting up stalls in the periphery of markets but these aspects of their activities are downplayed through the lens of informality, which recognises the lack of legal alternatives and formal employment for a majority of the population (Monteith and Giesbert 2017).

Quite the opposite is the case in off-continent migration. Whether enacted by land and (potentially) sea through the shifting bottlenecks along the North African coast, or by



air through overstaying tourist visas, migrants from (West) Africa to the global north are increasingly perceived as potentially illegal or explicitly defined as such. In this way, the manifold reasons for enacting such journeys and the lack of other viable options tend to be either downplayed or perceived as illegitimate reasons for breaching the law. This criminalising view of African migration, spurred to a significant degree by the externalisation of EU immigration governance, implies a highly normative reading of a particular kind of informality, while wilfully ignoring the considerable numbers of authorised migration practices, including student and professional migration, tourism, etc.

How, then, would an infrastructural approach help us appreciate the regulatory contexts of West African migration in a less normative and more exploratory way? One potential avenue takes us outside the scope of migration-specific research, to consider the growing attention to infrastructural complexity in qualitative urban theory. In the following section we consider some of the most notable contributions within this line of inquiry on urban Africa and reflect on its implications for understanding migration infrastructures in a West African context.

People as infrastructure

As already alluded to, the notion of infrastructure lends itself to a broad range of phenomena and contexts, including those not exclusively related to the facilitation of movement. While urban infrastructures do mediate the mobilities of its residents in various ways, scholars of urban Africa have emphasised that even when material infrastructures may seem dysfunctional, they may in fact be more productive than their intended purposes allow. For example, Filip De Boeck, who has written extensively on the workings of African urbanities through his research on the city of Kinshasa, offers an evocative illustration of how the failings of urban planning and maintenance create new opportunities:

Potholes or pools of water on a public road, to give but one example, may become infrastructural elements in themselves, because they create thickenings of publics, and offer the possibility of assembling people, or of slowing them down (so that one might sell them something along the road, for example). (De Boeck 2012)

In this anecdotal example, the infrastructural restraints on urban circulation create possibilities for urban residents to engage with people who would otherwise be unavailable, had the material state of public roads permitted them to move more freely. In De Boeck's reading, these possibilities are facilitated by the effects of potholes or pools of water. In other words, while the public road fails in its purpose of enabling mobility/circulation, its deficiencies *succeed* in facilitating the encounter between petty traders and people passing through.

Much of the literature on urban infrastructures in this vein builds on Abdou Malig Simone's influential notion of people as infrastructure (2004). By taking the reader on a journey through the inner-city of post-apartheid Johannesburg, Simone suggests that what the dilapidating urban infrastructure lacks in terms of predictability, security, and service



provision, it repays in its facilitation of "... incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used" (2004:407). In a context where the state has virtually withdrawn from large sections of the inner-city, new groups of residents create their own working orders of more or less illicit forms of trade and exchange of services which would not have been possible under the gaze of a more effective urban governance regime. Here, as Xiang & Lindquist note, "the social directly takes an infrastructural form" (2014: S133) by creating what Simone refers to as "a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city" (2004: 408).

Julie Kleinman's study of West African migrants at the Gare du Nord train station in Paris evokes a similar notion of social infrastructure as "a hub of creating encounters across difference, and a site where social interaction can occur that could not happen elsewhere" (2013: 287). While Simone's "intersections of residents" are facilitated by the relative absence of the state, Kleinman's social infrastructures are confronted with the patrolling eye of the French authorities in their search for undocumented migrants. In both cases, however, the notion of social infrastructure characterises situations where formal governance is stacked against urban residents who are brought together because of, not in spite of, these unfavourable circumstances. Much as the flooded road evoked by De Boeck, the abandoned inner-city and the patrolled space of Gare du Nord create the conditions for productive encounters that go against the formal purposes of the spaces they inhabit. Finally, a recently published volume on "arrival infrastructures" (Meeus et al. 2019) explicitly links the urban infrastructural perspective to migration theory, emphasising how urban "arrival infrastructures select, give direction to, and retain or accelerate certain migratory subjects" (2019: 15).

