

An Appraisal of Procurement Challenges Facing Emerging Contractors in Public Sector Projects in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa and around the world, economic development cannot be discussed without small businesses and the impact of the construction industry on the economy. Emerging contractors' underperformance in public procurement of construction projects is a cause for concern as small businesses underpin economic growth in South Africa. Despite limited capital and financial resources, small and medium enterprises are inventing new goods and technologies to rejuvenate and advance the industry by contributing to innovation, poverty reduction, and job creation. This paper examines the challenges in South Africa's public sector procurement for emerging contractors. A quantitative approach was employed with a well-structured questionnaire survey amongst the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB levels 4 and 5) as General Builders and Civil Engineering (CE) emerging contractors on procurement challenges. The study used a random sampling technique. Seventy-five responses were received from the Participants for the analysis of the study. The result shows that late payments by the state government, political interference, and poorly managed cash flows are among the challenges faced by emerging contractors in the South African construction industry, hindering their growth in the procurement of public projects. This study assesses the challenges faced by emerging contractors in the procurement process, identifies the key challenges that need to be addressed to help emerging contractors operate efficiently in the construction sector and provides a systematic insight into the procurement challenges faced by emerging contractors and how this affects their performance in the construction industry.

Keywords: Challenges, Emerging Contractors, Procurement, Small businesses, South Africa

1. Introduction

Procurement is under increasing scrutiny, fuelled by technological advances, programme evaluations, and the public and political need for improved service quality (Ambe & Badenhorst-Weiss, 2012). The construction industry is vital for any country's economic and social development, as it provides essential infrastructure and buildings for human activities (Chuai et al., 2021). Procurement of construction works by the organs of the state amounts to an estimated expenditure of R220 billion per year and contributes about 1.4 million jobs, which is the backbone of economic growth (CIDB, 2017). According to Boo (2013), the construction industry remains a vital contributor to job creation and the development of the country's economy, even though it is perceived as the most dishonest player. Balogun et al. (2016) revealed that the contribution of emerging contractors to economic and social development has been recognised around the world as vital. Emerging contractors are seen as an effective means of creating employment opportunities, particularly due to their labour-intensive nature and strong emphasis on technical expertise. They can meet the needs of

communities by providing labour and facilitating the transfer of skills (Bikitsha & Amoah, 2022).

In South Africa, emerging contractors are major contributors to the economy of South Africa through job creation for entry-level skills (Thwala & Mvubu, 2008; Sibiyi et al., 2023). The persistent low participation of emerging contractors in the economic mainstream has resulted in some emerging contractors not progressing to a higher level of CIDB grading and, thus, not fully participating in the economy (Balogun et al. 2016). The study by Shwala (2019) confirms that emerging contractors face challenges related to procurement and execution of public sector projects, which in turn hinder their categorisation at the next level of the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) contractor register. Various studies have revealed that emerging contractors face a variety of challenges when seeking contracts from government agencies. According to the CIDB (2022) report, the board indicated that the decrease in work opportunities for black-and-women-owned companies is a threat to transformation as black-owned contractors, which make up about 56% of the register of contractors, only accessed 33% of the work from the public sector.

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According to Thwala & Mvubu (2008), among other challenges faced by emerging contractors is access to projects, which is hindered by the administrative processes that make it difficult for small contractors to secure projects. These challenges have not only hindered the emerging contractors' success in making it to the next CIDB grading but have, in many instances, engendered underdevelopment and failures for these emerging contractors. It is a great concern that even though the government has been trying to assist emerging contractors, they continue to fail due to various factors and challenges. Considering that the economic development of any nation relies significantly on the sustainability of small businesses, this study, therefore, seeks to unbundle and investigate procurement challenges facing emerging contractors in the South African construction industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Emerging Contractors

The South African construction industry has, over the past decade, experienced an explosion in the myriad of emerging contractors. This is due to the metamorphosis of the industry transforming through the advancement of historically disadvantaged individuals by ensuring their participation in the economy from which they were previously excluded (Martin & Root, 2010; Bangani and Mewomo, 2019). Through this advancement, emerging contractors are mainly comprised of historically disadvantaged owners. Before one takes a detailed look at the challenges facing emerging contractors, it is important first to understand who falls under the category of "emerging contractor." According to Govender's (2017) study, emerging contractors in the construction industry are the contractors at the entry level of the industry and are small companies. These companies are also defined as enterprises owned, overseen, and administered by historically disadvantaged persons. This definition was confirmed by Mohlala (2015), who concurred that there is no direct definition of emerging contractors; however, they can be defined as a person or enterprise owned by historically disadvantaged individuals (HDI), and those can be termed "small-scale contractors."

In the South African construction industry, an emerging contractor is defined as an enterprise owned, managed, and controlled by previously disadvantaged individuals and is overcoming business impediments arising from the legacy of apartheid (Muzondo & McCutcheon, 2018). In Nigeria, emerging contractors are described as small-scale construction firms that hardly employ more than 25 workers with virtually no construction plant or equipment (Ali et al., (2020). From the above, one can summarise that "emerging contractors" term as small-scale contractors at the entry level of the industry, measured by their capacity, capability, financial ability, CIDB ranking and involvement in the industry. These contractors are mainly characterised by the nature and

size of the work they do, which ranges from CIDB grades 1 to 4 (Sogaxa, 2024).

According to Muzondo & McCutcheon (2018), emerging contractors are also termed small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in the South African context. Sitharam & Hoque (2016) explained that emerging businesses as "small, medium enterprises" (SMEs) measured by their turnover, asset value, and the number of people they employ. SMEs are widely acknowledged as a vital force driving the global economy's dynamism, innovation, and adaptability, which significantly contribute to job creation, enhance productivity and fuel economic growth (Handayani et al., 2025; Mbazor et al., 2024; Sogaxa, 2024).

