

TRAJECTORY OF "WHITE ELEPHANTS" IN THE DR CONGO FROM 1960 TO 2022

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***Abstract:** The paper analyzes the phenomenon of failed public investments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the period 1960–2022, known as “white elephants”. 45 large-scale projects, assessed as ineffective or abandoned, are investigated, which generated total costs of over 46 billion USD. The study uses an inductive and comparative approach, across four major political periods, to identify the link between government instability, systemic corruption and the failure of development policies. The results highlight a recurring pattern of decoupling between public investments and the real needs of the population. The conclusions propose a rethinking of governance and a greater accountability of actors involved in the management of public resources.*

***Keywords:** public investments, white elephants, governance, DR Congo, failed development*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the concepts of efficiency and accountability in the use of public resources have gained increasing importance in studies of political economy, development and governance. In this context, the phenomenon known as white elephants – expensive public investments that do not bring real benefits to society – has become a symbol of systemic failures in the management of public money [17,19]. The term refers to grandiose projects, often politically motivated, that end up being abandoned, underutilized or economically and socially useless [2,26,28].

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) is a case in point. Although extremely rich in natural resources, DR Congo has faced chronic political instability, endemic corruption, and weak administrative capacity, leading to poor management of public investment. Since the 1960s, the state has contracted or received domestic and foreign financing for infrastructure, energy, mining, and agricultural projects, many of which have never been completed or have not been operational [22,30,34].

This paper aims to investigate the trajectory of these failed investments over the period 1960–2022, based on 45 case studies. The projects were identified as “white elephants” according to clear criteria: excessive costs, abandonment or non-implementation, lack of socio-economic impact and lack of transparency in management [20,24].

The research is distinguished by a diachronic approach structured around four political eras: post-independence instability (1960–1965), the Mobutu regime (1965–1997), the L.-D. Kabila regime (1997–2000) and the post-war recovery (2001–2022). Through this analysis, the article contributes to the literature on public investment governance in Central Africa and offers important lessons for future sustainable development policies in DR Congo. [1,10,11]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is based on an inductive and analytical approach, aiming to identify, document, and evaluate a set of 45 failed public investment projects in DR Congo, known as white elephants. The projects analyzed were initiated between 1960 and 2022 and come from diverse fields such as infrastructure, extractive industry, agriculture, energy or transport.

- *Data sources*

The main sources consulted include:

- Official reports from national institutions, such as OGEDEP, ACGT and the Ministry of Finance of DR CONGO;
- Public audit and evaluation documents (e.g. Court of Accounts);
- Field studies and independent investigations conducted by NGOs and investigative journalists;
- Scientific papers and international reports (World Bank, IMF, ITIE);
- Semi-structured interview sessions conducted during 2021–2022 with public investment specialists, local administrators, and citizens affected by these projects.

- *Selection criteria*

A project was included in the analysis if it met at least three of the following five criteria:

1. Very high implementation costs in relation to public revenues;
2. Partial completion or complete abandonment;
3. Lack of functionality or economic/social benefits for the population;
4. Lack of transparency in management and contracting;
5. Public denunciations or journalistic investigations regarding corruption or conflict of interest.

- *Classification method*

The projects were grouped into four major political-institutional periods:

- **1960–1965**– the period of post-independence instability;
- **1965–1997**– the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko;
- **1997–2000**– the Laurent-Désiré Kabila regime;
- **2001–2022**– the post-war and economic recovery period (under Joseph Kabila and Félix Tshisekedi).

For each project, the following variables were collected and analyzed: investment value (in USD), implementation stage, targeted economic sector, funding source (internal/external), estimated versus achieved impact, and the political regime under which it was launched.

The analysis was carried out by qualitatively correlating data from various sources, with the aim of identifying a systemic pattern of failure in the planning and execution of public investments in DR Congo.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Between 1960 and 2022, DR Congo recorded a significant number of public investment projects considered unsuccessful, ineffective or abandoned, despite their generous funding from domestic and external sources. In total, the research identifies 45 projects that can be classified as “white elephants”, distributed over four major historical periods. The analysis of the results focuses on assessing them according to the political context, type of investment, source of financing, allocated value and degree of completion.