These works on urban social infrastructures offer two important conceptual contributions for the purposes of this working paper. First of all, the notion of social infrastructure clearly shows how formal governance structures, or indeed their relative absence, may contribute to encounters and synergies far from the intended purposes of those structures. This complicates the distinction between functional and dysfunctional infrastructures and obliges an acute attention to the positionalities of the actors at the centre of the analysis. As in Xiang & Lindquist's empirical examples, institutionalised migration infrastructures may work so smoothly that migrants' mobility is shaped and set in motion by other actors and institutions from beginning to end, to the extent that the possibilities for improvisation or individual agency on the part of the migrant are virtually impossible. Conversely, inner-city dwellers in Johannesburg may lack the institutional services and protection of the municipal authorities but they would most likely be evicted or persecuted, had the state plans for gentrification been put into effect. In other words, the opportunities for creating productive, yet illicit, social infrastructures are in part a result of these specific dysfunctions of the state. Secondly, and following from this productive potential of the dysfunction or lack of formal governance structures, these studies emphasise the adaptability, creativity, and



improvisational capacity of urban residents – including migrants – to make the best of difficult circumstances.

4. Two West African case studies

In order to engage more fully with the conceptual potential and implications of the concept of migration infrastructure for understanding the mediation of West African migration, we now present two brief case studies, reanalysing work previously published in different framings and formats.

Ghanaian labour migration to Libya: shifting landscapes of conflict and control¹

Libya, a hub for labour migrants from all over the world until the outbreak of civil war in 2011, has been a major destination for Ghanaian migrants for about 25 years, taking off when Gaddafi actively promoted sub-Saharan migration in the 1990s (Bredeloup and Pliez 2011; Hamood 2006). Following century old caravan routes, these trajectories have historical antecedents but are embedded in contemporary regimes of mobility and migration control as well as shifting landscapes of conflict. As West African nationals, Ghanaians have the right to move freely within the ECOWAS zone until the Niger-Libya border. In practice, harassment and extortion by corrupt authorities and criminal gangs in Niger is common, especially north of the Saharan transport hub of Agadez. Until this point, migrant journeys are either self-organised or led by a Ghanaian connection man, often an experienced fellow migrant, who deals with various intermediaries on the way. Crossing the Sahara requires assistance though, and entry into Libyan territory mostly takes place clandestinely. Hence, from Agadez and onwards, the mobility of Ghanaian migrants is mediated and constrained by other actors, such as trans-Saharan transporters and guides, border patrols, criminal gangs, and (sometimes corrupt and violent) authorities. The combination of conflict, lawlessness, EU externalisation of border control, Libyan immigration legislation and the hazards of crossing the Sahara makes this leg of the journey extremely dangerous. Hazards include kidnapping, extortion, imprisonment and detention, vehicles getting lost or breaking down, and dehydration – all with possible fatal outcomes. Intensified border control and payment of ransom following kidnapping or detention has also heightened the commercial profit made from migration and, in consequence, the price that migrants and their families pay.

Once in Libya, uncertainty continues to characterise the lives of Ghanaian labour migrants (cf. Kandilige and Hamidou forthcoming). While some have regularised their immigration status a posteriori through brokers or employers, or used fabricated ID cards, others have lived and worked without authorised papers. Being caught without papers in Libya has resulted in detention, imprisonment and deportations – both before and, especially, after the civil war and the (renewed) EU collaboration with Libya to prevent migration

¹ When not otherwise noted, the case study draws on interviews with Ghanaian return migrants Libya, undertaken by Nauja Kleist through seven months of fieldwork between 2012 and 2015 (see Kleist 2017b; 2017c; 2018).



