

Full Length Research Paper

Current challenges and problems facing small and medium size contractors in Swaziland

Wellington Didibhuku Thwala* and Mpendulo Mvubu

Department of Construction Management and Quantity Surveying, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Accepted 14 May 2008

The construction sector in Swaziland is not only a significant source of direct employment but also a sector which contributes, through its wide range of projects and operations. The Swazi economy is unable to deliver employment for a growing number of workers. Structural unemployment and poverty are persistent and growing problems in contemporary Swaziland. Small businesses have been advocated as an important means of generating employment in which Swaziland is not an exception. The paper first outlined the arguments that have been put forward for the development of small contractors in the construction sector in sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, the paper described the problems and successes that have been experienced in Swaziland in relation to small contractor development programme. The lastly, the paper concluded with recommendations for the future which will enhance the success of small and medium size contractors in Swaziland.

Key words: Contractor, construction, development, employment, programme.

INTRODUCTION

In Swaziland and other countries there seem to be general consensus that small enterprise are the mainstay of economic growth and prosperity. Small contractors can be powerful instruments of generating job opportunities as small contractors can perform small projects at different and remote geographical locations that might be unattractive to big firms or too costly for the big firms; low overheads enable small contractors to work at more competitive prices; large number of functional small and medium scale black contractors can help to decentralise the construction industry dominated by established large contractors; the relatively low skills and resources required at this scale can easily lower the entry point for the small and medium size owners to begin to participate in the industry; and a large number of functional Swazi owned contractors can develop a platform for growth and redistribution of wealth in Swaziland. Small businesses represent over 95% of the total number of business organizations in the United States of America (Abdelsamad and Kindling, 1978). However, Thompson (1991) points out those small businesses employ six out of every ten

people and have been responsible for more than half of all the innovations developed during the 20th century. Haswell and Holmes (1989) attribute small business failures to the following: managerial inadequacy, incompetence, inefficiency and inexperience in running a business venture.

At a time when the public sector and big business are shedding jobs, small businesses are maintaining real employment growth. The small contractor development programme falls under the Ministry of Public Works and Transport. The main mandate of the ministry is to ensure the provision and maintenance of a sustainable public infrastructure, an efficient and effective seamless transport system and network, regulation for a vibrant construction and transport industry, management of public service accommodation and the provision of meteorological services. In carrying out its mission, the Ministry is committed to upholding safety and environmental standards for socio-economic development by making the best use of the country's available resources. The following are the responsibilities of the ministry: construction and maintenance of Government buildings; construction and maintenance of public roads; administration of the Road and Outspan Act; planning and Regulation of Road Transport Services; Government Transport Administra-

*Corresponding author. E-mail: didibhukut@uj.ac.za.

tion; administration of the Road Traffic Act; administration of the Road Safety Act; Road Transportation Act; Government Housing; Royal Swazi National Airways Corporation; Civil Aviation; Meteorological Services; Regulation of Air Transport Services; and Regulation of Rail Transportation Services (Ministry of Public Works and Roads: Swaziland, 2007).

Emerging contractors in South Africa

In South Africa, the contractors enter the market at the lower end and in the general building contracting category, making the sector extremely competitive and unsustainable (CIDB, DPW, CETA, 2005) and the emerging contractor policies intended for black economic empowerment (BEE) are being used as job creation opportunities, which contributes to the over crowding of the emerging market. It is common for black businesses to be based on technical skills which are used to satisfy needs of the community. However, technical competence is no guarantee of business success. Operational (e.g. scheduling and ordering) and business (e.g. planning, financial control and budgeting) skills are vital to the success of any enterprise. It is precisely these skills which are often lacking in the black business and it is thus imperative that these skills are developed if the Industry is to expand to accommodate the meaningful black presence that is necessary for economic growth.

Small enterprises contribute positively to the economy of the country and to the survival of large numbers of people. However, the success of small enterprise is impaired by the common weaknesses from which many enterprises suffer. South Africa is faced with a large challenge of developing infrastructure in the communities which were previously disadvantaged, and also upgrading the existing infrastructure to cope with the high demand. This category of contractors is the preferred vehicle of delivery of infrastructure to communities (Ngala et al., 2005).

