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Reframing urban development politics: Transcalarity in sovereign, developmental and private circuits

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Abstract
This paper develops the idea of transcalarity to reframe analyses of urban development politics. Our analysis starts from African contexts but is relevant to, and in conversation with, experiences on other continents. Accounts of the politics of urban development have rarely benefitted from the experiences of African urban settings. Characterised by relatively weakly resourced municipalities, informality of the urban setting and of the state, and highly transnationalised forms of governance, African experiences may seem to stand out as profoundly different from those which have informed dominant theorisations of urban development politics. And yet, it is across the African continent that a substantial portion of the world's new, future urban areas are being made, providing strong grounds for theorising urban development politics starting from the diversity of experiences across the continent. Evidence from current research and long-term observations in three African urban contexts (Lilongwe, Accra and Dar es Salaam) indicate that inherited conceptualisations vastly overestimate the resources and agency of municipal government in many urban contexts and omit the enhanced institutional interests of national actors in urban development. Also, the range of international actors considered has been analytically restricted or mischaracterised, as global sovereign and developmental actors play a powerful role while significant private sector interests may not be very international. More generally, 'circulating' processes and actors might not be 'external' as, especially in relation to developmental and sovereign circuits, these are often embedded in and contribute to shaping emergent transcalar territorial networks co-ordinating investment in different contexts.

Keywords
African urban politics, circuits, developmental investment, financing urban development, national governments in urban development, sovereign investments, urban development politics

摘要

本论文拓展了跨尺度的概念，重新构建对城市发展政治的分析。我们的分析虽然是始于非洲本土的情况，但它与其他大洲的经验也相关，并与之进行对话。关于城市发展政治的叙述很少从非洲城市环境的相关经验中获益。非洲的城市以其资源相对薄弱，城市环境和政府的非正规性，及高度跨国化的治理形式为特征，非洲的经验似乎与那些反映城市发展政治主导理论的经验截然不同。然而，正是在非洲大陆上，世界上很大一部分新兴的、未来的城市区域正在建设中，这为从整个非洲大陆经验的多样性出发，对城市发展政治进行理论化提供了坚实的基础。对三个非洲城市环境（利隆圭、阿克拉和达累斯萨拉姆）目前进行的研究和长期观察所得到的证据表明，以往传统概念理论大大高估市政府在许多城市环境中的资源和能动性，忽略国家行为者在城市发展中日渐增强的体制利益。此外，我们所考虑的国际行为体的范围在分析时受到了限制或被错误定性，因为全球主权和开发方发挥着强大的作用，而重要私营部门的兴趣可能不是非常国际化。
更笼统地来说，“循环”过程和行为体可能不是“外部”的，特别是在有关发展和主权回路方面，这些过程和行为体通常扎根并有助于塑造新兴的跨尺度的地域网络，协调不同背景下的投资。

关键词

非洲城市政治、回路、发展投资、城市发展融资、国家政府在城市发展中的作用、主权投资、城市发展政治

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Introduction

Characterised by weakly resourced municipalities, and the intermittent implementation of political decentralisation and financial devolution, African experiences fit poorly into much of the urban development politics literature which emphasises municipal scale agency (Cox and Mair, 1988; Harvey, 1989; Peck et al., 2009). However, they provide valuable insights into the nature of urban development politics in an era when urban policy and urban development financing are both associated with globally circulating processes (Guironnet and Halbert, 2023; Theodore and Peck, 2024). In this paper we present evidence from current research and long-term observations in three African urban contexts – Lilongwe (Malawi), Accra (Ghana) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) – indicating how we can extend the repertoire of urban political analysis beyond inherited conceptualisations. Specifically, we focus on the transcalarity of urban politics, with closer attention to the place of international and national actors in shaping the emergent (territorial) political formations associated with urban developments.

Growth machine politics, a prominent US-based model, speaks to the alignment of locally dependent interests of embedded capital, municipal governments with strongly territorialised revenue streams, and an electorate concerned with locality and jobs, all looking to circulating capital to secure investment (Cox and Mair, 1988; Harvey, 1989). The more politically nuanced regime theory uncovers the relationships amongst locally dependent actors, including attending to the informal and opaque arrangements which support longer term local growth trajectories. (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989; Ward, 1996). Municipal actors remain a central focus here, although efforts to internationalise regime theory (Kantor et al., 1997) stressed the important role of national politics and international economic regimes in framing the possibilities of local development politics (Harding, 1994). The varying role of local government in different regional and national contexts has been an important theme (Brenner, 2019; Cox, 2017; Le Galès, 2002; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020; Wu, 2020) and has been identified as a focus for further comparative research (Therborn, 2024). African urban development experiences are well placed to inform this discussion, especially given the central role of national as opposed to local governments in urban development in many African contexts and the presence of a diversity of international actors (Cirolia and Harber, 2022; Croese, 2018; Gastrow, 2020).

More recent analyses of urban development politics focus on the circulation of finance, policies and practices aligned with powerful international interests, including advocates of neoliberal policies and financialised capital (Aalbers, 2017; Peck et al., 2009; McCann and Ward, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2015). This has been very influenced by research on policy mobilities. Attention to the complex interface between transnational circulations and localised policy formulation has generated a vibrant and innovative range of insights concerning the diverse urban outcomes of such circulations (Porto de Oliviera, 2017; Wood, 2015). The concept of 'variegation' highlights the close mutual shaping of urban politics and these wider processes (Peck and Theodore, 2007), informing, for example, propositions about a putative 'green structural adjustment' motivated to enhance resilience and bankability at the city scale in lower income countries (Bigger and Webber, 2021). Focussing on the materialities, topologies and emergent formations of policy across different entities and actors has contributed theoretical agility to understanding this complex interface (Lane, 2022; Prince, 2012; Robinson, 2015). Also, the role of international networking and platforms, and a diversity of policy agendas beyond neoliberalisation – developmental agendas and climate change, for example – has expanded the scope of urban development politics (Acuto, 2013; Bulkeley, 2010; Lauermann, 2018; Parnell, 2016; Peyroux, 2018). More generally, changing international rule regimes, pan-urban political economic processes, and a complex institutional landscape of policy formulation including international and regional bodies like the OECD or UN organisations, frame the flows of urban policy and politics (Theodore and Peck, 2024).

Both these foci in the study of urban development politics – municipal government, and mobilities of policies and finance – tend to overestimate the resources and agency (or potential agency) of municipal government in many urban contexts (Cirolia and Harber, 2022; Harding, 1994). There has been relatively little attention paid to the institutional interests of national actors in urban development (Cox, 2017; Brenner, 2019; Shatkin, 2022), as compared to in international political economy and development studies where national government actors are the main focus of attention (Hickey, 2023). Crucially, the range of international actors considered in both models has been analytically restricted, largely focussed on capitalist investors rather than on developmental and sovereign investors which include, for example, international donors, multilateral development bodies, diplomatic and aid agencies, state-owned enterprises, sovereign wealth funds or quasi-state asset funds. Many urban environments are shaped by the combined and intersecting activities of private sector, developmental and sovereign actors (Büdenbender and Golubchikov, 2017; Moser et al., 2022; van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018) – and this is very evident across the African continent. We refer to these as different 'circuits' of investment in urban development. These different circuits are shaped by a diversity of actors, relationships and spatialities which have been little considered in the study of urban development politics.