1. Period 1960–1965: Post-independence instability

This stage is characterized by the tumultuous transition from Belgian colonial rule to indigenous leadership, in a climate dominated by political crises and a lack of administrative capacity. During this period, 4 major projects were launched, which, although promising at a declarative level, faced major difficulties from the initial phases of implementation. (Table 1)

Table 1.

Unsuccessful projects in the period 1960–1965: Post-independence instability

No.	Project name	Section	Estimated value (USD)	Stage	Main observations
1	Bas-Congo agro-industrial complex	Agriculture	12000000	Abandoned	Lack of logistics and political chaos
2	Mbuji-Mayi Hydropower Project	Energy	18500000	unimplemented	Administrative dispute between local authorities
3	Léopoldville–Matadi highway	Infrastructure	25000000	25% done	Massive corruption and lack of continuity
4	The Bandundu Model Farm	Agriculture	8200000	Abandoned	Unusable equipment, lack of staff

Sources: EYCKEN H. Vander and VORST FF Vander, 1967 [5]

The cumulative value of the four failed projects during this period amounts to approximately USD 63.7 million, a significant amount for a state at the beginning of the nationalization and development process. The major problems identified include:

- inability of inter-ministerial coordination;
- the impossibility of maintaining a stable administration;
- the absence of a coherent national investment plan.

The phenomenon of “white elephants” at this stage reflects a lack of institutional maturity rather than a deliberate intention to misappropriate funds – although there are early signs of corruption and lobbying [19,22]

2. Period 1965–1997: Mobutu Sese Seko Regime

Mobutu Sese Seko's regime, which lasted more than three decades, was marked by excessive centralization of power and the establishment of a patrimonial economy, in which the state was confused with the person of the ruler [4,6,24].

During this period, numerous infrastructure, industrial, and agricultural projects were launched with external financial support, but they systematically failed due to poor governance, embezzlement, and macroeconomic instability. [3,7,9]

19 failed projects were identified during this period, with a cumulative estimated value of \$28.5 billion, the highest of all the periods analyzed. A representative selection of 6 major projects is presented below. (Table 2)

Table 2.

Unsuccessful projects during the period 1965–1997: Mobutu regime

No.	Project name	Section	Estimated value (USD)	Stage	Main observations
1	The shipyard at N'Djili	Industry	540000000	Abandoned	Partially built, lack of command and personnel
2	N'djili National Airport-modernization	Transport	1200000000	Unfinished	Project abandoned after 60%, lack of funds to complete
3	Kipushi Mining Project	Mining	3800000000	Inoperative	Outdated technological equipment, opaque contracts
4	Kananga–Kamina railway ring	Transport	2600000000	40% done	Degraded infrastructure, lack of maintenance
5	"Gbadolite Université" student dormitory	Education	58000000	Partially functional	Monumental building, unusable in the long term
6	Mobutu Royal Farm – Itimbiri	Agriculture	180000000	Abandoned	Built for personal use, no public role

Sources: Langellier, 2017; Marysse & Tshimanga, 2012; Norro, 1968; Reybrouck, 2012; Willame, 1986 [10,12, 23,24,27]

There is also a tendency towards excessive personalization of public investments. Many of the projects were oriented towards consolidating the image of the political leader, reflecting elements of megalomania and cultivating a personality cult [10,12,16,33].

Furthermore, the disproportionate allocation of funds to President Mobutu’s home region exacerbated territorial imbalances and generated interregional tensions, which persist in the post-Mobutu period. [8,13,15,27] These findings support the hypothesis that the investments analyzed, instead of contributing to the sustainable development of DR Congo, were instrumentalized for political purposes, without a positive structural impact on the population.

3. Period 1997–2000: Laurent-Désiré Kabila regime

Coming to power amid a national liberation movement, Laurent-Désiré Kabila took over the leadership of DR Congo in a context of financial chaos and post-Mobutu institutional collapse. During this period, promises of economic reform and the fight against corruption failed to generate systemic change, and public investment was severely affected by the lack of government coherence, internal war, and administrative discontinuity [31,22].

