

## WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

The Algerian East-West Highway, or A1 Highway, as it is often called, is dubbed one of the largest public works projects globally. The \$11.2 billion megaproject spanned about four decades from conception to completion.

Conceived in 1975, the six-lane highway stretches 1,216 kilometres, featuring 70 viaducts, 60 interchanges and 12 tunnels. Yet, work only began in 2005 under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The project's delivery was split between a Chinese contractor overseeing the western section and a Japanese counterpart handling the east. Beneath them, a global consortium of suppliers and subcontractors contributed their bit to the vast scope.

The employment statistics were encouraging, as the A1 generated more than 100,000 jobs. The implementation of this project resulted in a reduction in trip durations and enhanced connectivity to the northern region of Algeria, hence stimulating economic development. Today, the project continues to serve the ever-growing population of Algerians and fosters trade with neighbouring Morocco and Tunisia. However, research indicates that A1, though a tactical and strategic success, struggled with operational flaws. What appeared successful on the surface has been described as an operational failure.

## Challenges and Stakeholder Dynamics

The launch, initially planned for 2009, saw a significant setback of seven years, significantly beyond the initial projection of forty (40) months and incurring billions of additional costs. Delays are understandable in circumstances beyond the project's control, but that was not the case here. These delays were mainly caused by internal conflicts among the many stakeholder groups, which consisted of 18 different classes, including local government agencies and foreign financiers.

In a 2015 exhaustive analysis conducted by Zidane et al., the authors revealed the multitude of detrimental effects that these conflicting interests had on the A1 Highway.<sup>1</sup> Several retrospective studies have emerged since Zidane et al., regrettably showing that the African megaproject playbook has not yet wholly included the effective management of stakeholder impacts as a strategic component.

In the A1 case, the government's interference with operational decisions, which would have been left to the project management team, led to significant reworks that snowballed into billions of dollars and extra years. For instance, in a well-intentioned but misguided effort to save on costs, the Algerian government mandated the use of locally sourced soil for subgrade construction instead of using geotechnically appropriate material from faraway locations. The choice resulted in soil collapse, which

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<sup>1</sup> Zidane, Y. J.-T., Johansen, A., Ekambaram, A., & Hald, L. C. (2015). *When Stakeholders Shape Successes or Bring Failures – A Case Study of an Algerian Megaproject*. *Procedia Computer Science*, 64, 844–851.

subsequently required costly and time-consuming remediation works after the completion of the road.

### The Human and Environmental Cost

The project's second error was the belated engagement with the communities and landowners impacted by the highway's route. The negotiations with landowners, who were facing economic hardships, grew prolonged and expensive as they aimed to negotiate prices far higher than the usual rates. Although it is difficult to tell where a 1200km road would pass, progressive engagement with landowners could have reduced delays. Had the project managers implemented a progressive engagement approach, the project may have potentially circumvented these expensive delays.

Furthermore, environmental issues were not prioritised. The project's lack of initial collaboration with environmental organisations resulted in legal disputes and halts in construction as environmentalists mobilised public sentiment against the highway, highlighting its detrimental effects on animals and ecosystems. These scenarios, government interference and protests by land owners and environmental groups illustrate the profound influence of stakeholders on project success.

### A Pan-African Perspective

The Algerian experience is not isolated. Throughout Africa, from Algeria, Ethiopia, Nigeria to Zimbabwe, infrastructure megaprojects

encounter the same outcomes: airports devoid of aircraft, harbours lacking ships, and oil pipelines running empty. Projects that progressed past the initial execution phase grovel from conflicting interests and agendas, sometimes holding entire nations to ransom. It is a pattern of potential held back by conflicting interests.

A continent in dire need of basic infrastructure cannot afford the negative impacts of these intrigues and project politics. Therefore, managers of major capital projects must possess the skills to navigate this intricate landscape, effectively balancing various human interests while pursuing the goal of national growth.

This book was written for you, the Project Manager at the frontline of Africa's infrastructural evolution. Beyond the technicalities, I offer insights from over two decades of hands-on experience dealing with the complex network of stakeholder interests that shape contemporary project settings.

Join me!