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# Causes of construction failures

## OPINION

Andrew Seymour

**T**he *Witness* recently published an article ("Newly constructed N3 highway near Peter Brown needs repairing", July 5) disclosing that "poor quality" materials were used in the refurbishments of the N3 highway between Peter Brown and Sanctuary Road off-ramps.

The article alleges that additional repairs to the highway will become necessary, undoubtedly a disheartening revelation to the commuters who've had to endure the disruptions and increased travel risk during this construction phase. Regardless of whether the allegations are correct, it does raise the question as to who, in the circumstances, would be accountable if it were the case that poor quality materials were used? While specifics pertaining to this case are yet unknown and Sanral has disputed the allegations, it's worth discussing briefly how such a circumstance may arise.

The project life cycle is generally straightforward. The employer, Sanral in this case, identifies a need — the highway requires repair. An engineer is appointed to design, detail and oversee the work, and a contractor is brought on board to execute the project. So, who is responsible for assuring the correctness of materials used and workmanship adhering to relevant standards? In essence,

everyone involved.

The engineer and project management teams must ensure the specifications are adhered to and that the work is delivered to the required standard, with due regard to public health, safety, and interest. The contractor is required to follow the engineer's specifications and deliver a high-quality project.

At the same time, the employer, a public entity, is obligated to ensure that suitable checks and controls are in place to confirm the delivery of a quality project. Failure of any party to discharge its obligations will invariably result in some form of liability being attached to it.

However, there is a broader consequence when a project such as this fails. Once more, a light shines on the systemic challenges faced by the construction industry in the private and public sectors. The industry grapples with a critical shortage of engineers, project managers and contractors with industry experience, resulting in inadequately resourced projects.

A stagnant economy results in fewer projects being implemented. This compels construction companies to reduce their profit margins to secure work in an ever-decreasing pool of available projects. This, in turn, impacts the ability of these companies to deliver a quality product.

Similarly, professional firms are operating in an increasingly competitive environment. This leads to a general reduction in fees in order to secure work and, subsequently, a compromised capacity to allocate sufficient resources to projects, be it

in design or supervision. An unfortunate yet notable decrease in the quality of professional graduates from tertiary institutions further exacerbates this problem.

Construction is vulnerable to corrupt practices, particularly in public works. This is manifest in numerous ways, such as appointments of unqualified service providers, bypassing of tender and procurement processes, and the delivery of sub-standard materials to acquire higher mark-ups. Meanwhile, the construction mafias are using threats and violence to demand significant portions of contracts, while the work they provide is virtually non-existent. Factor in the load-shedding schedules which hamper production times, along with escalating costs of materials, and the industry finds itself grappling with a multitude of problems that seem almost insurmountable.

Construction is an inherently complicated process that involves a number of moving parts and role-players that all have a part to play in determining how successful a project is.

The current environment facing the industry makes the prospect of delivering quality projects on time and within budget even more daunting. Unless there is intervention by government, professional bodies and role-players who are able to effect change, we should not be surprised to see more project failures, or poor quality projects being delivered.

• Andrew Seymour is a practising attorney and a professionally registered civil engineer with over 17 years' experience.