Informed by our detailed empirical research in three African urban contexts, we propose 'transcalarity' as an alternative starting point for analysis of urban development politics which can address these omissions and dynamics. In doing so, we turn to Ludovic Halbert and Hortense Rouanet's concept of 'transcalar territorial networks' which they use 'to explain how resources from multiple horizons are pulled together in a given business property development, from a fixed plot of land to capital allocated in distant investment committee boardrooms.' (Halbert and Rouanet, 2014: 481). The formulation, 'transcalar territorial networks', draws attention, from the perspective of the specific territories of development, to the complex relationships amongst different actors with varying spatial reach drawn together to shape urban development projects (Robinson et al., 2022). Importantly, they emphasise the role of 'local' actors and national governmental and regulatory contexts in making 'global' circulations and shaping transnational actors.

Taking inspiration from nine different cases of (relatively) large-scale urban developments across three African cities, we seek to reformulate analyses of the politics of urban development to better account for African contexts – and to generate productive insights for other contexts. In each of the three case study cities, our research considered individual projects or clusters of projects, across what we have called three different 'circuits' of financing, policy and technical inputs: 'sovereign' (external government-led investment, country-to-country aid, and activities of state-owned enterprises), 'developmental' (projects which form part of the wider international development and aid infrastructure, including for example the World Bank, regional organisations, philanthropic and multi-agency projects), and 'private' (direct and financialised investments by international and national private sector actors). Our methods were similar in each case, relying on detailed document analysis, in-depth interviews with key informants (20–30 interviews per case), site visits and participant observation especially in relation to community activities.

Following a discussion in the first section of the paper about the potential to learn from African urban experiences, and a justification for reframing urban development politics as transcalar, the paper presents insights from each of these circuits in turn, highlighting:

- how international development actors are deeply embedded in emergent territorial formations of urban policy and urban development politics;
- the role of national government actors in negotiating sovereign investments in urban development, even when powerful external actors are involved; and
- the ways in which many different actors and institutions are involved in the arrangements which produce private financial flows into urban developments.

Rather than seeing circulations as variegated in their interaction with local formations, our evidence suggests that the 'circuits' shaping urban development are better understood topologically as transcalar arrangements of actors, territories, policies and practices. We introduce the logic or circuit board as a metaphor for how the flows and investments associated with urban development are produced through such transcalar arrangements. A focus on these arrangements might usefully replace the metaphors of scale and variegation. Amongst these various actors and arrangements, the role of central government actors in urban development comes sharply into view across all three circuits. However, our cases also highlight the diverse interests and concerns of state actors, posing some questions as to the relevance of the concept of 'state' in urban development politics and leading us to draw on African studies concepts of 'negotiated statehood' (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010) and to interrogate the empirical interests of state actors (Bayart, 2009). The paper also has implications for international policy initiatives, notably concerning the role of national governments in undermining international development policy goals to capacitate local government in relation to the 'urban turn' (Croese and Parnell, 2022). First, the paper establishes the grounds for conversations across African and wider urban contexts about the politics of urban development.

Starting in African contexts: Conversations across diversity

Writing of 'African Dreams' of infrastructure investments anticipated to flow in the wake of the SDGs, Pieterse et al. (2018: 4) note that the underlying 'demographic reality, that an increasingly large proportion of the world's urban population lives in Africa, is also driving a southern rethinking of cities that makes African urbanists more central to the collective act of urban theorising than they may have been in the past'. They pose the potential limits of learning from this context for other regions – 'deep poverty, immense infrastructure backlogs, weak capacity and a shortage of money make it very difficult to compare the material issues of urban development in, say, Kinshasa with those of Sydney or Zurich' and note that 'the same can be said for comparative studies of African cities, with differences in scale, extent and context all challenging broad generalisations of the African city' (Pieterse et al., 2018). In this paper we are eager, like others, to take on these challenges (Bekker and Fourchard, 2013; Cardoso, 2022; Potts, 2020).

Comparative urbanism opens perspectives across the urban world. On the one hand these can emerge along the capillary interconnections of a globalising economy, whether this is to track globalised circuits of investment and policy or to follow the informal traders and circuits of goods which compose transnational urban territories. On the other hand, there is vast potential for analytical thinking and concept generation across the diverse urban world, learning from one context to another (Robinson, 2022; Ward, 2010). In developing these comparative tactics, we seek to avoid the spatial delimitations of 'global South' perspectives, which gloss over the prolific interdependencies of cities across the globe (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020). We are also eager to open accounts of poorer cities beyond developmentalism so as not to foreclose on certain analytical insights or political dynamics (Pieterse et al., 2018) – for example, the desire to capacitate local government can divert attention from closer interrogation of the actually existing spatialities of urban politics in which central government actors can play a determining role. In this paper we draw on African case studies to highlight the role of putatively international and national government actors as pivotal in the emergent transcalar political formations associated with urban development. These insights can both benefit from and contribute to understandings of urban development politics in different contexts, thinking from difference and diversity beyond a 'global South' imagination.

We take as our lens on urban politics large-scale, or contextually substantial, developments. Evident in so many urban contexts, these form valuable grounds for building comparative insights on urban politics. Large-scale developments have shared features involving complex governance arrangements (multi-actor, multi-jurisdictional), challenges of financing, and extended time scales as well as significant impacts on urban form and social and spatial inequalities. Set alongside each other in comparative analysis, a variety of forms of governance come into view across cases, extending the range of actors, and how they might be understood, in urban development politics (Robinson et al., 2022; Shatkin, 2017).

In probing these actors through our three case study contexts, it is evident that transcalar relationships contribute to the formation of apparently 'scalar' actors and that interactions amongst actors operating across 'scales' bring forward urban development (see also Hönke et al., 2023). This includes: international actors with a long presence and embeddedness in specific contexts which subsequently shape their broader policy agendas; close and formally required interactions between international and national government actors; national government actors gouging out local government capacity to strengthen their own scope for engagement in urban developments; the agency of international private investors reshaping national government practices to create opportunities for investment; and communities and agile municipal officials negotiating, opposing and navigating impacts across government and transnational actors. Halbert and Rouanet's (2014) account of 'filtering risk away' for global capital investors in Bangalore's lucrative business park, commercial and real estate markets, shows how a range of different actors are crucial in enabling the circulation and fixing of capital in the built environment, from farmers, to agile real estate 'fixers' and regional developers and including financialised investors for whom property is a semi-liquid asset in a portfolio of investments looking for long-term and reliable returns to support pension funds. 'Global' actors' agency in specific contexts, they insist, is made up through these diverse actors:

> 'Thus, it is contended that TTNs [transcalar territorial networks] are more than just an adaptation to finance capital and may be as much a necessary component of finance capital fixation as, for instance, the deregulation of foreign direct investments (FDIs) at national and international levels (Halbert and Rouanet, 2014: 481).

