

CONTEXT-SENSITIVE SOLUTIONS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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Summary

The growing global construction market has increasingly allowed builders and engineers from developed countries to participate in projects in developing countries. These builders and designers bring with them international standards and best practices that are possibly to the detriment of the local client and its stakeholders. Ignoring local context-sensitive solutions that account for historical, cultural and societal differences may outweigh benefits of implementing international best practices.

An example of successfully implementing locally developed socio-economic construction project policies and guidelines can be found in the Blackburn Pedestrian Bridge and Walkway community development project completed in 2010 in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. The footbridge project included additional components such as taxi lay-byes, a walkway and a bridge widening that could specifically cater for unskilled and semi-skilled labour. Additionally, specific policies drafted by the South African National Roads Agency along with flexible applications to suit the needs of the Blackburn community enabled this project to be a landmark in not only structural design but community development.

Keywords: South Africa; Blackburn; footbridge; corporate responsibility; SANRAL.

1. Introduction

1.1 Challenges of History

As engineering and construction firms are passing increasingly effortlessly across borders following international job opportunities, the concept of a global marketplace with increasingly fewer national distinctions is becoming a reality. Design codes, best practice guidelines, contract laws and labours laws are travelling through Customs unnoticed like fruit and are simply being internationalised under a “one size fits all” assumption. Simplified international approaches to modern construction run the risk of overlooking the impact that a country’s history and social dynamics may play in the successful implementation of international contracts.

From the ex-Soviet Union’s Grodno train station to the USA’s Cold War inspired interstate highway system, transport infrastructure retains traces of the historical context in which it was developed. A close look at a transportation network reveals both challenges of the past construction era and those of the future.

This is particularly relevant in a developing country such as South Africa. The country’s infrastructure still bears strong signs of an era during which social classes were separated and means of travel between them followed the same mandates. The past two decades have seen significant transformations which have included increased economic activity and a burgeoning middle class [1] complete with the requisite personal vehicles.

South Africa’s national and municipal roads organisations have been working to grow and maintain the road infrastructure required for this growing middle class but due to the country’s unique history, South Africa’s transforming social landscape has brought more challenges than just meeting the needs of increased capacity.

In order to avoid the potentially detrimental effects of a developing road infrastructure [2], environmental and community/social impact assessments have become standard requirements in both developed and developing countries. These requirements promote sustainability in the duties of designers, owners and builders with respect to the natural environment and local communities.