Financial constraints

The high competition among emerging contractors has contributed to increase financial failures of the emerging market, making the market unsustainable. The (CIDB: 2005) states that the large numbers of emerging contractors have moved into higher value public tendering in the R0.5m to R2m market, which is also becoming overly competitive. Emerging contractors should not tender for higher contract values until they have gained enough experience and have financial capacity to handle the Statistics South Africa (2005) states that from 1995 to 2005, about 5907 construction companies were formally liquidated. The CIDB (2004) states that much more than 90% of the emerging black contractors survive the first

five years. The CIDB further highlight that 1,400 construction companies were liquidated over the past three years larger contracts.

Emerging contractors feel that the banks are reluctant to deal with them unless they pay exorbitant interest rates and through compulsory business management services. Complexity, risks involved in the construction industry have led to enormous failures especially in small contractors and those small emerging contractors harboring the wrong impression that there is quick money to be made are the mostly affected (Ngala et al., 2005). Lack of access to finance both during pre- construction which disqualifies emerging contractors from meeting guarantee and performance bond requirements and during construction which leads to cash-flow problems, incomplete work and even liquidation are financial constraints facing emerging contractors.

Relationships between emerging contractors and suppliers

Emerging contractors do not have good relationships with their suppliers. In a functioning relationship, the material supplier provides credit to the contractor (30 - 90 day term), contractor pays on time and the cycle gets repeated. In an emerging supplier relationship, the supplier requires cash upfront and will not deliver the material until payment is made in full. The reason for this is if the supplier provides credit to the emerging contractor, the contractor is often unable to pay on time due to capacity or performance constraints. The reluctance by suppliers in the relationship with emerging contractors is caused by the following risk factors:

- I. History of emerging contractor's failure to complete projects which is very high.
- II. Systematic contractor payment processing delays, especially for construction works commissioned by the public sector.
- III. The potential for material losses due to theft, lack of appropriate storage and mismanagement by emerging contractor.

Late payment by clients

Emerging contractors run into problems due to late payments by the clients. A problem arises when the local council runs into budget difficulties and is unable to pay. The emerging contractor does everything right, his work is of good quality but the local council doesn't pay on time and the contractor ends up owing the bank and defaulting. The unlucky contractor, failing to repay loans on time had his business put into liquidation.

Difficulties when running a business

The Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB)

has presently concluded a reform measure which is used to grade the contractors, which are to a certain extent being contested at some quarters (CIDB, DPW, CETA, 2005). All these reform measures tend to concentrate on how to make projects accessible to the black contractors. They do not change the complex conditions of the contract performance procedure; they do not equip the contractors with the required capacity or competency that can achieve success.

In South Africa, problems facing small emerging contractors in the contractor development programs according to CIDB, DPW, CETA (2005) are as follows: usually open adverts are placed in the media calling on people to come out and participate; it is very difficult for a selection process to capture those with the proper drive, passion and ability to work as contractors; this brings wrong people in the programs and drives them easily on the way; the required academic qualification is usually matric or less; no prior technical and managerial skills or experience in construction related fields are required; few matric holders make rare success; most successful contractors have degree or diploma in construction related field, with 5 - 10 years technical and managerial work experience; inadequate training done at short period's in-between projects; unsuitable for the contractor's time and project need; inappropriate trainers; clear-cut grading criteria had been elusive; recently CIDB graded and categorized the contractors.

Due to lack of collateral, any one that gets credit from banks is subjected to high interest and financial risk management charges that make contracts unprofitable; in the ambition to grow big and make big profit, most of them take projects they do not have the necessary skills and financial resources to execute; the contractors tend not to employ qualified workers; they consider them expensive, but they fail while doing things all by themselves or with cheap, incompetent workers; they lack skills to properly program projects resources in monthly segments for healthy cash flow; they are not allowed front load due to lack of trust; they do not know how to prepare documents for timely payment; delayed payment; they do not seem to understand terms of contract conditions; do not know how to use applicable contract performance procedures to deal with clients; they do not get properly trained in this. They are usually considered incapable of doing competent work, which imperils their relationship with the client's agent; they do not seem to know how to use applicable contractual instruments regarding instruction, demand for specific performance, and payment; they are not properly trained; where they know these rules they fail to use them due to fear of being 'red listed'; in an attempt to make huge profit they cut specified quality, do bad work that falls short of the design standards and specifications. Rejection of such work usually leads to non-payment, conflict and in most cases collapse of the contractors; and those that manage to win profitable con-

tracts get only 2% profit if they are able to successfully complete the project; the situation seems discouraging.