The need to think urban development politics across 'scales' or beyond a scalar imagination has been probed from different theoretical perspectives. A generally 'relational' account of urban development politics, attentive to wider flows and co-creation of development outcomes across different contexts is of course helpful (Raco et al., 2023). Neil Brenner (2019) addresses this more systematically in his paper, 'Urban Growth Machines—But at What Scale?'. He directs closer attention to 'national' state space and territorial regulation in the politics of urban development. For example, the characteristic US-style growth machine politics is deeply enmeshed in the wider national and transnational spatialities of urban policy and investment; and the autonomy of local government itself is defined through national political regulations. Leitner and Sheppard (2020) propose an inter-urban comparative approach that takes into account horizontal (inter-urban but also rural–urban), vertical (inter-scalar) and transnational spatiotemporal relations. They articulate this within a framing of 'general' or shared, wider processes such as 'globalisation, neoliberal global urbanism and finance dominated accumulation' (pp. 498–499) as well as 'spatially and temporally specific particularities' (p. 499). They see the 'general' and the 'particular' as 'relationally constituted across scales, rather than forming a nested hierarchy whereby local particularities are enframed by larger-scale generalities' (p. 498).

Through our cases we have been drawn to develop this further to explore the political formations and power relationships which emerge in the course of urban development as a result of transcalar entanglements across a diversity of circuits, processes and actors. We ground this on a treatment of the urban as 'space', in all its fullness and complexity (Robinson, 2022, Chapter 8). Any urban territory is then seen as 'specific', distinctive and not interpreted as a 'particular' in relation to a pre-existing 'general' but rather as a component of world-wide urbanisation processes (Schmid, 2024). Working from specificity means new processes neglected by existing analyses might then come into view – the importance of developmental and sovereign circuits, for example. Thinking from specificity, thinking spatially, is to generate concepts from the diversity of urban experiences rather than assume pre-existing generalities (Robinson, 2022, Chapter 6). And thinking the urban as 'space' insists that all 'scales' (or levels, to follow Lefebvre) are co-present in urban reality (Schmid, 2022), avoiding the analytical gymnastics of conjunctural spirals, metaphors of verticality or spatially extended (and restricted) conjunctures (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020; Peck, 2017).

From this perspective, starting with the territories of urban development, it is the arrangements of actors, institutions and materialities which initiate and sustain flows. We do not assume that 'circulating' actors or phenomena arrive preconstituted or are simply hybridised locally (Aalbers, 2024; Van Loon et al., 2019). Circuits are thus intricate ensembles of elements, flows and relationships – transcalar arrangements of actors, territories, policies and practices which actively produce the actors, interests, flows and investments that shape urban development. In this sense, circuits only exist as a circuitry – what sets things on the move. What enables an investment are the complex relations and arrangements which secure territory and enable speculation (Bear, 2020). This shifts attention from a tension between global flows/circulations and 'local' territories to an appreciation of the materiality of the processes that produce what seem to be 'circuits' – how policies, investments and practices are invented, drawn in, made up and put on the move in the formulation of particular projects, and in relation to their wider contexts (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Jacobs, 2006; Pinson, 2009). Borrowing from the work of Allen (2016), the notion of an urban development 'circuit' or 'logic' board helps to move us 'beyond territories and networks' to appreciate the ways in which particular arrangements of actors, agendas and logics allow investment-led urbanisation to move forward. Rather than 'following things' (money, actors, resources, ideas) as they journey around the world, the idea of the circuit board directs attention to the value of interrogating territorialised processes which initiate, shape and direct the 'flows' they are part of, and appreciating how various components come to be connected together, constituted also by the spatial arrangements of urban territories. Money, people, materials – these certainly 'move', but the composition of any given urban territory, or urban development project, can also be seen as a 'drawing in', an organisation and co-ordination of many different actors, phenomena and processes with different reaches and spatialities (Robinson, 2015). This is more an arrangement of relationships often best thought of topologically, to follow John Allen, than a 'circuit' which arrives, hits the ground and is changed, somehow. For example, actors from different jurisdictions might be embedded in a shared territory, effectively 'lifted out' of one physical context through arrangements which create relations of proximity and presence elsewhere.

Altogether, we suggest that the theoretical categories with which urban development politics has been interpreted so far need closer interrogation – and that we might as well begin in African contexts, which are not so much 'deviant' or 'particular' as components of global urbanisation and potentially sites of the production of core theoretical terms in their own right (Schmid et al., 2018). They are places from where insights might well be generated which are helpful to revise or replace concepts related to widely shared phenomena or processes (Robinson, 2022, Chapter 11). In the case studies we present here, thinking from specificity brings into view the transcalarity of urban development politics, hopefully introducing new insights for others to reflect on in relation to their contexts. We now turn to each of the three 'circuits' – developmental, sovereign and private – to consider the transcalar nature of the power relations which frame urban development.

Embedded agency in developmental circuits

In developmentally focussed circuits of investment the relationships amongst actors in central governments and international development agencies come most quickly into view, although a range of other actors including local consultants and affected communities, as well as the path dependent formations of communities of practice in planning, also contribute to forming an arena of transcalar politics (Healey, 2007; Croese and Kombe, 2024). Despite this, conventions direct international developmental actors to focus their formal activities on sustained engagements with central government ministries and leaders of governments.

Indeed, a central paradox of international developmental practice is that while the dominant circulating international policy discourse emphasises the decentralisation of governance, and notably so in the wake of the SDG Urban goal (Parnell, 2016), in general terms actual developmental practice systematically strengthens national government relative to the sub-national. The reason for this is to some extent rooted in post-colonial anxiety around the impact of development aid on national sovereignty. National governments have tried to realise in practice the sovereignty they were formally granted with independence while developmental agencies nonetheless sought to use the disbursement of aid to influence national governments towards (changing) conceptions of good developmental practice. Jostling over the competing objectives of national and international agencies continues but established protocols have emerged over time. In the wake of the intense criticism of multilateral agencies for imposing structural adjustment programmes on African countries in the 1980s, the development aid terrain was renegotiated, leading to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, 2005 and the Accra Agenda for Action, 2008 which committed donor agencies to respecting national policies and plans, and to aligning their processes with national processes, in return for recipient country commitments to global goals including gender equality, human rights and environmental protection (World Bank, 2005; OECD, 2008).

Certainly, there remain huge asymmetries in the relationships between donor agencies and recipient countries, with frequent compliance by lip service only, as well as numerous unintended consequences of this well-intended framework. One of these concerns the emphasis on national ownership of policy initiative and investments, making central governments the formally mandated anchor for negotiating aid and concessional loans. This has the potential for sub-national governments to be deeply marginalised within these processes, as all of our case studies confirm. Within this overarching dilemma, however, we have observed significant complexity in practice. Looking beyond the formal relationship between international agencies and national government representatives, a range of other more informal relationships shape development outcomes, including those built between international development actors, local consultants, affected communities and local officials. Some aid agencies have long term relationships with a wide range of sub-national in-country actors (Croese and Miyauchi, 2023), and may be deeply embedded with and reliant on local knowledge communities in alliances which have been forged over decades (Croese and Kombe, 2024; Kopiński and Sun, 2014). In our case-studies, we noted the diverse, pragmatic relationships which emerge in the course of conventionally mandated negotiations with international actors. The often obscured roles of a diversity of actors are evident in the course of these negotiations and resultant activities; but also the non-official motivations and interests of governmental actors can be identified. In addition to national governmental concerns with addressing problems of economic and urban development, for example, state actors often seek to leverage their role in negotiating international development to expand their own departments or agencies, to benefit themselves as individuals or to strengthen their own networks, electoral parties or other institutions. Local political systems (actually existing rather than formal) and entrenched interests, forms of corruption and clientelism can therefore shape the outcomes of developmental (and other) circuits. Urban development and infrastructure projects are often closely enmeshed with routinised informal and exceptional modes of securing access to land and associated opportunities for value capture and rent seeking.

