

Editorial

The construction industry (CI) and its activities play an important role in socio-economic development and quality of life. The CI is considered to be one of the most important industries in any country's economy. It interacts with nearly all fields of human endeavours. In developing countries this role is very significant especially when you reflect on the characteristics of these countries below within the economic development equation.

The developing countries have very different climatic, cultural and economic conditions, yet they have many common characteristics. The following are some of the main characteristics

- Developing countries are further characterised by a lack of infrastructure and basic services and the capacity and resources to improve and maintain existing infrastructure, let alone cope with the demands of rapid urbanisation.
- While the developing countries consume far less resources, and releases far less greenhouse gasses than the developed countries, the environmental degradation experienced has a more direct and visible impact and present a more immediate threat to the physical survival of the poor.
- There are also high levels of inequity within developing countries, many countries having developed a dual economy with wealthy elite that has developed consumption patterns equal to those in developed countries, and the rest of the population living in abject poverty.
- The main sources of foreign income for most developing countries remain agricultural products and raw materials, and with the declining value of these commodities, these countries find it increasingly difficult to access the financing necessary to move towards industrialisation and a knowledge economy.
- There is strong grassroots ability for innovation in the use of building materials, settlement development and institutional structuring that can be regarded as one of the most important resources in developing countries.

The need for construction industries in developing countries to contribute towards minimising the challenges within the above characteristics above is fundamental, hence a significant part of the challenge falls on the shoulders of developing countries experts, researchers and government policy makers to find innovative ways towards addressing these challenges. The five papers presented in this special issue are part and parcel of various contributions directed at developing countries construction industries and the need to find appropriate solutions to the challenges.

In the first paper, George Ofori and Shamas-ur-Rehman Toor cast a critical eye on leadership and construction industry development in developing countries. Their

point of departure is "effective leadership" as one of the primary answers to the challenges facing construction industries in developing countries. In addressing issues of leadership the paper poses a number of questions on what leadership is; its importance; its relevance; how research on leadership has developed over time; current status on leadership; what is to be done; and finally an agenda is formulated for research on construction leadership.

Toong Khuan Chan and Poh Tin Hiap look critically at construction industries need to improve their performance. Using the Malaysian construction industry as a case study, the paper reports on the results of their study where a balanced scorecard was used to measure construction industry performance. Results on evaluation of critical success factors, strategic thrusts and recommendations to ensure that the industry master plan presents a balanced view to enhance the industry's competitive standing are reported. Finally, they provide a list of key performance measures for the Malaysian construction industry by linking each industry thrust with the relevant performance measures. Their findings could be used as a basis of undertaking similar studies in other developing countries.

PD Rwelamila's paper reports on research contribution to innovation in infrastructure development in Africa. Based on two preliminary research projects, the paper reports on the findings which were based on two primary objectives: assessment of previous research findings on the challenges of the African infrastructure sector (AIS) that are not currently being employed by researchers; and identification of the primary factors that are contributing to the disconnect between research findings and implementation of innovation in the sector. The paper reports that most challenges have solutions that have been described in various publications, while the majority of the challenges that necessitated these research projects continue to negatively affect the AIS. The paper advances a debate on the need to re-examine existing research findings and convert them to an applied form that is ready for use by practitioners and policy makers. Furthermore, a number of causes of the situation are identified and recommendations for addressing the challenges are given. Although reporting on the African situation, the research theme and study methodology could be replicated within individual countries or other continents.

Another timely paper by Mehdi Tadayon, Mastura Jaafar and Ehsan Nasri takes a closer look at issues of risk in large construction projects in Iran. The primary focus of the paper is on risk identification. They argue that by identifying risks in an early stage of project planning and assessing their relative importance, it is possible to identify methods which should be used to reduce risks and allocate the best people to mitigate them. In their study, they report that the most considerable types of risk in construction projects in Iran are financial risks, construction risks and demand or product risks. This is an interesting study which could be replicated in other developing countries.

The fifth and final paper is written by Mohd Suberi Ab. Halim, Mastura Jaafar, Omar Osman and Md. Shariff Haniff on contracting firms' failure and financial factors in the Malaysia construction industry. The paper examines the role of financial management in the success or failure of construction firms. The paper discusses

the sources of construction firms' failures in Malaysia and specifically emerging construction firms (Bumiputera). The Malaysian findings are relevant in addressing similar challenges facing emerging construction firms in other developing countries.

The challenges facing developing countries, which are reflected in their different industries (including construction industries), are not beyond reach. The papers in this Special issue are advancing various solutions to these challenges. It is expected that all construction industries stakeholders will reflect on the issues raised in these papers and embrace construction industry development with a purpose. The words of the foremost researcher on construction industry development in developing countries today should provide the point of departure in embracing what is advanced by these five papers. In one of his seminal papers, he had the following to say:

"The construction industries of developing countries must be improved as they are of critical importance to national socio-economic development. These industries have failed to meet the expectations of governments, clients and society as a whole. A comprehensive research programme is necessary to facilitate the development of appropriate policies and strategies for improving the performance of the industries ... Effective dissemination of the results of the research is also necessary ... It should be acknowledged that the proposals and recommendations to be applied in each country must be country-specific, and take into account of the cultural and resource contexts, as well as the governmental mechanisms and the business networks".

Cursing the darkness is not an option for developing countries researchers and practitioners both in public and private sectors. The only way to support the writers of these five papers is to light the candle through reflecting on their findings and recommendations.

P D Rwelamila
University of South Africa
Guest Editor