

INFRASTRUCTURE CAN NO LONGER BE CONSIDERED IN ISOLATION: THE WORLD INFRASTRUCTURE FORUM IS LAUNCHED TO CONNECT THE SYSTEMS THAT SUSTAIN OUR SOCIETIES



From left to right: José Miguel Atienza, Dean of the UPM School of Civil Engineering; Stéphane Straub, Chief Economist for Infrastructure at the World Bank Group; Ali Jadbabaie, Head of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at MIT; and Carmen Marín, Executive Director of WIF.

- MIT, UPM, the World Bank Group and UT Austin launch the World Infrastructure Forum to address the transformation of infrastructure in the era of digitalisation, AI and climate change.
- The new international forum, which will hold its first summit in Madrid on 28 and 29 October, will bring together more than 350 leaders from over 40 countries to address the future of energy, artificial intelligence, infrastructure finance, mobility, resilience and critical infrastructure.
- More than 2 billion people worldwide lack access to safe drinking water, while 685 million have no access to electricity.
- 57% of the world's population — more than 4.7 billion people — live in cities, and only half have adequate access to public transport.



Madrid, September 2, 2026 – The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), the World Bank Group and The University of Texas at Austin today presented the World Infrastructure Forum (WIF) in Madrid, a new high-level international platform created to address the profound transformation infrastructure is undergoing as a result of advances in artificial intelligence, the energy transition, digitalisation, climate change and an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

During today's press conference, Carmen Marín, Executive Director of the WIF; Ali Jadbabaie, Head of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at MIT; José Miguel Atienza, Dean of UPM's School of Civil Engineering, both co-founders of the Forum; and Stéphane Straub, Chief Economist for Infrastructure at the World Bank Group, agreed that infrastructure can no longer be understood as a collection of isolated assets and must instead be approached as interconnected systems on which economic competitiveness, security, resilience and societal well-being depend.

Infrastructure at a Turning Point

As highlighted in the introductory manifesto video presented at the Forum (*Introducing the World Infrastructure Forum | Reimagining the Future of Infrastructure* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-H2PYjDGyIM>) the starting point for the World Infrastructure Forum is that the major transformations shaping our time are converging on infrastructure.

For the founders of the initiative, artificial intelligence is creating new demand for electricity, data centers and connectivity; the energy transition requires grids to be transformed and generation and storage capacity to be expanded; climate change is making it essential to design more resilient systems; urbanization is increasing demand for mobility, water, energy and urban services; and new geopolitical tensions have turned certain infrastructure assets into strategic assets.

“Infrastructure is no longer simply a collection of works designed to connect territories or facilitate economic growth. It has become the operating system of our societies,” said José Miguel Atienza during the presentation.

In this new context, the organizers believe that it is no longer sufficient to address energy, digital, transport, water or mobility infrastructure separately. Their growing interdependence requires a systemic approach and closer connections between disciplines and communities that have traditionally worked independently.

“We do not want to create simply another international conference. The WIF aims to become a permanent international platform for strategic thinking, cooperation and knowledge generation applied to the infrastructure of the 21st century,” explained Carmen Marín.

The World Infrastructure Forum is a non-profit initiative jointly led by MIT, UPM, the World Bank Group and UT Austin. It brings together decision-makers from academia, business, finance, technology and the public sector. Its objective is to connect knowledge, investment, innovation, public policy and business expertise in order to improve decision-making on the infrastructure of the future.

The Infrastructure Challenge Is Also a Development Challenge

According to the World Bank Group's Chief Economist for Infrastructure, the transformation of infrastructure cannot be analyzed solely from the perspective of the world's most developed economies. A fundamental part of the challenge is ensuring that developing countries have access to the basic infrastructure they need to generate growth, employment and opportunities.

Straub highlighted the scale of today's infrastructure gaps:

- **685 million people** worldwide, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa, still lack access to electricity.
- **Millions of people** live more than two kilometres from a road that is passable throughout the year.
- **Only around half of the world's urban population** has adequate access to public transport.
- **2.1 billion people** lack access to safely managed drinking water, while **3.4 billion** do not have access to safely managed sanitation services.
- **2.6 billion people** still do not use the Internet.

These figures show that the infrastructure debate of the future must simultaneously address the technological transformation of advanced systems and the need to extend access to basic infrastructure to those who still lack it.

“Infrastructure is an essential condition for development. Where reliable roads, electricity, safe water, sanitation, public transport or digital connectivity are lacking, people's and businesses' opportunities are also constrained,” said Stéphane Straub.

In this regard, the World Bank Group's Chief Economist for Infrastructure highlighted the importance of international initiatives aimed at closing these gaps, including Mission 300, which seeks to expand access to electricity in Africa, and Water Forward, which focuses on promoting solutions to improve water security.

Straub also stressed that knowledge and evidence must play a central role in infrastructure investment decisions, and announced that the World Bank Group will contribute to the WIF as a knowledge partner, bringing its global experience, research and accumulated knowledge from its work with countries around the world.

Among the World Bank Group's recent publications that will help inform this debate is the *Infrastructure Foundations* report (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/infrastructure/publication/infrastructure-foundations-from-current-assets-to-future-growth>), which examines the role of infrastructure as a foundation for economic and social development.

Artificial Intelligence Is Also an Infrastructure Revolution

Ali Jadbabaie's contribution focused on one of the most profound transformations underway: the impact of artificial intelligence on the physical systems that underpin the digital economy.

