world conference on research in SOCIAL SCIENCES

21 - 23 November 2025 Copenhagen , Denmark

Concrete Trust: Building South Africa's Infrastructure through Social Negotiations and Institutional Alchemy

Xolani Ngonini

Trans
Caledon Tunnel Authority, South Africa

Abstract

South Africa is currently facing a crucial juncture, where the country's economic growth and long-term sustainability heavily depend on addressing a significant infrastructure shortfall. In the energy, water, and transport sectors, many projects encounter major obstacles due to community protests, investor hesitation, and widespread public mistrust. The fundamental issue is not a lack of technical solutions or financial resources but a deficit in social trust. Despite implementing ambitious initiatives, such as the National Development Plan 2030 and the National Infrastructure Plan 2050 (NIP-2050), designed to achieve the national vision of inclusive growth and align key development goals with concrete investments and outcomes, the country still grapples with an infrastructure investment gap. Community mistrust, investor reluctance, and fragmented governance often lead to project stalling. To address these problems, we propose shifting from traditional measures of "bankability" to a strategy that highlights socially embedded infrastructure development, which we call "institutional alchemy." This research contends that the success of infrastructure projects primarily depends on the establishment of early social agreements established before any physical construction begins. Involving multiple stakeholders in complex discussions helps create shared goals that unite communities, investors, and government bodies. This study employed a participatory research approach to examine three case studies of project implementation negotiations using real-world observations. Evidence from reviews suggests that projects emphasising social foundations encounter fewer delays, reduced conflict, and enhanced sustainability. These initiatives build crucial "concrete trust" for future investment. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can advocate for inclusive development benefiting all parties.

Keywords: Bankability and Belonging, Institutional Alchemy, Stakeholder Engagement, Concrete Trust, Tcta