Two major World Bank projects aimed at addressing flood resilience and urban services in Accra and Dar es Salaam draw attention to some of these dynamics: the Greater Accra Resilient and Integrated Development project (GARID) highlights the agency of central government actors in shaping developmental investments; and the Dar es Salaam Metropolitan Development Project (DMDP), including the Msimbazi River Basin Opportunity Project (MOP), indicates how 'transnational' actors can be closely embedded in particular urban and national contexts.

In the Accra case,[1] a World Bank-funded USD200 million initiative to address flooding in the Odaw River basin in central areas of Accra grew out of a strong desire amongst government actors and residents to find an effective way to respond to dangerous and regular flooding (Sheburah Essien et al., forthcoming). The 2015 floods, which led to the deaths of 150 people, provided a motivation for government actors to seek to initiate a new approach to flooding where previous efforts had failed. The main reasons for this have been seen as a lack of effective integration across different ministries and sectors, and the reliance on contractors to pre-finance their activities with long waits for government payments disrupting delivery. Government efforts to find support from partners and international agencies to respond to this crisis resonated with initiatives being taken by some World Bank actors at the time, concerned with flooding and resilience in relation to climate change. An initiative to analyse the Accra flood problems, from which lending might flow (Analytical Based Lending), drew on an analytical tool, City Strength Diagnostics, which had been developed within World Bank circles and was being implemented in other contexts. However, its use in Accra involved numerous Ghanaian experts and government officials from a number of relevant ministries alongside international consultants – there are three pages of thanks in the report, citing local experts and officials (World Bank, 2017: vii–ix). One key informant noted how numerous government actors participated in the co-evolution of the GARID project, providing information, reviewing reports and attending meetings 'through the conceptualization to the development of the project [GARID] itself' (Interview, Government official, Accra, 24 October 2022). Subsequently led by a senior Accra-based Ghanaian consultant with long development and scholarly experience in the area, the GARID initiative involves many different actors working closely together to try and break some of the logjams that have prevented finding a solution in the past, despite (or because) there are so many different bodies and actors with expertise, funding and responsibility for flood control. The powerful role of national government actors is evident, then, in their initiation of a response to the flood, negotiating the terms of the World Bank funding for the resulting project, GARID, and its implementation.

Characteristic here and across all our case studies is the competitive fragmentation of government initiatives, and the porosity of state and personal interests. Four different national ministries jostled for position in overseeing the financing, development and planning of the project, making for a top heavy and dispersed implementation agency. Also, as expected, local governments played no role in the initial negotiations and only a very limited role in the design and construction phases of the projects, although they are responsible for co-ordinating and overseeing long term maintenance of infrastructure (a largely unfunded mandate). However, the presence and interests of a variety of different actors invariably intrude into the development process, obliging international and central government actors to engage local reality and agency, or to risk the failure of the project by not doing so. In this regard, the GARID project faces a key threat. A central element of the project – large retention ponds designed to temporarily hold flood waters – has been derailed by encroachments on the government land earmarked for them, which has reduced their water holding capacity during flood events from 2.4 million cubic metres of water to only 1.1 million cubic metres (Interview, GARID Project Co-ordination Unit (PCU) 16, 14 July 2023). The encroachers include individuals, developers and faith-based groups who have managed to acquire leases to the land, through customary, (informal) state or private processes within the context of Accra's deeply entrenched and conflictual processes of land allocation (Aryeetey et al., 2007; Grant et al., 2019; Owusu, 2008). Despite intense lobbying, and USD200 million of loan money being at stake, the entwining of traditional forms of legitimacy and customary access to land (Paller, 2019) means that government actors have been unwilling to address these irregularities, creating a major limitation on the planned programme. The project team are trying to bring the project forward by 'designing out' any pockets of resistance or encroachment (Interview, GARID PCU1, 30 October 2023).

Thus, even as international donors (and sovereign investors) make immense efforts to de-risk, ringfence and control financial flows in development projects (Chasukwa and Banik, 2019), a range of political and urban dynamics are able to reconfigure the outcomes of investments. However, as in this case, this often favours those with influence and protection from national government actors.

The Dar es Salaam Metropolitan Development Project[2] demonstrates how the 'developmental circuit' and 'transnational actors' can be deeply locally embedded. Thus, an initiative that is seen as a 'World Bank' project carries with it experiences, agendas and analyses which have been produced by an emerging 'community of practice' over a long period of time. The World Bank's current urban projects in Tanzania come in the wake of a long stream of urban projects, in both metropolitan areas and secondary cities. As the first four-year phase of an Urban Local Government Strengthening Programme was coming to an end in 2008 (in practice extended until 2011 and officially completed in 2012), the Bank started preparing and rolling out a series of further projects with a specific focus on urban development. By 2015 it had established a 'robust urban program' for governance reform which was 'financing infrastructure and institutional strengthening in the country's entire urban system of 30 cities and towns' (World Bank, 2021: 7). All the projects implemented in this period – amounting to a combined US$ 1 billion in concessional loans – were subsequently renewed. Bank officials reflect on this transition with pride: 'a country which went from only rural projects, only human development projects, to now focusing on urban projects. There's a major change. It's a very big change' (Interview, World Bank (WB) official Dar es Salaam (DAR) 2, 4 May 2022). 'I mean, I don't want to attribute it all to like the work of the World Bank. But I will say that we had massive influence' (WB official Dar, 10 August 2022). In doing so, Tanzania came to represent the Bank's 'flagship urban programme in Africa', 'a portfolio that other countries aspired to' (Interview, WB official Dar, 10 August 2022).

The DMDP, implemented between 2015 and 2022, with some ongoing elements, aimed to improve urban services through urban infrastructure upgrading and development and institutional capacity strengthening. An important feature of the DMDP, as with the GARID initiative, is the powerful role of national government actors in negotiating, defining, supporting and implementing the project, but also in derailing the project.

National government recalcitrance to support key elements of the DMDP programme concerning local governmental capacity building became starkly evident during the regime of President Magufuli. As one local planner noted, 'we wanted to review the management structure of the city, of the entire Dar es Salaam. That was one of the [project indicators]. It was dropped by the President when he didn't even want to start it' (Interview, Planner (PLAN) DAR 12, 8 April 2022). Instead, the existing metropolitan scale government was dismantled, with the effect of concentrating urban governmental capacity in national government agencies. Additionally, during the course of the DMDP, new national government bodies were established which inserted themselves as key reference points for elements of the programme and captured local government finances. As consultants to World Bank projects noted, new roads and tax revenue agencies have been established which now collect property tax revenues and manage new funds for road investments, previously intended for local authorities. The DMDP therefore has no choice but to work with these new authorities although 'they don't know anything about local finance and governance' (Interview, WB consultant, 21 April 2022). One informant commented that 'most of the revenues from our local authorities now is directed to the central government. You find that to some extent the local authorities, despite the fact that they have collected a lot of money, but they have remained very unpowerful' (Interview, PLANDAR 11, 24 August 2022).