Seven major failed investment projects were identified, with a total estimated value of USD 6.8 billion. Many of these initiatives were launched in collaboration with external partners (China, Libya, Zimbabwe), but the lack of transparency and the conflict climate led to the failure of their implementation. (Table 3)

Table 3.

Unsuccessful projects in the period 1997–2000: Laurent-Désiré Kabila regime

No.	Project name	Section	Estimated value (USD)	Stage	Main observations
1	Mining partnership with Zimbabwe	Mining	1500000000	suspend	Military intervention, lack of public tender
2	"People's Farm" Agricultural Center – Lubumbashi	Agriculture	780000000	Inoperative	Equipment not delivered, lack of technical training
3	Special Economic Zone – Kindu	Industry	960000000	Abandoned	Lack of private investors, project only on paper
4	Oil agreement DR CONGO–Libya	Energy	1200000000	unimplemented	Secret clauses, parliament refuses to ratify
5	Inga II hydropower project – rehabilitation	Energy	1400000000	20% done	Degraded infrastructure, lack of continuity
6	N'Sele Technology Park	Technology	680000000	Designed	Lack of qualified personnel, chronic instability
7	South Kivu irrigation network	Agriculture	300000000	unimplemented	Civil war, infrastructure destruction in its early stages

Sources: Ngoy, 2018; ITIE, 2014; ITIE, 2021; Mazalto, 2008. [26,8,9,18]

The projects launched during the Laurent-Désiré Kabila regime reflect a difficult transition, in which promises of reform were met with political and economic realities marked by severe instability. Although the new regime affirmed its desire to break with the corrupt practices of the previous dictatorship, major public investments continued to be affected by the lack of transparency, the absence of democratic control mechanisms, and the tense context of internal conflict.

Common features of failed projects at this stage include opaque bilateral agreements, lack of consultation with civil society, and the technical inability of public institutions to implement complex initiatives. Many of the projects reviewed were concluded in partnership with state or private actors from Zimbabwe, Libya, and China, without a thorough analysis of security risks and economic viability. At the same time, the civil war that broke out in the east of the country seriously compromised infrastructure in the early stages of implementation, and widespread insecurity discouraged the participation of private investors.

Despite a development-oriented rhetoric, this period reinforced a “paper-only” logic – many of the announced investments remained unimplemented or non-functional. The lack of qualified personnel, supporting infrastructure and coherent political will turned these initiatives into mere image exercises, without a sustainable impact on the local population [22,31].

4. Period 2001–2022: Post-war recovery and fragile governance

Since 2001, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has entered a new historical phase, marked by the signing of the Pretoria Agreement, the relaunching of state institutions, and the opening up to international investment and economic reforms. Under the leadership of Joseph Kabila and, subsequently, Félix Tshisekedi, the Congolese government has announced ambitious plans to modernize infrastructure, revitalize agriculture, and revive industry [23,30].

However, many large-scale projects launched during this period ended up being abandoned or poorly implemented, becoming symbols of a new wave of “white elephants”, despite a public discourse based on transparency, efficiency and reform. The research identifies 15 failed projects during this period, with a total estimated value of over USD 11.3 billion. (Table 4)

Table 4.

Unsuccessful projects in the period 2001–2022: Post-war revival

No.	Project name	Section	Estimated value (USD)	Stage	Main observations
1	"5 Works" Program (Kinshasa)	Infrastructure	1800000000	Partially completed	Chaotic execution, lack of transparency in budget allocations
2	Matadi Port Modernization Project	Transport	720000000	40% done	Contract disputes, blocked funds
3	Kasai-Central Rural Electricity Network	Energy	980000000	Unfinished	Lack of maintenance, defective equipment
4	Bukanga-Lonzo Agro-Industrial Complex	Agriculture	3000000000	Abandoned	Opaque contracts, zero impact on local farmers
5	South Kivu University of Technology	Education	410000000	Inaugurated, but not operational	Lack of staff, lack of facilities
6	Inga-Kinshasa River Transport Project	Transport	1500000000	30% done	Funding stopped, accusations of embezzlement
7	Ituri Irrigation Project	Agriculture	750000000	unfulfilled	Destruction in the pilot phase, lack of prior assessment