International experience with regard to small and medium enterprise

In order to get a broader perspective of the environment and conditions within which contractors or Small Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) operate, it is imperative that we look at similar situations of small enterprise development in other countries. Bangladesh, Singapore and Malaysia have grappled with similar situations as far back as the post Second World War reconstruction period. These countries in different ways have a longer history and applied experience with regard to the development of a small business strategy. However, it must be recognised that different circumstances supported their initiatives, despite common experiences of the war devastation. In spite of positive circumstances in the above economies for Small Medium Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) to prosper, the strategies took at least ten years to unfold. This provides us with the opportunity to learn from other countries' experiences, both useful and harmful, for Swaziland's unfolding small business strategy.

All three countries add a different perspective about 'international best practice'. International best practice in these countries suggests that a strong institutional framework displays the following characteristics: a combination of financial and non-financial services delivered by separate institutions in close co-operation as part of a national strategy; targeted finance programmes i.e. broad based, industry based and sector based schemes with focused assistance e.g. machinery, factory premises, raw materials, training programmes- and technology; a detailed and comprehensive 'economic umbrella plan' with targets i.e. an overall vision and the inputs to be invested with clear detailed outputs within particular time frames; avoidance of ad hoc and disconnected Small Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMME) programmes. Programmes are part of the larger strategy or plan (Jaafar and Abdul, 2005) . A rapid delivery of programmes and an ability to rapidly shift programme focus and resources; ease of access to users; demand driven support; and a platform for interaction between public and private sectors with a strong emphasis on the planning role of the state.

Contractor accreditation process in Swaziland

A registration of accredited construction enterprises in Swaziland constitutes an essential tool for the industry transformation, for monitoring the performance of enabling environment programmes, and for ensuring compliance with the performance of public-sector projects. All construction enterprises engaged in public sector work,

Table 1. Contractor grading in Swaziland.

| Categories | Project Category Eligible to tender for |
|------------|--|
| Category 1 | Locally and internationally funded construction projects above R20 million. |
| Category 2 | Local and internationally funded construction projects above R10 million. |
| Category 3 | Local and internationally funded construction projects above R5 million. |
| Category 4 | Local and internationally funded construction projects above R1million. |
| Category 5 | Local and internationally funded construction projects above R500, 000.00 but below E3million. |
| Category 6 | Local and internationally funded construction projects below R500, 000.00. |

Source: Ministry of Public Works and Roads- Swaziland: 2007.



Figure 1. Map of Swaziland

or in receipt of State funding training or support functions, are required to be registered in a manner that will reflect their capacity and performance.

The registration process must address the following: the operation of a preference scheme, or approved public tender list, which would reduce industry and public sector cost associated with an all out open tender process at the same time supporting risk management; performance monitoring to enable the promotion of improved contractors and to ensure compliance where standards are violated; and; the targeting of resources to the emerging con-

tractors which are demonstrating progress and the withdrawal of support from those which have graduated or have failed to progress (Ministry of Public Works and Roads, 2007).

Contractor grading in Swaziland is one of the tools that are used to regulate the construction sector. The categories start from category 1 to 6. Table 1 shows the different categories. The small and medium size contractors in Swaziland fall between categories 2 to 6. The tender price category is below R500, 000.00 and less than R20m (\$1 = R8).

METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive survey of the current challenges and problems facing small and medium size contractors in Swaziland. Swaziland is divided into four administrative regions; that are Hhohho, Manzini, Lubombo and Shiselweni. 87 respondents were interviewed which includes consultants, contractors, financial institutions representatives and government officials. The respondents were distributed all over the four regions (Figure 1). Contractors and consultants were chosen by random sampling, judgmental analysis, and partly purposive decisions in order to have a wide representation of contractors and consultants in the sample. Two methods were mainly employed in primary data collection. These are in-depth interviews and questionnaire methods. Data was collected between the 1st of June 2007 and 30th July 2007 and 87 respondents were interviewed.