“The artificial intelligence revolution is also an infrastructure revolution,” said the Head of MIT's Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

The expansion of AI is increasing demand for data centers, electricity, cooling, water and connectivity, making the relationship between digital and energy infrastructure increasingly close.

Jadbabaie warned that the challenge is no longer exclusively technical and requires much closer collaboration between engineers, data scientists, artificial intelligence experts, energy specialists, researchers, companies, governments and investors.

“We have to learn how to design infrastructure that can evolve,” he argued.

This need is particularly relevant because of the different speeds at which physical infrastructure and digital technologies evolve. Many physical infrastructure assets have useful lives of between 30 and 100 years, while digital technologies evolve in much shorter cycles.

This means that systems must be designed to incorporate innovation, new data and new capabilities throughout their entire lifespan.

Urbanization Will Increase Pressure on Infrastructure

José Miguel Atienza also highlighted the urban dimension of the challenge.

In 2024, around 57% of the world's population — more than 4.7 billion people — already lived in cities. The United Nations forecasts that this proportion will reach approximately 68% by 2050, meaning that close to 6.7 billion people will then live in urban environments.

This means that over the coming decades, infrastructure for mobility, energy, water, sanitation, housing, connectivity and urban services will need to be expanded and transformed to respond to a growing urban population.

“Never before have so many people simultaneously needed such a profound transformation of the systems that sustain urban life,” Atienza said.

According to the Dean of UPM's School of Civil Engineering, planning must incorporate resilience, sustainability, technological adaptation and the ability to evolve from the outset.

Resilience, he explained, should not be limited to responding to natural disasters, but should also encompass the capacity of infrastructure to maintain essential services in the face of extreme weather events, cyberattacks, supply-chain disruptions and geopolitical shocks.

Decisions That Will Shape Generations

Another characteristic that distinguishes infrastructure from other economic assets is its extraordinary longevity.

Many infrastructure assets have useful lives of between 30 and 100 years, meaning that decisions taken today can shape the competitiveness, security and quality of life of societies for generations.

For this reason, Atienza argued that the question can no longer simply be how much should be invested.

“We need to ask ourselves what infrastructure we will need 30, 50 or even 70 years from now,” he said.

This perspective also requires broadening the concept of the value generated by infrastructure. A railway line, an electricity grid or a digital infrastructure asset does not generate only a direct financial return. It can also transform productivity, mobility, territorial cohesion, innovation capacity and a country's strategic security.

A Challenge That Requires Capital, Knowledge and Talent

For Stéphane Straub, the scale of infrastructure investment needs makes it essential to combine public and private resources and develop new financing mechanisms.

The challenge requires mobilizing private capital, promoting public-private partnerships, strengthening the capacity of financial institutions and multilateral organizations, and creating stable regulatory frameworks that provide investors with certainty.

But alongside financial capital, there is another strategic resource: talent.

The infrastructure of the future will become increasingly complex and will require professionals capable of understanding engineering, technology, economics, finance, sustainability and risk management simultaneously.

“Human capital will be just as strategic as financial capital,” Straub stressed.

A Forum to Connect Knowledge, Investment, Technology and Public Policy

The World Infrastructure Forum has been created precisely to provide an international space where these different communities can work together.

“We do not want to create simply another international conference. The WIF aims to become a permanent international platform for strategic thinking, cooperation and knowledge generation applied to the infrastructure of the 21st century,” explained Carmen Marín.

The initiative is jointly driven by MIT, UPM, the World Bank Group and The University of Texas at Austin, and has an international, interdisciplinary, independent and long-term vocation.

Its objective is to connect governments, companies, financial institutions, multilateral organizations, universities, technology centers and investors in order to share knowledge, anticipate trends, identify risks and opportunities, and contribute to better infrastructure decision-making.

“The infrastructure of the 21st century does not need only more investment or better technologies. Above all, it needs better decisions,” said Marín.

Madrid to Host the First World Infrastructure Forum Summit

Today's presentation also provided an overview of the main contents of the first edition of the World Infrastructure Forum Summit, which will take place in Madrid on 28 and 29 October 2026.

The event will bring together international leaders from governments, businesses, financial institutions, multilateral organizations, universities and research centers to analyze the main forces transforming infrastructure.

The programme will address issues including:

- **Energy and the energy transition**
- **Artificial intelligence and digital transformation**
- **Infrastructure finance and investment**
- **Mobility and urban transformation**
- **Resilience and climate change adaptation**
- **Security and protection of critical infrastructure**
- **Governance, talent and capacity building**

The Summit will combine plenary sessions, executive dialogues, roundtables and specialized working groups, with the aim of moving from analysis towards the identification of priorities and solutions.

The event aims to become the first major meeting point for this new international community and the starting point for a permanent agenda on the infrastructure that will shape economies and societies over the coming decades.

A New Space to Anticipate the Future

The founders of the World Infrastructure Forum believe that the scale and complexity of today's challenges require a new model of international collaboration.

The combination of artificial intelligence, the energy transition, digitalization, urbanization, climate change and new geopolitical dynamics is simultaneously changing infrastructure needs and the way infrastructure is financed, designed and managed.

"Infrastructure is not simply a response to the needs of the present. It is the investment through which each generation builds its future," Carmen Marín concluded.

The World Infrastructure Forum Summit will take place in Madrid on 28 and 29 October, with the ambition of opening a permanent international conversation on how to build infrastructure that is more competitive, sustainable, resilient, secure and prepared for the future.

More information: The full press conference can be viewed at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/Ef0tO-xzkLo?si=AcC0QAda1qPd1pMA>