towards Europe. Furthermore, Ghanaian migrants have been evacuated following conflict in several instances. The largest evacuation took place in March 2011, following the outbreak of civil war, where about 19,000 Ghanaians were airlifted from neighbouring countries (Zampagni et al. 2017), coordinated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in collaboration with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Libya-bound migration from Ghana has mainly been undertaken by young men of relatively poor backgrounds, travelling to support their families and/or save up for their future. Kwesi's two journeys to Libya and back again illustrates some of the complexities of such migration projects and their mediation. Growing up in a rural town in Ghana with longstanding practices of out-migration and mobile livelihoods, the possibility of going to Libya or further afield was on Kwesi's mind from an early age. In 2005, 25 years old, he took off to Libya himself, inspired by a childhood friend who lived in the UK after having spent some years in Libya. Travelling in a small group of fellow townsmen led by a local connection man, Kwesi made it to the Libyan border via Niger and then hiked across the Hoggar mountain range, a journey he described as extremely dangerous and exhaustive. As so many other Ghanaians in Libya, he found work as a mason but the job did not appeal to him and after a few months, Kwesi persuaded an older brother working in Libya to pay for his journey to Europe via Spain. He was caught at the Moroccan border, however, and deported to Algeria from where the Algerian authorities further deported him to Mali. Broke and distressed, Kwesi finally made it back to Ghana where his family helped him back on his feet. A few years later, Kwesi travelled to Libya again. This time he found a job in an international company and decided to stay. His employers took care of his papers, and Kwesi sent one part of his salary to his family in Ghana, depositing the rest in a local bank. When the civil war broke out in 2011, the bank burnt down and Kwesi lost his savings. Waiting several days in a camp in Tunis, he was finally evacuated to Ghana. Upon arrival, Kwesi was interrogated by Ghana Immigration Service, relocated to a camp in Accra for debriefing and health screening, and finally handed a small amount of cash to pay for his bus ticket to his hometown. Kwesi thus returned to his family once again, this time sharing a room with his junior brother for several months.

Kwesi's case demonstrates the close intertwinement of migration infrastructure dimensions in the mediation of his two trips. Embedded in collective imaginaries of migration as a pathway of improvement and in long-established reciprocity and livelihood practices, his migrations were inspired, funded and supported by family and friends, emphasising the pertinence of the social dimension before, during and after his migration projects. His case also demonstrates that contexts of conflict and insecurity shape the regulatory and commercial dimensions. Overland migrants from West Africa move from the free mobility zone of ECOWAS to militarised migration control in the Niger-Libyan borderland and inside Libya, shaping the governance of their mobility as well as the commercial actors and activities mediating it. While the first leg of the journey is relatively low-cost, being self or locally organised, cross-Saharan migration industries thrive on the demand for mobility in situations with



few or no safe or legal options – whether they are regarded as legal actors (state authorities) or illicit ones (human smugglers or criminal gangs). Finally, the humanitarian dimension comes into play through evacuation from the civil war. The mediation of migration carried out by international organisations has become more salient in recent years where IOM has initiated and upscaled so-called voluntary return projects from migration hubs in Niger, following the intensified patrol and militarisation of border control. These instances point to the intersection with the regulatory and commercial dimensions, as ‘humanitarian’ efforts are embedded in mobility regimes and rescue industries.

Burkinabe labour migration to Côte d’Ivoire: the cultural embeddedness of migrant imaginaries

Côte d’Ivoire has been the preferred destination of Burkinabe labour migrants since the independence era of the 1960s. During the French colonial occupation, which was initiated in the 1890s, a similar trajectory was enforced upon the populations of present-day Burkina Faso in the interest of developing an expansive plantation economy in the fertile forest belt along the colony’s coastal regions (Amin 1995). After independence, the first Ivorian president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, encouraged the voluntary migration of labourers from Côte d’Ivoire’s poorer neighbours and despite the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s and the armed conflict of the early 2000s, Côte d’Ivoire remains the world’s largest cocoa producer, in large part fuelled by the continued influx of such migrant labour.

Despite considerable shifts in the regulatory infrastructure of Burkinabe labour migration to Côte d’Ivoire, the circular trajectory of regional migration has remained remarkably consistent for generations. This continuity, despite the fact that migrant labourers were explicitly targeted by the loyalist side of the Ivorian civil war (Banégas and Marshall-Fratani 2003; Banégas and Otayek 2003), would be difficult to understand, were it not for the importance ascribed to this journey by the migrants themselves. Given the unpredictability of most migrant endeavours in this context, and the virtual absence of effective state regulation, the continuity of Burkinabe migrants’ orientation towards Côte d’Ivoire has as much to do with the durability of culturally informed idioms of what these journeys signify in the lives of migrants and their extended families as with a strictly economic cost/benefit assessment; it has little to do with any institutionalised (state or transnational) infrastructure.