Findings

The problems facing small contractors are not unique to Swaziland. The vast majority of construction firms are small enterprises that rely on outsourcing personnel as required. This has severely affected skills training and the retention of expertise in the industry as construction workers become highly mobile, walking in and out of the industry, depending on performance in other sectors of the economy. The impact can be seen in the rigid adherence to management techniques and construction practices handed down from colonial times which, which result in inadequate skills and capacity. Delays with interim and final payments, as well as onerous contract conditions faced by construction firms, can also impose huge con-

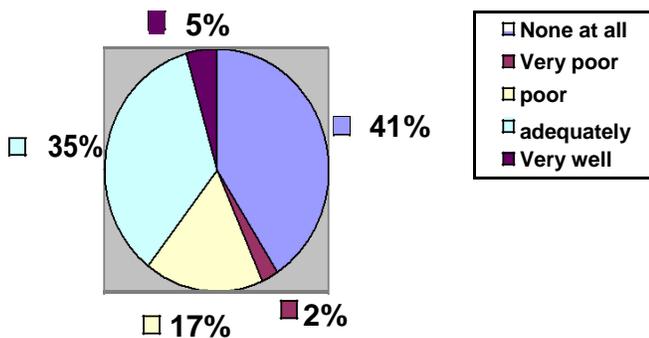


Figure 2. Develop Business Skills

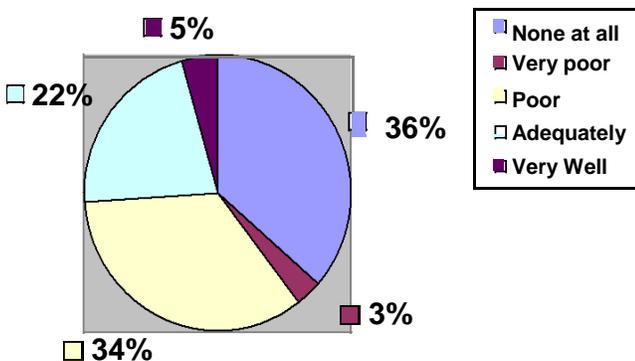


Figure 3. Develop Management skills.

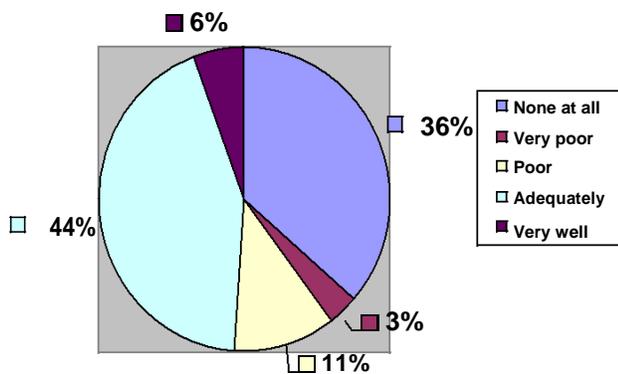


Figure 4. Develop technical skills

constraints on the industry. Many construction firms have suffered financial ruin and bankruptcy because of delays in payment, which are common with government contracts. Contemporary research that was conducted in 2007 by the authors revealed the current reasons for the failure of small and medium size contractors in Swaziland. 87 owners of the small and medium size contractors were interviewed. 68% of the contractors were less than four years; 20% were between 5 and 9 years; and 12% had operated for more than 10 years. There was no contractor that had operated more than 15 years. 63% of the respondents believed that the four major

banks in Swaziland had proper systems in place to support small and medium size contractors once they had secured work. On the other hand 37% of the respondents did not believe that the four major banks in Swaziland had proper systems in place to support small and medium size contractors. 33.4% of the respondents thought environment within the construction industry in Swaziland was favourable for small and medium size contractors to be successful. On the other hand 66.6% of the respondents believed that the construction industry environment was not favourable for the success of the small and medium size contractors.

From the Figure 2, 40% of the respondents were satisfied with business skill development and 60% of the respondents were not satisfied. The figure shows that the respondents were not satisfied with regard to the development of business skills.

From the Figure 3, 27% of the respondents were satisfied with the development of managerial skills. 73% of the respondents were not satisfied with the development of managerial skills. It is clear from the above figure that respondents had not been trained.

From the Figure 4, 47% of the respondents were satisfied with the development of technical skills. 53% of the respondents were not satisfied with the development of technical skills.

