



Large Infrastructure

The origins of Africa's infrastructure deficit

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Colonial powers were not concerned about connecting Africa's people and promoting regional trade. Infrastructure that could serve military purposes, provide access to mineral deposits and connect agriculturally rich areas with the coast were prioritised. This resulted in sub-Saharan Africa's pre-independence railroads being built primarily to provide the shortest and cheapest route from extraction points to ports for shipping cargo to Europe, rather than connecting towns.[1] Only places with a significant and permanent European settlement, particularly South Africa, saw any meaningful roll-out of infrastructure designed to improve the welfare of the local population, and then only for the colonist minority.[2]

After independence, most railroads fell into disuse because they were often not suited to new development priorities owing to conflict, mismanagement and changes in national priorities. Generally, attention shifted from rail to roads. This shift was accompanied by a lack of attention to basic infrastructure such as sanitation that could facilitate human development or cross-border connecting infrastructure to advance regional integration. With advances in medicine keeping communicable diseases at bay, instead of effective sanitation, water and health (WaSH) infrastructure, urbanisation proceeded in much of Africa with limited additional basic infrastructure, discussed in the theme on [health/WaSH](#).

Yet the impact of colonial railways persisted, with locations along these routes becoming more developed and urbanised than towns not close to rails. In summary, the 'railroads built during the colonial period strongly predicted the current location of cities.[3] Similarly, many African cities still depend on creaking water, electricity and sanitation infrastructure, which often predate independence more than half a century ago.

Post-colonial Africa has subsequently also had its fair share of so-called white elephant projects, where a large development (such as a factory or power station) was constructed as the political pet project of an incumbent leader. This was a particular problem during the 1980s after the (ultimately overly) ambitious Lagos Plan of Action was adopted. Projects were often initiated without proper economic analysis or consideration of potential synergies or regional cooperation. This approach resulted in inappropriate or an oversupply of infrastructure,[4] saddling governments with unsustainable debt levels.

The situation eventually led to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank imposing various structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s, which sought to adjust a country's economic structure, improve international competitiveness and restore its balance of payments. The latter intention inevitably discouraged government expenditure, including on infrastructure, with the result that Africa actually regressed from already low rates of access to key indicators (such as WaSH).

Africa's general low population density has, until quite recently, largely precluded the development of economies of scale. Infrastructure development was also primarily considered and planned on a project-by-project basis and so has generally lacked the integrated, systemic approach evident in more developed regions.[5]

Spending on infrastructure began rising again with the commodity boom in the first decade of the 2000s,[6] with many of Africa's development ambitions consisting of grandiose urban projects driven by local politicians and global investors. The visions typically reflect images of Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai, with glass skyscrapers and landscaped freeways that suggest fashionable smart cities. For example, the Nairobi 2030 Metro Strategy,[7] which was unveiled by the Kenyan government in 2008, aimed to make Nairobi a world-class African metropolis. Another is Hope City in Ghana—a US\$10 billion IT hub to be built outside Accra. Launched by President John Mahama in 2013, the project proposed to build Africa's tallest building within three years.[8]

Endnotes

1. For example, the so-called Lunatic Express, from Kisumu (Lake Victoria) to the port of Mombasa, built between 1886 and 1901, literally bypassed all the highly populated areas.
2. R Jedwab, E Kerby and A Moradi, [How colonial railroads defined Africa's economic geography](#), VOXEU, 2 March 2017.
3. R Jedwab, E Kerby and A Moradi, [How colonial railroads defined Africa's economic geography](#), VOXEU, 2 March 2017.
4. See: African Development Bank, [African Economic Outlook 2018](#), 2018. An example of a white elephant project is the Southern Paper Mills in Tanzania, which was eventually completed in 1985 at US\$600 million (roughly US\$4.2 billion today), more than double the initial estimated cost of US\$261 million. The mill operated at about half its capacity at best for almost 20 years, at which time it was eventually sold to a private investor for US\$1 million — see: E Gurardet, [African Journey: A white elephant — symbol of Tanzania's troubled economy](#), The Christian Science Monitor, 21 December 1985; Staff writer, [Tanzania's Mufindi Paper Mills in full production](#), Lesprom, 8 August 2008.
5. S Schindler and J Kanai, [How mega infrastructure projects in Africa, Asia and Latin America are reshaping development](#), The Conversation, 31 October 2019.
6. African Development Bank, [African Economic Outlook 2018](#), 2018.
7. Government of the Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Nairobi Metropolitan Development, [Nairobi Metro 2030: A world class African metropolis](#), 2018.
8. Staff writer, [Ghana's John Mahama launches Hope City project](#), BBC, 4 March 2013.

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Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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