In the long term, though, key actors suggest that the ambition for institutional strengthening remains on the agenda. The sustained commitment to urban-related projects by the World Bank and other development agencies has produced a wide community of practice and policy in which metropolitan governance is seen as crucial: 'leaders recognize that major changes are required to improve the metropolitan planning and governance arrangements for the burgeoning region', suggesting extensive buy in for such changes from the local authorities and planning community (World Bank, 2014). In the meantime, the navigation of these complex political environments sees international development actors working within the parameters of 'actually existing' power relations, conscious of the compromises needed with national government actors as their key development partner to bring forward what are often much-needed investments.

For the two coastal cities we studied, the coming challenges of climate change, and dangerous flooding already induced by lack of planning and infrastructure, certainly provide an incentive to invest in sustainable and resilient urban development. The pivotal relationship in the initiation and negotiation of these projects is between international and national government actors which have undermined local government involvement in development processes despite the rhetoric to the contrary, with no evidence of local government reformatting or 'green structural adjustment' of cities (Bigger and Webber, 2021). But as these two cases demonstrate, programme and project outcomes are nevertheless powerfully shaped by a much wider array of actors within transcalar processes (Kanai and Schindler, 2019). This includes transnational professional networks of officials, locally based and international professionals and consultants who provide potent embedded knowledge and continuity in city based programmes, and fill the gap where there are incapacitated local government authorities. It also includes the many governmental and other actors with stakes in land, who have the power to frustrate the intentions of development projects.

Negotiated circuits of sovereign investment

Sovereign circuits of investment also privilege national government actors as these are government to government arrangements, and are at least partly underpinned by the strategic and geopolitical goals or motivations of a foreign government.[3] And yet, while the intentions and interests of external sovereign actors are a powerful driver, and there are consequential asymmetries in power relations between external sovereign and national government actors, sovereign investments always require active negotiation between two sets of government actors. We identify the major instruments of sovereign circuit investment as including: grants as a form of Official Development Assistance (ODA); concessional loans or other forms of fiscal assistance such as guarantees and export credits (as a form of ODA); technical assistance and knowledge exchange (as a form of ODA); commercial (non-concessional) loans by foreign state-owned financial institutions; portfolio investments by a Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF); and activities in a host country by a State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) such as the contracting of professional services or civil works. Bilateral ODA is mainly channelled through development agencies, or Development Financing Institutions (DFIs) which are constructed similarly to multilateral agencies,[4] and these DFIs generally subscribe to the principles of the Paris Declaration and Paris Accord, requiring them to promote the 'national ownership' of aid. They thus operate in terms of established protocols of engagement with national governments in recipient countries, which again has the effect of strengthening the role of national governments relative to sub-national government institutions, and other actors. The negotiations concerning investments often also involve supra national and regional associations, including multilateral discussions between China and the African Union within the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), with similar structures shaping other sovereign flows including the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) and the Korea Africa Forum (KAF) (Van Staden et al., 2018).

Investment in the sovereign sector always requires a complex negotiation of objectives and benefits between the two sets of government actors. It involves multiple sensitivities around respect for the national sovereignty of the recipient countries, and for the domestic politics and reputational risks faced by both countries. Donor countries have geopolitical and economic interests in implementing ODA programmes, with these drivers often jostling for priority and varying in relative significance. When political drivers dominate there is more likely to be symbolic investments without strong economic purpose (e.g. the Korean-financed Tanzanite bridge in Dar es Salaam which is highly visible but services a small elite community); and when economic drivers dominate, investment is likely to be in infrastructure such as rail and ports which will enable further economic opportunities associated with minerals or agriculture, or in projects that would benefit firms from the donor country. China offers an interesting example of vacillating priorities in development aid, reflected in the changing institutional responsibilities for overseeing aid. As economic objectives eclipsed ideological factors in the reform era, the PRC's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) took on a growing co-ordinating role in terms of ODA. But under President Xi Jinping's assertive leadership, geopolitical considerations resurfaced, with ODA motivated by a complex mix of economic, political and security related motivations. This is evident in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but also in the shift in the coordinating role for ODA from MOFCOM to the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) which was formed in 2018 and reports directly to the State Council (Morgan and Zheng, 2019; Rudyak, 2019; Yuan et al., 2022; Moses et al., 2023).

Whatever their objectives for ODA, donor countries are concerned with their own national reputation, and need to show efficient delivery of projects, without conflict or unnecessary complication. They may prioritise investment in countries which are politically and economically stable such as, for example, Tanzania, which has garnered amongst the highest levels of investment for African countries over decades (Infrastructure Consortium for Africa, 2018). But at the level of projects, development agencies such as JICA emphasise project viability and carefully structure the implementation and management process by maintaining close supervision over disbursement of funding and contractual arrangements, and using home country firms for the most critical tasks (Interview, JICA Lilongwe, May 2022). It is a careful balance however as DFIs must maintain good relations with agencies in the host country, and avoid the perception of being overbearing.

China is an exception within the ODA landscape, as it is not a member of the DAC, and not a signatory to the Paris Declaration or the Accra Agenda. It also follows different modes of negotiation. Funding agreements have been negotiated bilaterally at a high governmental level, and project funding disbursed directly to Chinese firms for implementation, largely bypassing sectoral ministries in the host countries, through the request-aid system in which Chinese state-owned entreprises secure and propose projects which they will then undertake (Bräutigam, 2011; Lam, 2016). However, while the formalities, and informal practices of negotiation may differ, there is a significant literature on China–Africa relationships which underlines the role of African agency in the engagement process (Duggan, 2023; Mohan and Lampert, 2013; Van Staden et al., 2018). Mohan and Lampert (2013: 92) argue that 'at various levels African actors have negotiated, shaped and even driven Chinese engagements in important ways', although acknowledging that 'the ability of African actors to exercise such agency is highly uneven, placing African politics at the heart of any understanding of China–Africa relations'.

For the political leadership in a host country, sovereign investment may deliver tangible outcomes, often highly visible in the urban landscape, that build domestic credibility and popular support, including securing international standing. However, accepting sovereign circuit investment may bring political risk, including the real or perceived compromise of domestic sovereignty; the possibility of a backlash from local business where preference is given to foreign firms; potential debt traps; and the opacity of investor intentions. Sibiri (2021) discusses the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in Africa which poses significant risks for governments perceived as being too close to China; and Burite (2023) reflects on the political debacle in Tanzania around the 30-year concession granted to a Dubai-based company to modernise and operate the Dar es Salaam port. National governments must be seen to defend their autonomy in policy making, and to ensure that local firms have a share of the benefits brought by foreign funded projects. Tanzania, for example, has asserted its control over policy making by reintroducing national development plans, while a number of countries have introduced regulations to reserve contract value of foreign-funded projects for local firms, typically between 20% and 30% (Ali, 2020). However, there are limits to what donor countries will accept, given their concerns with securing successful project outcomes.

Donor and recipient countries are therefore involved in complex calculations of economic and political cost, benefit and risk, exercising their agency in negotiating processes, although within a matrix of uneven power relationships. It is an unstable terrain, with calculations shifting over time, and instances where synergy was not achieved or sustained, as illustrated by the changing relationship between Tanzania and China. The relationship is historically deep, going back to the celebrated construction of the TAZARA railway in the 1970s (Tan-Mullins et al., 2010), but waned during the early stages of China's reform era as Tanzania shifted towards an IMF-directed development path. However, during Kikwete's presidency in Tanzania (2005–2015), there was a closer relationship with China, with Chinese investment proposed for mega projects such as the national-scale Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) and the planned new port and industrial zone at Bagamoyo. During Magufuli's presidency (2015–2021), calculations shifted, and the SGR was diverted to a Turkish firm, with the Chinese contract for Bagamoyo cancelled (Calabrese, 2022; Inanc, 2023). After falling out with Western donors, though, he turned back to the Chinese, and his successor Samia Hassan, who assumed power in 2021, visited Beijing in November 2022 to sign a 'comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership' with China. Afterwards, a Chinese company was awarded the contract for the final phases of the SGR and negotiations around the Bagamoyo contract were reopened (Chinese Embassy in Tanzania, 2022).

