We are living in the most explosive era of infrastructure expansion in human history (1, 2). In the next 3 years, paved roads are projected to double in length in Asia’s developing nations (3); in the next three decades, the total length of additional paved roads could approach 25 million kilometers worldwide—enough to encircle the planet more than 600 times (1). Nine-tenths of all new infrastructure is being built in developing nations (1), mainly in tropical and subtropical regions that contain Earth’s most diverse ecosystems. In a world that is projected to have 2 billion vehicles by 2030 (4), we need a better understanding of the impacts of roads and other infrastructure on our planet, societies, and economies (1–3, 5)—and more effective planning to ensure that the benefits of infrastructure outstrip its costs.

ROADS FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Government planners have often seen road expansion as a cost-effective means to accelerate economic growth and social integration. However, the magnitude and nature of such benefits vary widely and depend on local context. New or improved roads are particularly beneficial when they link rural farming populations efficiently to urban markets, allowing farmers to gain high crop prices and improved agricultural technologies while meeting growing urban food demand (1). In other settings, however, the benefits of new roads, and their potential risks, are far less certain. For example, road building in floodplains or steep terrain can unleash a Pandora’s box of environmental ills, such as land encroachment, wildlife poaching, forest fragmentation, exotic-species invasions, and illegal mining (1, 2). Even carefully managed projects can provoke societal hazards such as land speculation, corruption, cost overruns, and political conflict (5, 6). In worst-case scenarios, projects can collapse, stranding large financial investments and natural assets. Unpaved tropical roads can quickly become unusable because of deep rutting from vehicle use in the wet season (3, 6). For such reasons, road-expansion schemes have inconsistent, and sometimes clashing, impacts on human agriculture, recreation, aesthetics, and the costs of ecological restoration. Through its impacts on water quality and fish-breeding sites, planned road expansion in the Lower Mekong Basin could negatively affect fisheries worth an estimated U.S.$2 billion per year; similarly, deforestation from forest road-building in Aceh province, Indonesia, is costing about U.S.$15 million per year in flood-prevention measures (6).

Waves of new roads cutting into intact or critical habitats can unleash a Pandora’s box of environmental ills, such as land encroachment, wildlife poaching, forest fragmentation, exotic-species invasions, and illegal mining (1, 2). Even carefully managed projects can provoke societal hazards such as land speculation, corruption, cost overruns, and political conflict (5, 6). In worst-case scenarios, projects can collapse, stranding large financial investments and natural assets. Unpaved tropical roads can quickly become unusable because of deep rutting from vehicle use in the wet season (3, 6).
Access roads enable rapid ecosystem destruction in tropical regions, including the lowland rainforest in Sarawak, Borneo, Malaysia.

The unprecedented pace of infrastructure expansion is generating intense global interest. A meeting of more than 160 leading financiers, decision-makers, ecologists, and social-development specialists in Hanoi, Vietnam, in May 2017 (3) showcased state-of-the-art thinking about strategies to limit the environmental impacts of roads, but also revealed their limitations. Some experts asked participants to map out a new road between two rural towns while minimizing both construction costs and environmental damage—a surprisingly challenging exercise in real-world planning. Strategies such as clever landscaping or vegetation planting to help vulnerable wildlife species, such as forest elephants, traverse a highway are expensive and may do little to increase animal movements. Furthermore, they do not address the major impacts of infrastructure expansion on carbon emissions, water quality, and other environmental services.

The Hanoi forum also revealed deep rifts among those who are planning, funding, and evaluating infrastructure. The gulf between many ongoing road schemes and economic reality is striking. For example, trillions of dollars are being invested in road construction in high-rainfall tropical environments. Here, rapid slumping, potholing, and flooding can render expensive paved roads virtually impassable in just a few years, precluding access to the forest lands, minerals, or timber for which they were initially constructed (6). Typically, too much funding is being earmarked for the initial construction of ambitious new road networks and too little for their ongoing maintenance (6). Few roads are adequately engineered for challenging local conditions, and many suffer from shoddy construction, because road contractors cut corners on materials such as road bases and cement while siphoning off construction funds (10). World Bank studies suggest that typically 15 to 30% (and in some cases, up to 60%) of road funding in developing nations is lost to cartels and corruption (6).

An urgent concern is that new roads and the dramatic land-use changes they catalyze are penetrating rapidly into many of the world’s last wild places. From 1993 to 2009, the extent of global wilderness declined by about 10% (11); 70% of the world’s forests now occur within 1 km of a forest edge (12), reflecting a widespread decline of intact core habitats. Too often, the specific routes and siting of infrastructure projects are determined by factors such as political patronage, corruption, or a desire to consolidate national claims to remote frontier territories (6). Cost-benefit analyses frequently ignore or underestimate key challenges—such as the effects of inflation, the expense of servicing project debt, and long-term environmental and social costs—on the financial viability of infrastructure projects. This creates strong biases in favor of project approval, even for marginal or high-risk ventures (5, 13).