From the research conducted it can be concluded that the relative lack of success among the small and medium size contractors in Swaziland was as a result of the following problems which must be addressed in order for the contractors to be successful:

- I. A lack of resources for either large or complex construction work.
- II. An inability to provide securities, raise insurance and obtain professional indemnity.
- III. The contracts were inevitably packaged in such a way as to exclude small contractors.
- IV. Inadequacy in technical and managerial skills required in project implementation.
- V. Lack of continuity in relation to type, scale and location of work
- VI. An inadequate approach and insufficient knowledge, time and experience required for the whole process of finding work, once found, insufficient understanding of the contract documentation and the preparation and submission of tenders.
- VII. Slow and non-payment by government after completing a government project.

Lessons and Recommendations

The planning processes in Singapore and Malaysia are comprehensive, detailed and act as a guide for different Ministries to set quantitative and qualitative targets for delivery institutions. The planning process involves extensive consultations and input by a broad range of stakeholders, which is then co-ordinated and submitted to cabinet and finally parliament as the Industrial Master Plan. These plans tend to unite society around a common purpose and vision. Integral to economic planning in Singapore and Malaysia is targeted financial assistance for broad based, industry based and sector based schemes with focused assistance programmes e.g. machinery, factory premises, raw materials, training programmes, Industrial linkages, technology and research and development. The interest rates for the contractor programmes are generally lower than bank loans. The overall plan identifies certain industries and sectors as crucial to the economic development of the country. Holistic sup-

port programmes including financial incentives are introduced for identified sectors and industries. The growth of these industries and sectors act as a catalyst in the development of other sectors. It is seen as an investment by government with spill off effects. The government financial assistance is not ad hoc but part of a broader strategy.

None of the financial support programmes cover a focused and wide range of issues including targeted training, quality circles, research, mentoring, design and product development, skills development, Local Enterprise Upgrading Centre, infrastructure development, export development, technology development and technical assistance. These support programmes are closely linked to the financial packages e.g. the buying of machinery requires, optimal training in the use of such equipment. Support programmes are not seen in isolation to the broader strategy and guides entrepreneurs in fulfilling the targets set. The programmes are able to rapidly shift focus and resources. The Singapore Local Enterprise Upgrading Centre acts as a first stop for SMMEs giving assistance in technical consultancy and financing. It coordinates government programmes administered by a range of institutions. The first stop centre avoids bureaucracy for the entrepreneur and increases delivery efficiency. Government procurement is clearly an important mechanism in redistributing resources and opportunities in society. In Malaysia the government has actively used procurement as a means to empower, skill and redirect resources for the benefit of small contractors.

Conclusion

The small and medium size contractors in Swaziland is relatively underdeveloped, mainly constrained by limited access and high cost of capital and weak support programmes from government. There is also lack of skills. The most important deciding factors in the development of small contractors in Swaziland are to address the issue of access to finance, shortage of skills and adequate support from government must be a priority. Survival, growth and expansion of the small business sector are essential for economic growth and job creation in Swaziland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to acknowledge the financial assistance from the National Research Foundation, South Africa, whom without their support this paper would not be possible to do

REFERENCES

- Abdelsamad M, Kindling A (1978). Why small business fail: S.A.M. Adv. Manage. J. 46(2): 24-32
- Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) 2004. South African Construction Industry Status Report- Synthesis Review on the South African Construction Industry and its Development: A Discussion Document. CIDB: Pretoria, South Africa.
- Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), Department of Public Works (DPW), Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) (2005). Towards a common framework for enterprise growth and sustainability. Sustainable contractor development, National Workshop, Pretoria.
- Haswell S, Holmes S (1989). Estimating the Small Business Failure Rate: A Reappraisal, J. Small. Bus. Manage. 27 July.
- Jaafar M, Abdul A (2005). Resource Based View and Critical Success Factors: a Case study of Small and Medium Sized Contracting Enterprise (SMCEs) in Malaysia www.bre.polyu.edu.hk/cricom/english/journal/ Accessed 12th January 2007.
- Ministry of Public Works and Roads- Swaziland (2007). Swaziland Today. www.gov.sz. – Accessed: 12th January.
- Ngala JN, Adegoke IO, Otiena FO (2005). Evaluating Project Management Techniques in Small, Medium enterprises. Johannesburg.
- Statistics South Africa 2005. *Labour Force Survey for September 2005*. Statistics South Africa, Pretoria.
- Thompson K (1991). Facing an uphill battle. B.E. Special Report on Small Business. Black Enterprise, Nov 19, 22: 4.