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Large Infrastructure

Challenges: South Africa and DR Congo

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Corruption and political interference are major obstacles to infrastructure development. In South Africa, the Medupi and Kusile coal power stations illustrate these challenges. Medupi, initially budgeted at R80 billion in 2007 (US$11.19 billion), saw its costs triple and faced repeated delays; shortly after completion in 2021, one unit exploded, adding further repair costs. Kusile, budgeted at R81 billion (US$11.33 billion), also experienced major delays and cost overruns, with its budget doubling by 2020 and completion pushed to 2025.

Both projects were linked to corruption and inflated coal contracts, leaving Eskom with unsustainable debt. Despite being named power company of the year in 2001, South Africa later faced severe electricity shortages due to delayed procurement, poor maintenance and underinvestment in new capacity. By the mid-2010s, rolling blackouts were frequent and placed a heavy strain on the economy.

Since 2024, however, performance has improved. In 2025, Eskom recorded 231 consecutive days without load shedding, reflecting better maintenance and a gradual recovery in plant availability.

Another example is the Grand Inga Hydropower Project in DR Congo, where electricity access is extremely low and supply is unreliable, constraining economic growth. Many firms rely on backup generators, reflecting frequent outages. The state utility, Société Nationale d'Électricité (SNEL), is highly inefficient, losing nearly half of the generated electricity through outdated and poorly maintained infrastructure.

Despite an estimated 100 GW of hydropower potential, only a small fraction has been developed, mainly through the Inga I and II dams, which operate at below-capacity levels. The planned Grand Inga scheme could generate 44 GW at a cost of about US$80 billion, potentially meeting domestic demand and enabling exports.

Its first phase, Inga III (4.8 GW, US$14 billion), has been delayed for decades due to governance and funding challenges. After the World Bank suspended funding in 2016 over transparency concerns during Joseph Kabila's presidency, progress slowed further. Inga III is now unlikely to be completed before 2030.

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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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