

Countries are barriers to infrastructure projects

The biggest barrier to implementing regional infrastructure projects in Africa are the countries themselves, the Infrastructure Africa conference heard in Sandton on Tuesday (16 July).



The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (Pida) is the latest attempt to bring Africa's long list of infrastructure projects under one umbrella.

However, at state level, not enough has changed from when projects were first mooted as long ago as in the 1970s.

New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) Planning and Co-ordinating Agency transport infrastructure expert John Tambi said countries were reluctant to adopt regional projects because their constituencies did not recognise their benefits.

The north-south corridor, a rail and road-focused link between Durban and Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, is just one initiative that has failed to get enough support from some of the eight countries it traverses.

The fact that it links countries that are members of three different regional economic communities has compounded the problem.

Border posts, the most critical but weakest link along the corridor, are in urgent need of better processes, in order to facilitate trade and the movement of people.

Accountability

"However, states now have some level of accountability," Tambi said. The Presidential Infrastructure Champion Initiative, which he coordinates, requires the heads of states that drive the eight largest projects in Africa to report to the African Union every six months.

President Jacob Zuma is the champion of the north-south corridor. Similarly, the presidents of countries such as Algeria, Senegal and Nigeria promote other continental infrastructure projects.

"Now that presidents have been tasked with reporting on a project, it is easier to get national buy-in. They run the risk of

embarrassing themselves at the African Union if no progress has been made," Tambi told Business Day.

This impetus has helped increase the pace of regional infrastructure projects. Tambi said Algeria and Niger were recently able to plug the US\$40m funding gap in the construction of the missing road link on the trans-Sahara highway, by jointly asking the African Development Bank (AfDB) for assistance. The project will go to tender later this year.

Rail, road projects are priority

The AfDB's chief infrastructure and public-private partnership specialist, Mtchera Chirwa, referred to other examples of success. These include progress being made on the Nacala corridor, which will link landlocked Zambia and Malawi to the port of Nacala in Mozambique.

The countries have prioritised the rail and road projects that will improve the link. Border posts that link the countries are being streamlined for greater efficiency.

Tambi said regional projects must be translated into national priorities in national development plans for countries to take them seriously.

The AfDB has played a key role in Pida's priority action plan, which comprises a list of 51 projects that will cost US\$68bn over the next seven years. Looking ahead to 2040, it says US\$360bn is required.

But there are other constraints. The Development Bank of Southern Africa's sector specialist for regional programmes, Dr Michele Ruiters, told the conference the biggest problem within the Southern African Development Community is making projects bankable. The region has a project wish list, but many of these are not economically sustainable, and would not pass the bankability test.

Source: Business Day via I-Net Bridge

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