The experiences of Patrice² over three decades as a regional labour migrant may serve as an illustration of these general dynamics. Patrice, a sturdy and soft-spoken man in his fifties, grew up in a village near the town of Koudougou in central Burkina Faso. Like many of his friends, he had been set on going to Côte d’Ivoire since he was in his teens. He was convinced that becoming a migrant would be the best way for him to achieve a certain level of economic independence and the possibility of getting married and establishing his own household. He was finally given the opportunity to leave at the age of 19, when his childhood friend, Ousmane, visited his parents in the village, having been in Côte d’Ivoire

² A more detailed account of Patrice’s narrative has been published elsewhere (Bjarnesen 2013).



for several years. As is often the case, the more experienced and affluent peer took on a kinship-like role and agreed to take Patrice along, seeing to the necessary arrangements such as making sure that Patrice had an identity card and a yellow fever vaccine certificate³. Ousmane bore the costs for these preparations, and also paid the various minibuses they took on their way to the Ivorian south.

Outside the coastal town of San Pedro in western Côte d'Ivoire, Patrice worked on Ousmane's plantation with the intention of eventually acquiring his own land. Ousmane, also a Burkinabe, had worked for four years before he was given his own piece of land by his Ivorian *tuteur*⁴. The land was fertile and at the time, in the mid-1980s, anyone who was willing to work hard would be able to earn a decent living. It took Patrice six years to earn a piece of land for himself. When Ousmane was ready to stake out a part of his land for Patrice to cultivate, they arranged a meeting with the village elders and Ousmane's *tuteur*, who was also the village chief. The latter agreed to the transfer and accepted to be Patrice's *tuteurs* as well. The following four years were devoted to building up a cocoa plantation, which meant that Patrice remained dependent on Ousmane for food and housing since he had no income from the land yet.

Around 1993, Patrice's plantation began 'giving', producing enough cocoa to run a profit, and in the following year he consolidated his production before visiting his village in Burkina Faso with the intention of getting married. He had met his future wife during his time in Burkina Faso and had taken steps to marry her. After the wedding, Patrice brought his bride with him to San Pedro. It was a time of affluence and happiness. They had two children; a boy and a girl. But with the advent of the Ivorian crisis, their circumstances gradually deteriorated. Before the outbreak of violence against immigrant residents, the village was patrolled by soldiers, who checked identity papers and went door to door, collecting payments from immigrants and harassing people. Patrice and his wife stayed close to their *tuteur* who came to their defence on several occasions, evoking his authority as village chief. In 2002, the *tuteur* fell ill and died suddenly. During this time, a failed coup by rebel forces from the north resulted in the escalation of armed conflict and a territorial division of the country (Akindès 2003). Patrice realised that it would be too dangerous for them to stay on without the protection of his Ivorian *tuteur*, and the family left Côte d'Ivoire in 2003 via Ghana since the roads heading north were said to be too dangerous.

In 2006, Patrice went back to Côte d'Ivoire to check on his plantation, the maintenance of which he had entrusted to a younger relative. He still made a little money from the cocoa production but the plantation was becoming dilapidated under the care of his

³ Since the end of armed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, the WHO vaccine card for yellow fever often serves as sufficient travel documentation for crossing the border with Burkina Faso, reaffirming the commitment of both countries to the ECOWAS principles of free movement considered above. Even in cases where migrants travel without documentation, border officials will often accept a small bribe quite openly, to turn a blind eye.

⁴ The role of a *tuteur*, refers to the traditional institution known as the 'tutorat', which prescribed the welcoming of strangers and the provision of agricultural land in exchange for a share of the produce and, more importantly, the establishment of a mutual moral obligation of 'gratitude' and respect (Chauveau 2006: 214-215)



inexperienced relative. The farming village had been more or less abandoned, and Patrice realised then that it would be impossible to move back to Côte d'Ivoire. He used his savings and income from the plantation in San Pedro to invest in building materials and merchandise to set up a hardware shop in the town of Bobo-Dioulasso in southwestern Burkina Faso in 2007.

