

Two-stage Call for Papers

1. for [SASE 27-29 June 2024](#) | University of Limerick **and**

2. full paper manuscripts for submission to a Special Issue (SI) in [Review of International Political Economy](#)

SASE panel and SI title: ‘Infrastructure failures’: the politics and political economy of failed infrastructure projects

Led by the ERC-funded [REDEFINE](#) project at [The Open University](#)

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Introduction

This is a two-stage Call for Papers.

1. We invite abstracts (max. 250 words) to our panel entitled ‘*Infrastructure failures’: the politics and political economy of failed infrastructure projects*’ to be held at SASE 2024 (details below). Abstracts should be sent to samuel.rogers@open.ac.uk - submission deadline: 15th December 2023. We will select four applicants and inform them shortly after this date. SASE requires invitees to submit a full paper draft one month before the conference begins. This will give the panel discussant enough time to prepare for an impactful discussion. These full papers will then be submitted to the SI.

2. To complement the papers presented at SASE, we invite an additional four full paper manuscripts for submission to a Special Issue in [Review of International Political Economy](#) with the same title, where members of the REDEFINE project will act as Guest Editors. The SI submission deadline is 30th September 2024 with publication due in 2025. To prepare for this, we require submissions be sent to samuel.rogers@open.ac.uk with the submission deadline for full papers 1st July 2024. This will provide us enough time to select appropriate papers for the best chance of acceptance by RIPE. In total, we will submit eight full papers to the SI.

Call for abstract submissions for SASE 2024 & full paper submissions to a Special Issue in *Review of International Political Economy*

The study of infrastructure failure is typically limited. Often, contributions have tended to focus on physical infrastructure failures such as collapsed bridges or burst pipelines (Graham and Marvin 2009) rather than when and why projects fail and the consequences that ensue. Currently, we lack knowledge of what such failures mean for a broad range of factors such as capital investment, labour relations, and sectoral development amongst many others, exposing lacunae in understanding such as ‘what [infrastructure project failure] signifies, how it is structured, and what consequences it bears’ (Venugopal 2018, 244).

Shaped by largescale infrastructure umbrella programmes such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), investment in infrastructure projects whether through private or state capital, financing or funding initiatives, has grown rapidly since the 2010s. Just over a decade ago these moves were relatively lowkey, but the launch of the BRI in 2013 marked a gear shift, whereby massive investments in infrastructure – estimated to total \$1.3tn by 2027 – aim to create a ‘new Silk Road’, with digital, maritime, road, and rail dimensions. In turn, ostensibly ‘rival’ global programmes have been proposed and are at various stages of development such as the EU’s Global Gateway or have been aimed at the national level such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 or Thailand 4.0 or have emerged out of geopolitical blocs such as the New Development Bank. Sectorally, investments range from flagship nuclear projects, airport upgrades, inland and seaport development, waste management facilities, 5G installations, and transnational railway corridors, each replete with tensions concerning their overall cost, debt-repayment

timetables, imperialist undertones, labour issues, and environmental impact, and often set against the backdrop of an increasingly complex Sino-US rivalry.

Globally, there have been multiple occasions of infrastructure project failure. Three varied examples illustrate this: (1) a light railway transport project in the Kazakh capital Astana was halted mid-construction when the China Development Bank was alerted to widespread misuse of its loan that had financed the development; (2) the Texcoco airport development in Mexico was cancelled mid-way through its construction phase in 2018 by newly elected President Andrés Manuel López Obrador who cited its high costs and corruption levels, and; (3) announcements of coal phase-outs in multiple South Asian countries have led to a significant level of project cancellations, with only 1 from 52 projects announced since 2014 being realised.

These examples constitute ‘infrastructure failures’: projects that for various reasons were unable to deliver their original plan. Many proposals that are tabled are not realised: some never go past the drawing board, some emerge only as MoUs, some are cancelled during the construction phase, some may be completed but become white elephants. Indeed, in contravention of Albert Hirschman’s classic ‘hiding hand’ approach that glorifies ignorance as a benign force in design and implementation, ‘the average project is in fact undermined by a double whammy of substantial cost overruns compounded by substantial benefit shortfalls’ (Flyvberg 2016, 176).

Presently, too little is understood about when or why infrastructure investments fail with the ‘when’ here identified as the temporal/spatial ‘point-of-failure’ within the project: at the pre-planning, pre-construction, construction, decommissioning phases or beyond. This Mini Conference has a global focus to move beyond much scholarly output that has used the BRI as a main unit of analysis. Exploring when and why infrastructure projects fail is critical for how we understand some of the most important tangible and intangible aspects of our daily lives. Multiple interconnected institutional frameworks, state-socialist legacies, environmental breakdown, geopolitical tensions, sectoral diversity, and infrastructure requirements impact relations between the economy and society in multifaceted ways. Investigating these dimensions will instil a deeper comprehension of the global infrastructure ‘story’, illuminating the often-overlooked aspect of project failure, an outcome of equal importance to project success.

To address this shortfall in knowledge, this Mini Conference seeks to understand the politics and political economy of ‘infrastructure failures’ (as defined above). We encourage participants to provide analysis across scholarly boundaries, and as such proposals engaging with literature within the disciplines of development studies, economic sociology, human geography, political economy, politics, post-colonial studies, and cognate fields of inquiry are welcomed. We encourage submissions that provide either empirically informed theorisations or new empirical analyses using qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. Finally, we intend for these contributions and others to feed into a Special Issue in *Review of International Political Economy* to be submitted in September 2024, with publication expected in 2025.

We encourage work that provides empirically informed theorisations and/or new empirical analyses using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. Themes for submissions include but are not limited to the following:

- Explorations of how infrastructure investment can fail and therefore neglect to deliver economic ‘benefits’ to the host city, region, or state etc.
- What such infrastructure failures mean for current theoretical approaches in fields such as development studies; international relations; political economy; post-colonial studies etc.
- The impact of capital ‘variety’: the relationship between infrastructure failure and its capital sources e.g., private or state capital (or a hybrid of both)

- How sub/supra-national contexts (regional blocs) impact infrastructure failure. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; the African Union; BRICS; the European Union; the Eurasian Economic Union; MERCOSUR; NATO; The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation etc.
- The interaction of large-scale infrastructure projects with local/national/regional politics and political economies, and their responses and strategies
- The impact of infrastructure failure on labour relations
- The role of different infrastructure types in generating failure: tangible/accessible infrastructure such as airports, bridges, hospitals, railways, roads, schools etc. 'versus' intangible/inaccessible infrastructure such as 5G systems, augmented reality, drones, military procurement etc.
- Environmental impacts: how far 'green politics' affects or is affected by infrastructure failure
- The impact of COVID-19 on investor relations: the recalibration of investment streams and their role in infrastructure failure
- 'New' conceptualisations on infrastructure failure
- Spatiality and scalarity of infrastructure failure: how states' positions in the global economy shape their infrastructure development and attract investment
- The role of sectoral politics in infrastructure failures e.g., automobiles; digital; energy; health; manufacturing; transport etc.
- Infrastructure project failure within the context of Sino-US global rivalry and/or geopolitical processes that enable/disable specific investment activities