

A paradigm shift in the war on graft in the construction industry

By PATRICIA DE LILLE

The construction industry alters the nature, function and appearance of our towns, cities, communities and country, and makes an immense contribution to our quality of life.

As one of the largest industrial employers, and with huge annual capital investments, the industry accounts for the majority of the total amount of raw materials needed in the global economy, including iron ore, clay, sand, stone, gravel and other quarried material.

Because the sector is one of the most resource-intensive industries, the construction sector is at the vanguard of corruption.

Just as pots of honey attract flies, pots of money attract thieves, and unscrupulous people want a slice of the construction industry's booty. They converge on construction projects to divert a portion of the loot into their own hands.

Anti-corruption forum

For example, crooks defraud the state through the use of substandard construction material to make more profit and an added facilitation fee, as well as bribery and kickbacks, among others.

That is why the department of public works & infrastructure, the Special Investigating Unit and Infrastructure SA recently launched the Infrastructure Built Anti-Corruption Forum (IBACF).

The forum includes representatives from the National Prosecuting Authority, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, the Financial Intelligence Centre, Corruption Watch, Council for the Built Environment, Master Builders SA, South African Council for the Architectural Profession, Consulting Engineers SA, South African Black Technical & Allied Careers Organisation, the South African Bureau of Standards, Business Unity SA and the Human Sciences Research Council.

One may ask, why launch the IBACF now? All over the world, entrepreneurship and business development are impeded by corruption and self-serving institutions. Corruption is a major problem and a serious impediment to doing business. It also deals a major blow to the confidence of investors and society in the government. This is what we need to fix.

Most devastatingly, corruption steals from the poor. Our people need better roads, hospitals, schools and generally better infrastructure for better services, and we need better and more government buildings.

Follow a holistic approach

In order to address the corruption, it is essential to follow a holistic approach.

Actively combating corruption in the construction industry necessitates the elimination of factors contributing to this phenomenon, in addition to dealing with them in a preventative and suppressive manner.

The IBACF galvanised all stakeholders into action and ensures that infrastructure building projects are monitored more effectively and measures and systems are put in place to fight fraud and corruption and identify areas of co-operation to enhance prevention, detection, civil litigation and prosecution of fraud and corruption in the sector.

Corruption in the construction environment has run rampant for too long. The state has structures in place but the government cannot do this work alone and that is why we have brought private sector, public entities and civil society together in this forum.

We cannot allow the crooks to continue to steal billions meant for infrastructure. People, no matter who they are, cannot be allowed to continue to steal



Large construction projects in the private and public sectors are a magnet for corruption. Picture: Thapelo Morebudi

and stifle progress at the expense of the most vulnerable in our country.

The IBACF has been established in line with the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, which directs the strategic interventions that should be implemented in the sectors that are more prone and vulnerable to incidents of fraud and corruption.

The construction sector environment should be considered a major area that needs close attention for the achievement of sustainable development.

Corruption hurts investment

Let us not forget, in a world suffering from economic recession, one business that is booming is corruption.

Corruption, no matter what the scale, causes a trust deficit between the government and the private sector and does not instil confidence in the government by society and investors.

To regain the confidence of society and investors, we must show that the government is capable of holding the corrupt and delinquent accountable.

Corruption steals from the poor

Anyone involved in corrupt activities and found guilty of such must face the consequences. They must face the full might of the law.

One of the main objectives of the forum is to look into how whistleblowers can be incentivised and rewarded for coming forward with information on corruption that leads to successful prosecution.

Corruption is linked to most of the social ills in society today and if we are to make any progress as a

nation, we need a paradigm shift in our fight against corruption.

We need to change how we view and tackle corruption. We must change our attitudes and behaviour towards this scourge by denying corrupt people any opportunity or platform to normalise corruption.

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One only needs to follow the commission of inquiry into state capture to see the co-ordinated onslaught against the offices and agencies charged with fighting corruption. These campaigns are and were organised by powerful, moneyed and well-connected individuals keen on defeating the anti-corruption efforts.

Citizens bear the brunt

It is we citizens who daily bear the brunt of corruption when we are unable to access services because of demands for bribes.

We suffer when our friends and family members die or are maimed on poor roads because contractors have bribed their way through.

Ordinary citizens suffer when they can't access affordable food and decent health care because allocations were siphoned off by the crooks.

Corruption means our children cannot access quality education because there are no facilities, and books because the crooks haven't gotten their slice yet.

Pope Francis was spot on when he said "corruption is paid by the poor".

From what is coming out at the commission of inquiry into state capture, there is no doubt that most of the economic and political challenges facing our country can be attributed to corruption.

As a country, we spend too much time and money after the fact, when corruption has already occurred, trying to find out what went wrong. We need to put a greater emphasis on strategies to prevent and detect corruption, and this is what the IBACF will place emphasis on.

For SA as a country to effectively win the fight against corruption, the most important thing to do is collaborate.

As citizens who pay the price of corruption, we should all volunteer to give information on any activity suspected of being corrupt.

If we are to make any headway against corruption, we need a paradigm shift in the war against the scourge.

We need to change how we look at it and how we fight corruption in all our business sectors, including the infrastructure and construction sectors.

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