Throughout Patrice's experiences as a regional labour migrant, and later as an involuntary returnee during the Ivorian armed conflict, his migration was not primarily regulated by institutional actors or governance regimes but was, rather, embedded in an intimate social infrastructure as well as longstanding cultural idioms and institutions that provided support and direction to his movements. With the increasing hostility towards immigrants in Côte d'Ivoire during the 1990s, and the escalation of armed conflict after 2000, a broader governance regime may be said to have shaped a regulatory infrastructure of Burkinabe labour migration, although the regulating dynamics were more of a collateral effect of the outbreak of armed conflict, and not an infrastructural regulation of migration as such.

Contrasting the regional ethnographies

These two examples differ significantly from the Asian cases, presented by Xiang and Lindquist. The most striking difference is the intersection of the regulatory and commercial dimensions. In contrast to the Asian examples, where "the development of migration infrastructure has turned migration into an object of intensive regulation, commodification and intervention" (2014: S125), much West African migration is self-organised, stepwise (cf. Schapendonk and Steel 2014), and draws on social networks whether through kinship or peers (be they friends, colleagues or 'strangers' met *en route*), rather than mediated through institutionalised and official brokerage, such as recruitment agencies. The improvisational and stepwise nature often continues in interregional and off-continent migration though the migration industries involved change character in situations characterised by the *absence* of regular migration opportunities. While migrants are guided (or misguided) through the Sahara, or make their way to the Ivorian plantation belt, they are not "escorted and encapsulated from the beginning until the end of the migration circuit" as Xiang and Lindquist put it (2014: S131). Perhaps therefore, the social dimension is pertinent throughout the journey, with information technology playing a central role for connection and information-sharing between migrants.

While the concept of infrastructure, furthermore, tends to denote constellations that are more durable than, say, social networks, connections, or routes, we also note that dramatically shifting political contexts characterise both of our West African examples, while the Asian cases seem to portray a more stable macro-political landscape. The infrastructural dimensions of Ghanaian migration to Libya not only changed considerably with the fall of Gadhafi in 2011; they were also fundamentally affected by the externalisation of EU migration governance, particularly post-2015. In Côte d'Ivoire, the politicisation of immigration during the 1990s and the escalation of armed conflict in the early 2000s represent dramatic



shifts in the options and outlooks of Burkinabe labour migrants, which throws the enduring circulation of this labour force into stark relief. As Henrik Vigh has argued, in understanding the ways in which social actors navigate their social terrain under conditions of radical social change, this terrain may be as changeable and improvisational as the tactics people deploy to manoeuvre them. The study of such conditions thus becomes the study of “motion squared”, or “motion within motion” (Vigh 2009). Even in a less actor-oriented perspective, the macro-political contexts within which infrastructural dimensions unfold seem to impose more all-encompassing shifts and circumstances than the differentiating effects of infrastructural “planning power”, as evoked by the migration infrastructures approach (cf. Lin 2017: 170).

5. Migration infrastructure reconsidered

Through the comparative reading of a selection of theoretically and empirically centred research on African migrations and mobilities, this working paper has explored the analytical potential of the concept of migration infrastructure for expanding our understanding of the mediation of migration in various West African context. On this basis, we now reconsider migration infrastructure as a concept and approach. Firstly, we point to four fundamental ways in which the two West African case studies differ significantly from the Asian case material presented by Xiang & Lindquist; secondly, we reflect on the implications of these differences, suggesting three aspects that call for further attention.

The examples of Kwesi and Patrice throw light on significant differences between the mediation of migration in Asian and West African contexts. First, in both cases, the intersection of infrastructural dimensions shows a domination of social infrastructures as well as of the culturally informed imaginaries of generations of labour migrants. Secondly, they illustrate the stepwise and improvisational nature of mobility in contexts where mediating roles are unstable and contextual, rather than institutionalised, and where migrant trajectories rely on continuous (re)evaluation and piecemeal financing rather than a clearly defined itinerary. This flexibility also extends to the duration and frequency of migrant sojourns, with Ghanaian returnees being ready to engage in new attempts despite initial setbacks and involuntary return (see Kleist 2017b; 2017c; 2018) and Burkinabe migrants travelling back and forth for decades, often as part of transnational households that span generations (Bjarnesen 2013; 2016). Thirdly, inspired by Simone’s (2004) notion of people as infrastructure, the seeming dysfunctionality of formal infrastructures can be seen as a potentially productive condition for the mobilities that people engage in, enabling different choices and trajectories to different segments of the population than the often-exclusionary spheres of governance. Finally, since 2015, there has been a surge in and intensification of restrictive border regimes in the global north and the externalisation of such policies towards the global south in general, and the Sahelian region of West Africa in particular. This broader political context seems to impose more consequentially on the mediation of



