

LETTER TO EDITORS

A Response to George Ofori's Special Note

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Dear Editor,

I am writing in support of George Ofori's call for new thinking in respect of construction in developing countries. I believe, however, that it is necessary to unpack what we mean by both construction and developing countries.

In my view, it is not helpful to think of construction as one industry and that is just as true in so-called developing countries as it is in more mature economies. When we do, analyses and prescriptions for some sectors are not necessarily appropriate for all. For example, small scale domestic alterations or repair and maintenance is a distinctly different economic activity to large new commercial buildings or major infrastructure and what is amiss with them and how that should be addressed is also different.

In many poorer countries there is a particularly important sector often described as informal construction. The distinct characteristics of informal construction are outlined in a recent note for the World Bank (Meikle, 2011). Wells (2007) usefully identifies different aspects of informality – enterprises, employment, compliance with regulation of the construction process and compliance of the final product – and each of these requires attention but the issues are not necessarily conventionally "industrial".

In every country there is also a formal industry constructing public and private buildings, including housing, schools, hospitals, office and industrial buildings. This is commonly a national activity although there may be international participation in some larger or more complex projects. There is also a construction sector undertaking major infrastructure projects that can involve national and international contractors and sponsors and Public Private Partnerships (PPPs). These three sectors – informal, formal building and major infrastructure – do not comprise all of construction in developing countries but they illustrate the point about construction being a portfolio of industries, not a single industry. The problems in each are very different and the solutions to these are also different. And there is a wide range of products and processes within each sector and there are blurred boundaries between at least some of them. It would be helpful for broad sectors to be identified and their different issues to be addressed by policy makers and researchers.

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And, similarly, there is not one sort of developing country. Over the past few decades countries that were at similar levels are now very different in terms of national income and development. The technology choices available and project arrangements can vary markedly and it is important to consider not only construction sectors but also stages of development.

I do not want to overcomplicate the study of construction in developing – or developed – countries but just to point out that situations can vary and situations are important. And the issues are not only industry practices and procedures and corruption.

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