There are similar, although less theatrical, narratives for our other two case studies. Malawi's diplomatic shift in 2007 from Taiwan to supporting the People's Republic of China (PRC) was rewarded with various investments as gifts and loans. In Lilongwe, from 2009 a suite of Chinese government and SOE investments delivered parliament buildings (a \$41m grant), an international convention centre and hotels as well as high end secure diplomatic housing (\$90m loan financed by Exim Bank of China) and an international soccer stadium (\$70m concessional loan by the Exim Bank of China) (Batsani-Ncube, 2022; Vondracek, 2019). These investments transformed the urban landscape of Lilongwe and initiated extensive Chinese private sector and SOE contracting involvement in additional development in nearby areas, bringing some benefit to adjacent residential communities (Njanji, 2024). In Ghana, the inter-country relationships have been quite stable over a long period of time, although there has been little direct Chinese investment in urban areas as such (but see Asante and Helbrecht, 2022). International controversies emerged around a barter agreement in Ghana where rail investment from China into the interior was secured through commitments concerning the bauxite trade for 20 years. This has led to some wider reassessment of such investment agreements (Purwins, 2023). The relational landscape of sovereign to sovereign interactions is thus fluid.

To probe these high-level dynamics further, a project level analysis adds additional insight, revealing the often nuanced and complicated origins of urban development projects and providing detail on the nature of engagements between sovereign, central government and, sometimes, community based actors. The different approaches of the foreign sovereign actors are important in shaping the investment choices made. These include their own country's rules and interests in financing developments, their varied risk management strategies and the ways in which sovereign-host negotiations happen in practice. In the case of Dar es Salaam, we were able to follow the practices of different sovereign actors active there, from

China, Japan and Korea. The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been a major funder of transport infrastructure, as has the Import–Export Bank of Korea (KEXIM). Officials from these agencies, and from Tanzanian government agencies, explained to us the process of reaching agreement on the selection of projects for funding. There is a year-long cycle of negotiation which leads to project selection, involving an iterative engagement between the interests and priorities of donor and recipient governments, partly framed by the decisions reached in the multilateral forums and high-level bilateral meetings, but which often include inputs from different ministries and local governments as to priorities. In our initial discussions, our respondents emphasised the formal processes of negotiation, but in later interviews they acknowledged the importance of informal, or back room, engagements. In the case of JICA, the process is facilitated by the appointment of local Tanzanians to the JICA staff, and it is the Tanzanian staff who mainly liaise with Tanzanian government officials and draw on networks with relevant actors to find agreement on priority projects acceptable to both JICA and national government actors, usually the Presidency. We observed the same dynamics in all three of our case study cities.

Beyond the grants, concessional loans, and technical assistance provided by DFIs, sovereign circuits also include commercial loans by foreign-owned public banks, and profit-seeking portfolio investments by foreign SWFs and Public Pension Funds (PPFs). However, these forms of sovereign investment operate largely in the same mode as investments in private circuit. There is, however, another type of engagement, associated largely with the Chinese state, which involves the role of SOEs in the delivery of Chinese- and non-Chinese-funded projects. Increasingly, Chinese SOEs operate as contractors to multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and to Africa's national governments, rather than as initiators of Chinese funded projects or recipients of request-aid. The Chinese presence thus blurs the distinction between the sovereign, developmental and private circuits.

Although SOEs may receive support from their mother companies in China, not least the financial backing to enable them to make competitive bids for contracts, they are generally less closely tied to national, provincial and local governments there. However, they do often receive guidance and support from local Chinese embassies. On the whole, they act largely as private companies in the pursuit of civil works contracts (Interviews with Chinese construction companies in Lilongwe in September 2022, in Dar es Salaam in October 2022, and in Accra in April 2023). They are also often in intense competition with each other, with the embassies trying to moderate in the interests of national reputation - although often unsuccessfully because of the scale of the SOE presence in African countries. There is now a huge Chinese presence in civil works contracting, with Chinese firms, for example, accounting for 80% of the value of civil works contracting in Tanzania (Zhang, 2021). While Chinese in-country state presence is a factor in the successful operation of SOEs, it hardly reflects a coherent strategy, with adaptation in the hyper-competitive environment largely the result of individual firm responses (for an insightful discussion of Chinese firm strategies see Mazé and Chailan, 2021). At the same time, private Chinese companies are expected to operate within the broad framework of China's strategic objectives for international engagement. The motivations for and dynamics of particular investment choices and projects therefore reflect a diversity of priorities and financial calculations, with precise outcomes being set in train around each project.

Processes of mutual adjustment and readjustment are central to the operation of sovereign circuits. In general, these processes are dominated by the international–national interface, because of both the hierarchical nature of governance in many countries in Africa and global and country-to-country agreements and protocols designed to recognise national sovereignty. There are certainly geopolitical motivations and bespoke sovereign ambitions and procedures that cannot be ignored, but neither can we neglect the embeddedness of international actors within national settings, and the transcalar arenas of negotiation and mutual adjustment associated with the different kinds of sovereign investors. International sovereign and national government actors are frequently drawn into negotiations with community based organisations because of their ability to disrupt processes through protests over household resettlement, for example (Interview, Tanzanian Regional Administration and Local Government Unit Official, 4 November 2022). In Malawi, local government actors were able to feed priorities into the central government negotiations with JICA and other donors (Croese et al., 2023) and initiatives by international donors seeking to bypass national government actors in favour of local authorities have been noted (Chasukwa and Banik, 2019). In Ghana, where traditional leaders and families control some land allocations, they can play a role in directly negotiating developments with a range of actors and can significantly moderate the impacts of larger projects, as we discuss in the following section.

Assembling territories for private investment

Perhaps most prone to characterisation as an external and systemic force of power (Aalbers, 2024), our cases reveal private circuits of investment to be enmeshed with the activities of other transnational actors (developmental and sovereign) and dependent on various national government actors and institutions; private sector actors are actively involved in building the embedded networks needed to compose the conditions for specific urban territories to be rendered investable.[5] Here we take our lead from Laura Bear (Bear, 2020; Bear et al., 2015) in unravelling private sector speculation as the product of multifaceted and contextually embedded processes (see also Birch and Ward, 2024).

In our cases, private actors routinely leverage associations with state institutions and individuals to secure land and investment opportunities. Thus, flows of investment in this circuit are closely linked to national, state and quasi-state actors in urban development, including those who control access to land, such as local councillors, traditional leaders, and officials in central government Departments of Land. Goodfellow (2020) has observed that in African cities private investors are largely, but not only, local (who happen to have land in a certain location) or nationally based and are often 'gap-filling' in response to major infrastructure investments flowing from sovereign and developmental circuits. Some private sector actors, such as former SOEs, are also linked to foreign governments and may operate according to a diversity of business models and rely on opportunities for leverage through embassies. Contrary to perceptions of the potential for external 'global' private financing, it is internal funds (e.g. the National Social Security Fund or the National Housing Corporation in Tanzania, Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) in Ghana and the National Pension Fund in Malawi) which are an important source of urban infrastructure investment (Interview with former SSNIT Official, 14/2/2023). For national government actors, the ability to shape and influence the investments which flow from both individual private investors and these national financialised entities makes them a highly attractive alternative to strongly regulated developmental and sovereign funding sources (Lane et al., forthcoming).