migration in the West African case studies, emphasising the role of the regulatory framework and its intertwinement with commercial and humanitarian dimensions.

Expanding the dimensional framework of migration infrastructures?

Reflecting on the conceptual implications of these differences, we posit, firstly, that the varying intersections of infrastructural dimensions across the Asian and West African empirical examples testify to the overall analytical value of this approach. To the extent that the Ghanaian and Burkinabe cases are captured by the notion of infrastructure, these intersectional differences enable comparative insights into central – and diverging – spheres of mediation of migration. We have also seen, however, that the migration infrastructure approach may need some conceptual adjustment to capture central aspects of West African migration practices. Given the centrality of the social imaginaries (Taylor 2002) of circular migration in many West African contexts, we would argue that a *cultural* dimension of migration infrastructure might be added to account for

the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (Taylor 2002: 106)

The centrality of social imaginaries is reflected explicitly in the central role of the socio-cultural institution of *tutorat* in the Ivorian context, which cannot be reduced to the social connections it entails, but is rather a more elaborate cultural schema that orients the aspirations, conduct, and obligations of Burkinabe labour migrants and thereby mediates their migration in significant ways. In Ghana, the belief in and practice of migration as a pathway to a better life and self-improvement also constitute a significant social imaginary that underpins mobility practices and future-making. Similar idioms extend to the idealised expectations of circular migration within as well as beyond the African continent in many parts of West Africa.

Complicating the role of migrant agency in migration infrastructures

As a second conceptual implication, in line with Simone's notion of people as infrastructure and similar studies on urban infrastructuring 'from below', we argue that the migration infrastructures approach runs the risk of underestimating or obscuring the ways in which migrants and other actors make alternative uses of existing infrastructures. Broadly speaking, what may often end up facilitating the movement of people cannot be reduced to the planned or intended uses or effects of infrastructural dimensions – not even, we would argue, in cases where such structures are highly institutionalised. In our West African empirical cases, where the regulatory dimension of migration infrastructures tends to be less prominent, we have argued that social networks as well as cultural idioms of how and where to move in effect become central in an informal regulation of mobility. At the same time, the distinction between formal and informal regulation should not be overstated, as actors may also make use of formal structures in unpredictable and improvisational ways. The use of



recruitment agencies or tourist visas, for instance, does not necessarily imply that migrants follow prescribed or formal ways of moving, working or staying. Likewise, it does not prevent migrants from combining the activities entailed by their officially recognised status with other engagements; such as undocumented work or the pursuit of intimate relationships that may generate further possibilities. Furthermore, formal infrastructures are not immune to the manipulation of identification documents or work permits, which implies that formal structures may become complicit in facilitating activities or movements beyond their intended purposes. From the point of view of migrants and their social networks, these activities and possibilities are enabled because of, not in spite of, the overlaps and synergies between formal and informal spheres. Agency is thereby re-inscribed in the mediation of migration and hence in how migration infrastructures actually work.

As the above reflections and case studies indicate, the absence of formal migration infrastructure does not imply the absence of migration and its mediation. Rather, they demonstrate that various migration infrastructure dimensions are shaped by contexts of conflict, securitisation and militarisation, and maybe even thrive *because of* the delimited access to authorized migration routes and state-sanctioned brokerage. The fact that migration to Libya has been ongoing despite restrictive Libyan (and European) immigration policies and increasing militarisation is a poignant example. This observation warrants caution in assuming a direct causal link between the intended role(s) of migration infrastructures and their actual usage or effects. This caution is especially pertinent in contexts characterised by low degrees of institutionalised, and the predominance of more socially mediated, assemblages of infrastructural dimensions.