NEW MONEY, NEW DANGERS

Such challenges are exacerbated by profound changes in the world of major multilateral banks (14). New institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Chinese Import-Export Bank are heavily funded, and their strategic approaches focus partly on cutting through lengthy environmental and social checklists to push big infrastructure projects ahead quickly. This contrasts with the approaches of multilateral lenders such as the World Bank, which after years of criticism have gradually improved their safeguards and project-management procedures. Yet last year, the World Bank announced that it was streamlining its own environmental and social rules, in a move that was partly provoked by its desire to remain competitive with the new lenders (14). Will decades of important safeguards survive or be left partially in tatters, replaced by meaningless greenwashing?

In addition to multilateral banks, private capital—from mutual funds, insurance groups, and other large institutional investors—is a growing driver of global infrastructure expansion (15). It is far from certain whether private financiers will support projects that strive to balance environmental and social criteria with profitability. Most investors remain strongly profit-oriented, although there is growing interest in creating projects that can compete financially with traditional infrastructure schemes by proactively reducing their long-term environmental and social risks (15). Other innovators, meanwhile, are trying to devise new mechanisms to attract private funds for more-sustainable projects, such as by emphasizing the many advantages of protecting natural capital (16).

PROACTIVE PLANNING

Traditional environmental impact assessments (EIAs, see the table) are widely seen as too myopic and transient to rein in the negative consequences of new infrastructure projects. But that is about where the harmony ends. Some planners believe that broader assessments such as strategic EIAs (SEAs) and social cost-benefit analyses—which embrace geographically wider perspectives while considering both the indirect and direct impacts of projects (17)—
can forge a better balance. Others, such as ourselves, look favorably on these broader approaches but see them as inadequate unless urgently married to proactive land-use and infrastructure planning (1). The latter approach—as embodied in the global road-mapping scheme (1)—seeks to zone regions or nations to maximize the socioeconomic benefits and minimize the environmental costs of all new developments. We and other researchers are currently using it to compare the relative desirability of massive development corridors in sub-Saharan Africa (18), and of roads and other infrastructure projects across Indochina (19) and the Asia-Pacific region.

A critical reason for pushing proactive planning is that many infrastructure projects instigate large-scale land-use change.

Assessing infrastructure

Some advantages and disadvantages of environmental impact assessments (EIAs), strategic environmental assessments (SEAs), and strategic land-use planning [as typified by the “global road-mapping” strategy (1); www.global-roadmap.org]. For further details see the supplementary table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>DISADVANTAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EIAs</td>
<td>Generally fast (less than a year) and relatively inexpensive</td>
<td>Typically narrow geographic focus and short-term impact time frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well-known and established protocols</td>
<td>Often based on grossly inadequate data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandatory for major projects in most nations</td>
<td>Rarely implemented and monitored rigorously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEAs</td>
<td>Broader spatial and temporal focus than EIAs</td>
<td>More expensive and time consuming than EIAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More emphasis on indirect or longer-term impacts</td>
<td>Costs are borne by governments; not project proponents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May account for other existing or planned developments</td>
<td>Not legally required in most nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic land-use planning</td>
<td>Complementary to EIAs and SEAs</td>
<td>Requires access to moderate to high-resolution data for relevant environmental and infrastructure variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyses can often be based on publicly available data sets</td>
<td>Requires some expertise in modeling spatial data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Considers cumulative impacts of multiple development projects on rural livelihoods and habitat integrity</td>
<td>Not widely applied or required by legislation in most nations</td>
</tr>
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In the Brazilian Amazon, roads are overwhelmingly the strongest correlate of forest loss, with 95% of all deforestation occurring within 5.5 km of a legal or illegal road (20). In the Amazon, as elsewhere, deforestation first spreads along an initial road and then proliferates to an expanding spider web of illegal secondary and tertiary roads. The only real solution is to avoid the first cut: to not build new roads in intact forests in the first place. If one must build forest roads, such as for a logging or mining operation, then close the roads as quickly as possible when the project is completed (1).

This hard-won perspective can create a sharp divide between those promoting new roads and those attempting to limit their impacts. The first group sees many infrastructure projects as inevitable—a kind of cure-all for sluggish economic growth, food security issues, and other human development challenges. The only realistic solution, they opine, is to use local tactics such as biodiversity corridors or wildlife overpasses to help preserve nature and its benefits, while accepting that a nearly ubiquitous human footprint is unavoidable (3). The second group, among which we count ourselves, says this is dangerously simplistic, not least because the imperiled species and natural services that we most urgently need to maintain can be easily destroyed or severely damaged by human activities.

The recognition that many important financial, environmental, and social costs are not adequately captured in cost-benefit analyses for infrastructure projects may help most effective way to achieve this is proactively zoning Earth’s land regions and subregions such that development is concentrated in agriculturally suitable areas, especially where most native vegetation has already been cleared. Such areas are prime locales for new or improved roads, which increase transport efficiency and access to growing urban markets for farmers, while attracting investments (such as for improved farming technologies and medical and educational services) that enhance rural livelihoods (1, 19). The vital mirror side of this type of proactive infrastructure zoning (1) is to maximize road-free areas where habitats are intact and well-connected and where maintaining high environmental values is paramount. With such proactive planning, it is clearly possible to devise cost-effective scenarios that vigorously benefit humanity while lessening impacts on our natural environment.

REFERENCES AND NOTES


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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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Roads to riches or ruin?
William F. Laurance and Irene Burgués Arrea

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