



The way forward for civil engineering and construction

Despite the civil engineering and construction industry being well established and professionally organised, it is shackled by politics, labour legislation that is incompatible with growth demands and the questionable strategy to recruit foreign engineers who often have substandard qualifications, says University of Pretoria (UP) Graduate School of Technology Management project management senior lecturer Dr Giel Bekker.



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“The negative state of the sector impacts on investor confidence and, with diminishing capital investment, the civil engineering and construction industry has become largely dependent on public infrastructure spend,” he tells Engineering News.

Therefore, the way forward seems straight-forward, says Bekker, highlighting that this would require the country to throw off the shackles of its recent mistakes, improve governance and fully implement the National Development Plan 2030 and the government's latest economic plans such as the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan. “The industry is ready and waiting,” he enthuses, notwithstanding the well-documented inhibitors that need to be mitigated.

Specifically, inhibitors include the loss of State technical capacity and competency; decreasing expenditure; a decline in fair, legal, honest, competitive and effective procurement; and late payments by government. “Further, similar to previously formulated and announced recovery plans, the recent recovery plan is philosophically and strategically sound,” Bekker highlights.

Drafting the intent is the easy part, while implementing the projects that will realise the intended benefits is the difficult part, he adds. Bekker says the current focus should be on the success factors for implementation, whereby “strategic plans should be converted into project implementation plans”. For instance, phase-duration schedules should now be replaced by detailed construction schedules and agreements, which should be transformed into urgent, day-to-day decision-making on procurement

items. “Serving the establishment should also be replaced by serving the projects. It sounds simple, but the mind and attitude shift required by the mandate holders appears to be more daunting than expected.”

Stakeholders will need to demonstrate their willingness to regain trust and projects can facilitate this process. “People will need to work together, communicate their needs and expectations, tend to their allocated responsibilities timeously and promote transparency,” he tells Engineering News, emphasizing that trust cannot be regulated, as it needs to be demonstrated and earned.

He comments that public entities should focus only on regulatory, policy and political obstacles, and address them to ensure that the macro environment is conducive to effective project implementation. Meanwhile, private entities should take full ownership of project implementation and be solutions-driven, rather than claims-driven.

“All the ingredients, recipe and equipment for success are available. All that is left is for the chef and kitchen staff to do their magic,” which could ultimately ensure long-term sustainability, especially for the civil engineering, as well as the construction, sectors, he concludes.