The process whereby a piece of urban territory comes to be aligned with a development project that can be financed and constructed can therefore be extraordinarily complex. One set of relations which we noted concerns the connections and opportunities for private firms which emerge in the wake of their participation in developmental and sovereign circuits. The swathe of Chinese-funded developments in Lilongwe following their diplomatic support for China in 2007 transformed the area to the north of the commercial city centre, formerly designated and used as valued park land. Local city planners had little influence over this redesignation, which came about through direct presidential orders (Anonymous Interview, May 2022). This sovereign investment not only transformed the spatial organisation of Lilongwe but sparked a range of new investments from private firms and smaller (often regional, or city based) Chinese state-owned enterprises. In the first instance this involved firms who had won contracts for these diplomatic investments, and then spun off private ventures from these. For example, the SOE Anhui Foreign Economic Construction (Group) Co. Ltd. (AFECC), which built the new parliament building (2009–2010), became a private company, although with some provincial government shareholding, headquartered in Hefei in Anhui province. AFECC then founded the Sogecoa Company as its Malawian branch which has built several projects grant funded by China, or by the Malawian government. Their mode of operation remains distinctive – as one company respondent put it, 'although we are not an SOE, we are like an SOE in our behaviour and professional standards' (Interview, 16 September 2022). Also, because of its history the Chinese government still pays close attention to this company, celebrating their developments on the embassy website.[6] This reveals the fuzzy relationship between the categories of government and private ownership in relation to Chinese companies and the complex transcalar arrangements which have secured the developments this company has been involved in.

In another example, MHC-Henan Guoji Development Co. Ltd. is a joint venture between Malawian Housing Corporation (MHC) and the China Henan Guoji Industry Group Co. Ltd, headquartered in Zhengzhou, Henan province. The partnership to develop the MHC-Henan Guoji Dream Town in Lilongwe involved a shareholding and profit share set at 80% for Henan Guoji and 20% for MHC, with MHC's equity contribution being the land. Henan Guoji Group, headquartered in Zhengzhou, was a provincial SOE founded in 1994 but transformed into a private company in the late 1990s. It entered the African market in 1999, cooperating with the China–Africa Development Fund.[7] It has development and construction projects in many African countries, such as Zambia, Mozambique, Uganda and Sierra Leone. Henan Guoji's overseas business model focuses on addressing the housing deficit for civil servants and the company has signed cooperation agreements for housing delivery with governments across the region. The MHC-Henan Guoji Dream Town partnership follows the model of providing housing for the middle classes and higher level state officials as well as the Malawian diaspora, de facto the only categories who can afford this type of formal housing (Interview, HG Sales team, July 2023).

The role of national government actors in sustaining this deal was crucial. Early in the process Henan Guoji had organised a study tour to China for key MHC and government officials, and MHC was ordered by government actors to enter into the deal. As the second phase of the development was being negotiated, the 80–20 split of profits between HG and MHC turned into a 'loss' leading to reports of the partnership potentially being unravelled. But MHC was instructed to comply with HG, who are reported to have complained to central government actors involved. The modest project, a purely private investment by a small company, was treated almost as a bilateral one might be, with central state actors imposing limits on MHC. As one anonymous informant noted:

> I will be quick to say that even [though] MHC was put forward as the champion of the project, but there were some invisible hands by the government. So, if MHC raises issues, management of Henan were going behind to say, no this one is not being cooperative, it is putting too much nose into the project. So possibly maybe there were some agreements behind that we were not able to see on the table. (Interview, anonymous, May 2022)

One informant noted that in the second phase of the project the proposition mooted was for MHC to get a loan from China to pay for HG to be constructor, with a sovereign guarantee from the Malawian government. This would have secured an entirely de-risked development. The project also bypassed the Lilongwe City council planning process. As a former planner noted, 'this project was sort of political, so if anyone wanted to be like over-zealous then things were to happen. So, for this project, I think the city was watching from afar' (Interview, April 2021).

More generally, many private Chinese-owned companies in Lilongwe and in our other case study cities, both SOEs and private, keep close contact with the Chinese embassy, which sees it as their primary role to protect Chinese interests and reduce reputational risks for China (Interview, Chinese companies in Lilongwe, September 2022). Malawi Investment Forums have also been an important instrument, with the Malawian ambassador to China often facilitating the introduction of a firm from China, as in the case of the China Lilongwe Grand Holding Corporation Ltd. which has developed the Grand Business Park in Lilongwe. This private company plays a dual role, actively promoting the interests of China's Shanxi province in Malawi, but also working to promote Malawi in China.[8] The company thus works like a semi-government entity even if its shareholding is private.

Our final examples consider the mobilisation of national pensions as sources of financing, which are providing an important stream of income to side-step constraints on commercial borrowing for highly indebted countries (World Bank, 2022) or limits on access to aid funds as a result of concerns about government probity (Cammack, 2012). The Social Security and National Insurance Trust, Ghana's national pension agency, for example, joined international private investors Atterbury (South Africa) and Delico Property Development Limited (Mauritius), to develop a major shopping centre, West Hills Mall, to the west of Accra (Eduful, 2021), energising a new node of development for the wider metropolitan region which had been foreseen by the 1991 Accra strategic master plan. For the developers, bringing forward this investment relied on securing land from traditional authorities, contributing to the local authority in the form of planning gain to deliver a new road interchange, forging a partnership with a major South African investor in malls along with their anchor tenants, and an associated partnership with an Israeli developer to build a residential community adjacent. All the elements were in place for a strong investment, dependent on a transcalar territorial network which had consolidated around the project (Interview, former SSNIT official, 14 February 2023). However, through complex land deals with a fragmented traditional land ownership in the area, other actors have been able to leverage the emerging node to bring forward developments for their own benefit, and to the strong disbenefit of the SSNIT investment. This has resulted from informal subdivision and unserviced residential development on contested traditional authority land around the shopping centre, which has caused infrastructure deterioration and flooding. These processes have also made land available for an encroaching low-budget China Mall right next to the West Hills Mall, and for central government-facilitated Chinese investment in nearby industries. Both of these have the potential to devalue the high-end residential SSNIT properties and the West Hills Mall (Interview, West Hills Mall, 21/04/2023).

In Malawi, the relatively recent (2011) national pension fund, struggling with significant excess liquidity in a very small market, has worked together with the Treasury, facing worryingly high levels of government commercial indebtedness (World Bank, 2022), and other dynamic developmental actors in government agencies and national banks to invent new ways to secure development finance which they can direct to their own development priorities, outside of donor control. This group of actors have devised a way to ringfence and securitise government revenue streams from donor-funded regional toll roads (held by the well-respected Roads Fund Agency) to borrow from the national pension funds to then invest in urban infrastructure, notably urban roads and interchanges which have been neglected by regionally focussed international donors (Kanai and Schindler, 2019; Lane et al., forthcoming). A major road upgrade in central Lilongwe, Kenyatta Drive, has been so successful, with the loans paid back early, that it has arguably improved perceptions of the government's fiscal capacity to support commercial borrowing. This has motivated attempts to raise additional 'bonds' to fund a substantial investment in road connectivity for secondary cities as part of a longer term, nationally initiated development programme, Malawi 2063 (Lane et al., forthcoming; Interview, Reserve Bank of Malawi, 7 October 2022).

