



# Large Infrastructure

The origins of Africa's infrastructure deficit

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## The origins of Africa's infrastructure deficit

Africa's infrastructure deficit is the outcome of a long and cumulative historical process shaped by colonial legacies, post-independence development choices and persistent financing and governance constraints. Understanding these structural origins is essential for designing credible and forward-looking infrastructure strategies that support inclusive growth and structural transformation.

Much of Africa's infrastructure is still of colonial-era legacy, designed primarily to serve foreign extractive economic objectives rather than broad-based domestic development. **Priority** was given to infrastructure that served military objectives, facilitated access to mineral resources and linked agriculturally productive zones to coastal export points. Transport networks, particularly railways and ports, were therefore structured as linear corridors connecting mines and plantations to ports, with little consideration for internal market integration or regional cross-border connectivity.

For example, the Western Line in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) was built at the turn of the twentieth century (1898–1903) to **serve** the goldfields of Tarkwa and Obuasi. It also had military objectives, enabling the British administration to deploy troops to the Ashanti region. Meanwhile, construction of the Eastern Line began in 1908, reaching Tafo by 1918 and Kumasi by 1923, to access not only gold-rich areas but also cocoa-producing regions. Similarly, in Southern Africa, the construction of the Lourenço Marques railway, in present-day Mozambique, was driven by the strategic and economic interests of the colonial powers, both to maintain imperial control and to profit from raw material exports.

It is estimated that roughly **one-third** of colonial budgets were devoted to railroad construction.

As a result, infrastructure systems emerged as sparse, fragmented and poorly aligned with population distribution and the requirements of long-term economic transformation. Only in territories with significant and permanent **European** settlement, notably South Africa, did infrastructure development extend beyond extractive functions—and even then, largely to serve the colonist minority.

After independence, many inherited railway systems declined or fell into disuse. They were often poorly aligned with new national development priorities and weakened further by conflict, inadequate maintenance, institutional mismanagement, and shifting policy agendas. Over time, governments shifted their focus from rail to road transport. This transition was not matched by sufficient investment in other essential infrastructure, such as sanitation or cross-border systems needed for regional integration. Consequently, urbanisation across much of Africa often occurred without adequate basic infrastructure.

The impact of colonial railways, persisted, with locations along these routes becoming more developed. The railroads built during the colonial period strongly predicted the **current** location of cities. Further, many African cities still depend on creaking water, electricity and sanitation infrastructure, which often predate independence more than half a century ago.

In the post-colonial period, infrastructure development was also shaped by politically driven investment decisions. Many countries experienced episodes of “white elephant” projects, involving large-scale investments in roads, dams, power plants and public utilities pursued as prestige projects rather than as part of coherent development strategies. This tendency was particularly pronounced during the 1980s, following the adoption of the **Lagos Plan of Action**, which, despite its developmental ambition, often translated into poorly coordinated national projects implemented without rigorous economic analysis, adequate feasibility studies or regional coordination. These investments frequently generated limited economic returns while contributing to rising public debt.

By the late 1980s, falling commodity prices, high external debt and governance challenges culminated in widespread macroeconomic instability. The debt crises of the 1980s sharply curtailed public investment, with infrastructure spending

declining significantly and maintenance expenditures deferred. This period marked a decisive break in infrastructure accumulation, leading to the rapid deterioration of existing assets. The subsequent Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) implemented in the 1980s and 1990s prioritised fiscal consolidation and privatisation and reduced public spending. While the SAPs restored macroeconomic stability in many countries, infrastructure investment, particularly in energy, transport and water, was often treated as a residual rather than a core driver of growth and productivity.

The expectation that private investment would compensate for reduced public spending proved overly optimistic, especially in low-income and fragile contexts where risks were high and returns uncertain. While the telecommunications sector did attract some private investment, leading to the emergence of major operators such as MTN, Vodacom and Airtel, other sectors lagged. Energy sector privatisation progressed unevenly, and electricity access remained limited in many regions. National power grids in sub-Saharan Africa remain underdeveloped, particularly in rural areas. In urban transport, SAPs often contributed to the [collapse](#) of public bus companies and the deterioration of local road networks.

Spending on infrastructure began rising again with the commodity boom in the first decade of the [2000s](#), but with several of Africa's development ambitions consisting of grandiose urban projects, driven by local politicians and global investors. Many visions drew inspiration from global cities such as Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai, emphasising modern skylines, expressways and "smart city" concepts. The Nairobi Metro 2030 Strategy, launched in 2008, exemplifies this trend, aiming to transform Nairobi into a world-class African metropolis. At the same time, railway infrastructure, long neglected after independence, experienced a resurgence, particularly in Eastern Africa. China played a pivotal role in financing and constructing new railway lines, including Kenya's Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, and the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway.

Taken together, these historical layers (colonial extraction-oriented design, post-independence institutional and policy constraints, macroeconomic crises and uneven recent investment) explain the depth and persistence of Africa's infrastructure deficit. They also underscore the importance of focusing on economically grounded and geographically relevant infrastructure systems that support inclusive growth and long-term development.

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Dr Kouassi Yeboua previously worked as a Senior Researcher at AFI, where he led significant ISS studies on the long-term development prospects of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Horn of Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, and Mozambique. His research focuses on development economics, macroeconomics, gender, and economic modeling. He holds a PhD in Economics.

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