

# The global politics of the nexus

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transcript of talk given at conference

*“What works at the nexus?”*

*New connections in food, energy, water and environment”*

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Thanks, and thanks very much to the organisers for inviting me. I'd just like to make a few comments, and really I'd like to focus on what for me . . . has been missing in the discussions I've heard, what connections in the “nexus” are not, as far as I can see, being explored, perhaps deliberately so, and *whose* nexus are we actually talking about here.

Perhaps I should preface this by saying that for the last 30 years or so, my work has been primarily solidarity work with communities affected by particularly large infrastructure projects that are funded by the British Government, European governments, or in which British companies or European companies are involved.

So in a sense I've been working with those at the sharp end who are often excluded, dare I say it, in gatherings like this. And what I thought I might do was try and imagine – because I can only imagine since those people I work with are not here, rather conspicuously absent actually, those who are actually affected by what we've been talking about -- what they might say, or how they might have reacted to some of the discussions here.

I caution that by saying this is my imagination of this because I am not them and I don't claim to talk for them. But I think many of them would probably have a few words to say about framing these discussions in terms of security. And I think they'd ask, on their own experience of past programmes that have been intended to boost food security, the Green Revolution and so on, and the dispossession that that entailed, the concentration of land holdings that that entailed, the shifting of whole populations out of rural areas into cities that that entailed, they might well ask: ‘OK, so what's this food security and energy security, what sort of *insecurities* is that going to create for us?’

And I know that that's a question they ask because they put it to me. I worked on a pipeline, a BP pipeline, from Azerbaijan; not one single drop of the oil exported will go to anybody along the route. But that pipeline brings huge insecurities for them, not only in terms of increased militarisation but also in terms of very poor compensation and other things.

And I think they might also ask: ‘Well, OK, so you want to talk about security. Well, actually, our opposition to a lot of what you're proposing is being recast in rather more conventional security terms as threats. And we're seeing our communities increasingly criminalised because we don't buy into *your* food security concepts, your water security concepts, your energy security concepts.’

And I think they'd have a word or two to say about risk sharing. Now Lyla already this morning mentioned that this is a pretty weird concept when you've got unequal power relations. I mean, putting me up against Mohamed Ali at the height of his prowess would hardly be 'risk sharing' in a boxing match. And in fact we aren't talking about sharing risks, are we, SABMiller was very emphatic: the risks that they're looking at to water for *their* operations. They're not talking about the collective right of all to water; they're talking about water for SABMiller.

And they'd think it – I'm pretty certain – a pretty weird concept, or weird that any of us are even talking about risk sharing when the last 30 years of neoliberal policies have been about stripping collective forms of risk management and dumping those risks increasingly on poorer people.

And I think they'd have a word or two to say also about forms of risk that we're not talking about, about risk as a commodity, the largest traded commodity in the world actually by trillions of dollars – trillions! I mean, it outclasses every single other commodity.

And they'd want to talk about how speculation in those risk markets, derivative markets, much more than 9 billion people on the earth, have been responsible for recent price hikes that have denied them access to food. They'd want to talk about speculation, they'd want to talk about finance as an extractive industry, and they'd want to talk about mechanisms that deny them access to food, water, environment. They'd want to talk about why it is that in the current market system a cat belonging to any one of you here has more bargaining power in terms of food than the poorest African – they'd want to talk about that. And I haven't heard any mention of it.

And when they hear the word partnerships, I think that they would be thinking of a recent Goldman Sachs report, of which many of them are aware, on infrastructure, which rather 'nicely' reports on Goldman Sachs' proprietorial research polling, which concluded that, well, included in the advice: Don't talk about privatisation, talk about partnerships.

And I think they'd probably raise questions about partnerships in the context of the rolling out of public-private partnerships throughout the South. And I think they'd very much view those public-private partnerships within the context of inequality, and I think that they would view inequality as a proxy for the mechanisms that are in place in society for the rich to extract value at the cost to the rest of society. And I think they'd look at public-private partnerships as one of those mechanisms. And I think that they'd raise questions about the sort of liens on the state and on public wealth that are established through those public-private partnerships and which allow the private to extract wealth from the public for private profit.

I think that when they heard the word 'infrastructure', they'd have some questions. I think they'd recognise that for business, investors, infrastructure is not hospitals, bridges and so on. It is a stable form of income flow. That is how infrastructure as an asset class is actually defined by investors. And they'd recognise and ask questions about who is going to finance this infrastructure. And they'd recognise and ask questions about whether or not, for example, that infrastructure was going to be funded by, as it is increasingly, private equity firms that demand 15-20% rates of return on their investment. And I think they'd characterise that as

looting, and I think that they would probably recognise that any infrastructure that demands a 15-20% rate of return on investment is going to be infrastructure that the private sector wants and it's going to exclude most of the infrastructure that actually matters in their lives.

I think that they would insist on talking about capital, and the crisis of accumulation it faces and, at the risk of being impolite, I think that they would see 'nexus' as discussed here as one form of organising by capital in response to that crisis of accumulation.

And I think that they'd insist of talking about class, and they would insist on seeing climate and energy as more than issues of molecules of CO<sub>2</sub> or electrons. I think that they'd insist on seeing both of those as labour issues. We had some discussion this morning about China and about consumers and so on. Well, let's be absolutely frank: business isn't over in China to escape environmental regulations, that's not the main reason they're there. China has become the workshop of the world not because we Western consumers, every time we go into a shop we say, no, I want that one because it's Made in China, I don't want that one because it's Made in Germany. We aren't creating demand for China to be the workshop of the world. If the working class now has a Chinese address, it's because labour is cheaper in China, it's better educated, it's more pliant, and you can extract more value out of it: period. That is the reason why jobs will not be re-shored to America or Europe.

And I think we should recognise that to keep that going, to keep those factories going 24/7 day after day, you need energy systems that will supply the energy on a 24/7 basis. And that's not going to happen with most forms of green energy, which is why people remain committed to oil.

So if we want to address climate, I think we have to address the labour issue.

So finally, let's be very quick, I think we have to talk about power relations. And to those who say 'this is all too philosophical, we can't wait for The End of Capitalism', I agree. But I would say that those who I work with would insist on one question being asked and answered: whose side are you on? And to those who say 'we're all in the same boat', they would say: 'NO, WE ARE NOT! any more than first class and steerage were on the same boat in the Titanic. And the nexus of power, accumulation, extraction and conflict with the commons – the commons meant in terms of that collective right of all of us to survival – is the nexus that matters to them and it's the nexus that needs to be challenged. Class matters, struggle matters and solidarity matters.

Thank you.