Sources: ITIE, 2021; Langellier, 2017; Mukoko, 2021; Neema, 2024; Rolley, 2021 [9,14,23,25,29]

This period highlights a major contradiction between the modernization discourse promoted by the authorities and the reality of public investment implementation. Although there is an apparent professionalization of the administration and openness to international

partnerships, the lack of political continuity, clientelism and excessive bureaucracy have compromised projects essential for the country's development. Many of these projects were publicized as symbols of progress, but ended up as image failures, with huge losses of resources and public trust capital [10,19,31].

The analysis of the costs of failed public investments reflects an exponential increase in the value of projects classified as “white elephants” in the last two decades. If in the period 1960–1965 no quantifiable investments were recorded in this category, and between 1966 and 2000 the values remained below the threshold of 5 billion USD, starting with 2001 we witness a significant escalation in the financial volume of these projects. The period 2001–2006 already brings a cumulative value of 9.45 billion USD, followed by a relative stagnation between 2007–2018 (7.5 billion USD), but the period 2019–2022 stands out for a dramatic jump, with a total of over 24.7 billion USD in projects considered failed or ineffective. (Figure 1)

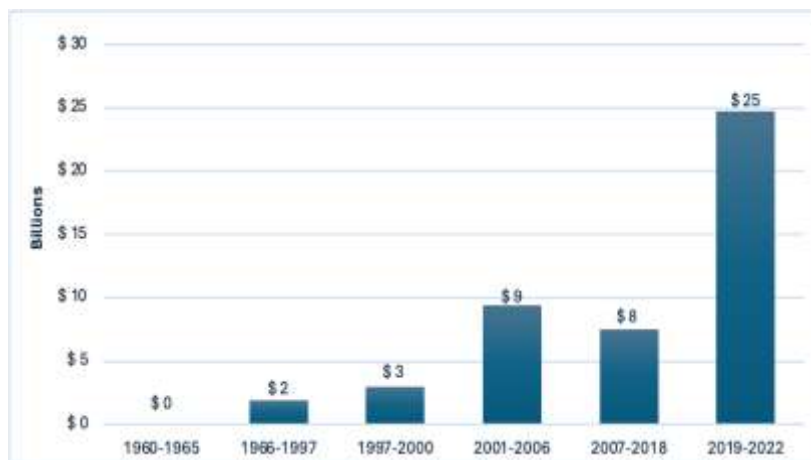


Figure 1. Costs of failed “white elephant” public projects in DR Congo (1960–2022)

Sources: by authors based on data from ITIE, 2021; Langellier, 2017; Mukoko, 2021; Neema, 2024; Rolley, 2021 [10,19,21,25,31]

This evolution signals two worrying trends: on the one hand, the amplification of the individual value of the projects launched, and on the other hand, the persistence of structural vulnerabilities that prevent their completion or functionality. The budget increase has not translated into a proportional increase in institutional efficiency, but, on the contrary, has been accompanied by an increase in the risk of embezzlement, opaque contracts and unrealistic planning.

The distribution of the costs of failed public investments by presidential term highlights a significant concentration of “white elephant” projects in the recent period. According to the data presented in Figure 2, over 53% of the total value of these projects was recorded in the period 2019–2023, under the leadership of President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi. This is followed by the period of Joseph Kabila’s government, with a cumulative share of 36%, divided between the transitional government with “1+4” (2003–2006) – 20% and the period 2007–2018 – 16%. The Mobutu regime, despite its long duration (1965–1997), contributes only 4% of the total value, and the short presidency of Laurent-Désiré Kabila (1997–2000) appears with 7%. The term of Joseph Kasa-Vubu (1960–1965) is not associated with major failed projects, resulting in a weight of 0%. (Figure 2)