Rescaling the politics of migration infrastructures

As the discussion of informality and intentionality in the previous section implies, the politics of infrastructure do not just concern the (planned) political effects of migration infrastructures. When migration is politicised in national and international public discourse and regulatory legislation, (identity) politics take an infrastructural and restructuring role, e.g. by bringing particular routes, groups, and actors into normative relief. One example of this overall political framing of infrastructural processes would be the politicisation of so-called “smuggling” infrastructures during the 2015 refugee crisis, whereby considerable attention and resources were redirected towards certain routes and actors. By rendering such mediation of migration legible and normatively exposed, these shifts in the tone and priorities of international migration governance entailed a rescaling of migration infrastructures into “suprastructures” (Trovalla and Trovalla 2015). This “superstructuring” implies that mediation of migration through “smuggling” was no longer “naturalised as taken-for-granted systems” (cf. Lin et al. 2017) – insofar as such activities were naturalised prior to 2015 – but rather the centre of intensified political and legislative attention. The fact that rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean is increasingly criminalised as human smuggling emphasises



this politicisation as well as it highlights the ambiguities of the humanitarian infrastructure dimension.

The migration infrastructure approach gains much of its merit from its focus on the “internal constitution and modular components of migration” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014: S132) – in the nuts and bolts of migration regulation rather than its effects, as we already discussed above. Nevertheless, as a third conceptual implication, we argue that the regulatory dimension of migration infrastructure might be less useful for teasing out the relationship between migration governance and hegemonic power structures, as it runs the risk of depoliticising these overarching dimensions. In a situation where the governance and regulation of migration is dominating political agendas in Europe and many other places, it is pertinent that our analytical frameworks take such perspectives into account.

6. Concluding remarks

In this working paper, we have explored the analytical value of the concept of migration infrastructure by relating this conceptual framework to the West African cases with which we are most familiar. By reflecting on the empirical specificity of the cases that have informed the work of Xiao and Lindquist, and by adding conceptual nuances on the basis of our own research and that of other work on African experiences of migrant and urban infrastructures, we have suggested some limitations to the concept, in particular in relation to the role of agency, social imaginaries of migration and the (de)politicisation of migration. Likewise, we have alluded to the ambiguities of the so-called humanitarian dimension where actors and operations may be intertwined, and sometimes in collusion, with the regulatory and commercial dimensions. Indeed we may consider a more apt designation for this dimension to avoid connotations of human rights advocacy, neutrality or doing no-harm’. Again, this emphasises the need to incorporate analysis of the political implications and underpinnings of migration infrastructure.

Our discussion also highlights the explanatory power of a migration infrastructure approach. Here we emphasise its value in comparative analysis. As we hope to have demonstrated, highlighting the differentiated intersections of infrastructural dimensions sheds light on the considerable variations in the mediation of migration across different empirical contexts. The central methodological value of a migration infrastructure approach, we believe, is its attention to the intersectionality of multiple infrastructural dimensions when studying the mediation of migration. Its contribution does not replace research focussing on a singular dimension – be it migration industries, regimes of mobility or social networks. Yet the virtue of bringing these dimensions into an overall analytical framework is exactly to examine their interconnections and intersections, whether within a single case study or across geographical and political contexts.

For instance, the degree of formal migration brokerage between East Asia and West Africa stands out. Broadly speaking, the close intertwining of state-sanctioned regulatory and commercial migration infrastructure dimensions is striking in the East Asian cases



while West Africa is characterised by a low degree of formal brokerage as well as long-established practices of informal and culturally embedded mobility patterns and mediation. Likewise, we have demonstrated that conflict shapes migration infrastructure dimensions in terms of which actors emerge and thrive, and how they operate and intersect. Indeed, attention to conflict, insecurity, and lawlessness is pertinent when analysing overland migration towards and into North Africa, bringing corrupt authorities, national and EU-stationed border patrols, violent gangs and other actors into the migration infrastructure or migration equation, whether they are state-sanctioned or not – or perhaps situated in a blurry place in between.

The West African examples considered here, have pointed to several ways in which the migration infrastructures approach may be refined and/or expanded to accommodate a broader variation in the structures and actors that enable and restrict migration across empirical cases.



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