Across our cases, private sector investment, even that which is financialised, relies heavily on state, sovereign and developmental actors to produce the conditions for investment. Relationships are forged across national government and private sector actors to leverage either permission or in-kind contributions which transform the terms of investment. Free land (or for the price of informal payments to officials, parties, government leaders or traditional authorities); privileged access to state partners through sovereign actor negotiations; facilitation to progress developments without formal planning or regulatory oversight; derisking through sovereign guarantees – these constitute some of the dynamics of the transcalar territorial networks forged around private investors. At the same time, these dynamics effectively establish emergent, informal (negotiated) forms of territorial regulation. The case studies we have discussed here highlight how private capital investment is produced by specific configurations of institutions, actors, territory and finances (or as Birch and Ward (2024) discuss, 'asset geographies'), rather than arriving with bespoke models and external conventions for securing returns. Our assessment is that this can have wider implications for theorising the politics of urban development in other contexts.

Concepts for urban development politics: An agenda

Urban development results from the power laden navigation of a multiplicity of interests amongst different actors. Conventionally these are understood as distributed across analytically identified scales. But, as we have shown, in practice these are negotiated within 'transcalar territorial networks' emergent around particular urban development projects and trajectories (Halbert and Rouanet, 2014). Our study of major developments in Dar es Salaam, Lilongwe and Accra illustrates how the possibilities for urban development, including the territories to be developed, are composed, not pregiven. Investors produce the conditions for investment, including access to land, through relationships with government actors, local decision-makers and, in dual land systems, traditional authorities, as well as through sovereign–sovereign interactions, formal and informal, supported by locally embedded offices or embassies. Transnational developmental, sovereign and private investment circuits, or circulations of finance, emerge through strongly embedded and transcalar political formations.

More generally, although ambitious and speculative large scale developments in Africa (new cities; satellite cities) have attracted a lot of critical attention in scholarly debate (Kanai and Schindler, 2019; van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018; Watson, 2014), in the contexts we studied many mooted large scale developments never materialised – for example, Hope City in Accra, Kigamboni and Bagamoyo in/near Dar es Salaam. In the cities we looked at, the large-scale developments we noticed and selected as case studies involved more routine and integrated urban developments – programmes to combat flooding, to invest in water and sewerage, modest programmes to build housing for the middle classes and salaried people, shopping centres and new commercial nodes or, more ambitiously, upgrading of ports, roads and bridges. In the wake of these investments, we observed numerous actors initiating further projects, relying on predominantly national financial resources (such as pension funds) or financing from pre-existing enterprises and land. We have seen little in the way of global 'financialisation', defined as the management of financial assets (Guironnet and Halbert, 2023). Projects have been financed by concessional loans and aid from international multilateral and individual donors, direct government borrowing, national pension funds or social security funds. In one case, these funds have also designed creative financial instruments securitising ring-fenced government revenue or state assets (Lane et al., forthcoming).

To understand these dynamics, this paper has proposed a focus on theorising urban development politics from specificity through elaborating the concept of transcalarity. We suggest that emergent arrangements of actors and institutions across putative scales characterise much urban development. At times fleeting, at times long lasting, political formations negotiated amongst central government actors (with various interests), a diversity of international actors and institutions, as well as private sector and community-based actors lead to the proposal and realisation (or abandoning) of ambitious projects. Agency and power relations are emergent, and negotiated, with varying spatial reaches, rather than aligned with different scales, formal institutions or predefined processes. For example, we have highlighted the long-term embeddedness of 'international' actors in countries and urban contexts, and thus their intrinsically transcalar nature. Embassies, representatives of bilateral and multi-lateral aid agencies and private firms (or state-owned enterprises) foster investment and financing decisions through close ties cultivated across municipal, central government, and regional institutions, at times mutually shaping long-term development pathways.

Transcalarity has implications for the terms, actors and concepts of urban studies. Notably in our cases we have seen the pivotal role of central government actors across all three circuits, but especially in terms of the developmental and sovereign circuits. Despite an international policy discourse around decentralisation, central government actors have emerged as the key initial negotiators of urban investments from sovereign and developmental actors, with the power to insist on playing a core role in implementation – here individual government actors, ministries and parties all play an important role (see also Shatkin, 2022). They provide a strong input to the final shape, and potential failure, of major urban projects; and in emergent transcalar territorial formations, they ‘fix’ or dematerialise territories (land) and regulations (streamlining or blocking relationships amongst actors) to enable circulations, or to prevent and divert certain investments. They actively position themselves as key elements in any circuit(ry) of urban development, enabling, limiting or switching flows of investments and their outcomes, including private investments.

However, our examples also suggest the need to identify the actual interests and power relations associated with government actors and institutions, rather than using the shorthand concept, ‘state’. To probe this further, we suggest that we can learn much from wider debates in African studies where the private interests of state actors have been extensively explored (Bayart, 2009), and where public authority is seen as emergent and negotiated (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010), often a feature of ‘twilight’ institutions forged across public and private actors and varied sources of authority (Croese, 2015; Fourchard, 2024; Lund, 2007). So, rather than coalesce the agency of the different government actors and institutions associated with urban development into the idea of ‘statehood’, or assume that “state”-craft ensues from their activities (cf. Cirolia and Harber, 2022), our cases inspire us to attend to the *precise* concerns and interests of actors operating on the terrain of government. The case studies we discuss draw attention to the role of: direct self-interest involving benefits in kind or direct payments; building electoral coalitions through directing investments towards certain areas or activities, or to enhance the standing and credibility of political leaders; inter-ministerial jockeying to control projects and financial flows; and the effects of routine irregularities in land allocation processes, which can undermine projects while leaving substantial state debt. Where government actors have a wide range of interests which are not closely related to governing, it might be deeply challenging to consider how large-scale investments and urban developments could deliver public benefit (Turok, 2016). More specifically, these varied interests are driving central government actors to concentrate urban development initiatives in central government agencies and ministries, undermining rather than capacitating local governments.

These themes which emerge from focussing on the transcalar formations of urban development politics bring to the fore analytical questions which have long been of concern to African and Africanist scholars. Their contributions to the wider conversations in urban studies might focus attention on emergent transcalar territorial formations, the role and nature of a diversity of transnational actors, re-theorising statehood and understanding the role of central government actors in urban development. In these, and we hope in many other areas of urban studies, Africa may emerge from its role in the dark shadow of, or as a shadow on, theories of urbanisation (De Boeck and Baloji, 2016: 16) to shine a direct light on contemporary processes and future challenges of global urban development.

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Notes

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6. http://mw.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sghdhzxxx/201108/t20110812_5804397.htm (last accessed 30 July 2024).
7. 走进国基 http://www.guojiindustry.com/h-col-105.html (last accessed 30 July 2024).
8. Interview at the Grand Business Park in Lilongwe in 2022: the company represents the

provincial investment office in Malawi while at the same time it acts to attract Chinese investment back in its province in China.

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