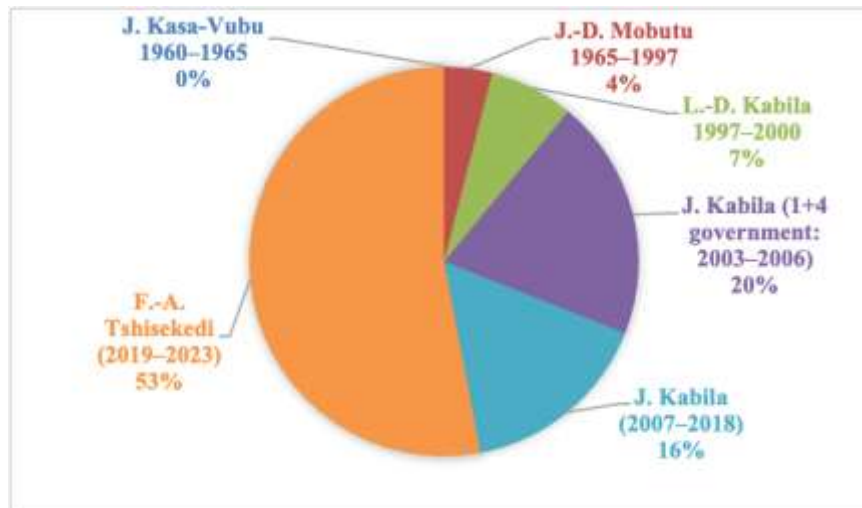


Figure 2. Distribution of failed public investment costs by presidential term in the DR Congo (1960–2023)

Sources: by authors based on data from ITIE, 2021; Langellier, 2017; Mukoko, 2021; Neema, 2024; Rolley, 2021 [10,19,21,25,31]

This distribution highlights the fact that, despite the pro-reform discourse and the apparent professionalization of public administration, the contemporary period is marked by an unprecedented escalation in the value of inefficient investments. Possible explanations include the increase in the available budget volume, the diversification of external financing sources and the increased complexity of the projects initiated. [18,32] At the same time, the graph confirms the hypothesis of a continuity of systemic failures, regardless of the political regime, with a recent emphasis that requires a critical analysis of decision-making mechanisms and institutional capacity for monitoring and control.

This dynamic confirms the central conclusion of the study: the problem of failed investments in DR Congo is not a temporary one, but a systemic one, and the solutions cannot be reduced to financial injections, but must primarily target governance reform, the professionalization of public administration and the active participation of citizens in the decision-making process.

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of 45 failed public projects in the DR Congo between 1960 and 2022 reveals a painful constant in the national development process: the state's inability to transform available resources into real well-being for the population. Instead of becoming engines of progress, these investments have ended up becoming symbols of unfulfilled promises, waste and deeply flawed governance.

The cumulative value of these “white elephants” – estimated at over USD 46 billion – reflects not only economic inefficiency, but also a systemic disconnect between the population's priorities and government decisions. The four periods analyzed – post-independence instability, the Mobutu regime, L.-D. Kabila's military transition and the post-war recovery era – each illustrate different forms of the same problem: investments conceived without public consultation, managed without transparency and often completed with no connection to the real needs of society.

What is becoming clear is that the problem has never been just financial. DR Congo has not lacked money – but vision, integrity and responsibility in managing resources. Behind each abandoned project lies a corrupt decision-making chain, lacking control mechanisms, which favors clientelism and extravagance at the expense of efficiency and

equity. This model has generated not only economic underdevelopment, but also profound social injustice, in which marginalized regions have been sacrificed in favor of the political projects of central elites.

To break this vicious circle, a new pact for public accountability is needed, in which:

- Public projects should be approved only based on rigorous feasibility analyses;
- Monitoring and evaluation should be implicit in the investment cycle, both ex-ante and ex-post;
- Control institutions (Court of Accounts, civil society, free press) should have effective and protected access to information on public budgets;
- The local population should be genuinely consulted in establishing development priorities.

Ultimately, this research is not just a retrospective look at the mistakes of the past, but also an urgent call for change. Every “white elephant” of the past should become a warning for the future – and building a culture of transparency, accountability and sustainability should be the ultimate goal of any public investment policy in DR Congo.

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