In 2023, SMEs accounted for 61% of Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employed 97% of the workforce (Hermira, 2024; Sogaxa, 2024). Similarly, in Malaysia, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in economic growth, job creation, and trade balance (Sogaxa, 2024). In South Africa, SMEs generate around 61% of employment and contribute between 52% and 57% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Amoah et al., 2022). Moreover, SME contractors are key drivers of innovation and adaptability, promoting technological advancements and industry growth (Sogaxa, 2024).

Over the past decade, the South African construction sector has seen a remarkable rise in emerging contractors, largely due to efforts to integrate traditionally marginalized individuals into the economy. Despite these initiatives, emerging construction companies face many contracting challenges that hinder their development and viability.

2.2. Challenges faced by emerging contractors

The success of small and emerging contractors plays a crucial role in job creation and economic development, given their significant contribution to employment in South Africa (Muzondo & McCutcheon, 2018). However, over 70% of SMEs in the country fail to sustain their operations beyond the first five years, leading to business closures (Wentzel et al., 2023; Sogaxa, 2024). The ability to perform and deliver projects is one of the most common factors affecting the success of emerging contractors, as emerging contractors tend to fail to perform and deliver projects on time (Sweis et al., 2014). Emerging contractors in the South African construction industry normally start at the bottom end of the general building market (Thwala & Mvubu, 2008). Due to various challenges encountered by those contractors along the journey, they often fail to climb up to the next level. Sogaxa (2024). identified key challenges SMEs face, including resource management difficulties, such as labor distribution, equipment allocation, and restricted access to modern technology and software for project planning, scheduling, and communication.

Additionally, several authors such as Windapo et al., 2019; Akinradewo et al., (2019) highlighted that poor recruitment and retention of skilled labor and insufficient training and development opportunities further hinder their performance. Various authors have unanimously agreed that a variety of challenges do exist that hinder the success of small contractors (Windapo, et al, 2020), as summarised in Table 1.

agreement to the identified procurement challenges on a five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree-1, disagree-2, neutral-3, agree-4, strongly agree-5. According to Slovin's formula, a questionnaire was distributed to 308 individuals in the study population, constituting the sample size. The responses of 75 Participants, accounting for approximately 24.35% of the sample size, were received. This was considered acceptable based on the type of survey and target population

Table 1: Challenges experienced by emerging contractors

Item No.	Challenges	Source
1	Lack of or poor management skills	(Tswadi & Dangalazana, 2005)
2	Lack of access to finance	(Govender, 2017; Balogun et al., 2016)
3	Poor record keeping.	(Aspar & Puddephatt, 2012)
4	One-man-show or sole management.	(Thwala & Phaladi, 2009)
5	Lack of understanding of pricing techniques	(Thwala, 2019)
6	Late payments by the government	(Govender, 2017; Thwala and Mvubu, 2008;
7	Poorly managed cash flow	(Maba & Anugwo, 2024)
8	The tender procedure is too complicated	(Govender, 2017)
9	Political interference	(Thwala, 2019)
10	The complexity of procurement regulations and their difficulty in implementation	(Ngobeni, 2011)
11	The overall contract value for a single award	(Kincze Máté, 2014)
12	Type of contract	(Kincze Máté, 2014)
13	Type of procurer	(Kincze Máté, 2014)
14	The publication of prior information	(Kincze Máté, 2014)
15	Tender procedure chosen	(Mohlala, 2015)
16	Selection criteria used	(Kincze Máté, 2014)
17	Price of tender document	(Govender, 2017)
18	Too much competition	(Govender, 2017)
19	Insufficient bidding information	(Govender, 2017)
20	Administrative burden	(Ngobeni, 2011)
21	Insufficient limited time to complete bids.	(Govender, 2017)

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative method. Employing both secondary data (literature review) and primary data (field research) to gather data to analyse the procurement challenges faced by emerging contractors in South Africa. The researcher began by drawing up a pilot study questionnaire, which was sent to five industry professionals for their comments in terms of the relevance of the questions for the purpose intended. Comments received from those professionals were analysed and incorporated into the research questionnaire, which was then sent out to participants. The study used a random sampling technique. The sample of the study consists of 308 respondents. The revised questionnaire was conducted among emerging contractors in the general building (GB) and civil engineering (CE) sectors in Gauteng Province. These contractors are registered at levels 4 and 5 of the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) Register of Contractors. The questionnaire survey included a section for respondent biographic information such as their gender, age, qualifications, experience in the construction industry, and the level of

(Dillman *et al*, 2014) The appropriate descriptive analysis of data for this study is presented using tables, and the analysis of the data was facilitated by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0.0). Mean Item Scores (MIS) were generated for all the factors investigated in this study. The scores were ranked in accordance with their significant levels. The use of MIS has been found relevant in the previous study (Moswane *et al*, 2018, Mewomo *et al* 2017).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Background information of respondents.

The study conducted through a questionnaire survey showed that, out of 75 respondents, 60% were male and 40% were female. The majority of participants were between 26 and 30 years old, accounting for 41.3% of the respondents. Thirty-six percent of the respondents had 6–10 years of experience, while those who had more than 15 years of experience represented 14.7% of the population. About 60% of the respondents were from CIDB Level 4 companies, and most of the respondents' companies under the general building

classification accounted for 38.7%. Most of the respondents' Companies have done 1–5 projects under the CIDB level classification. Most of those respondents have between 0 and 5 years of experience, accounting for 37.3% of the population. About 42.7% of the participants have done 1–5 projects for the organs of the state, while 9.3% have never worked with the state before. EMEs accounted for 66.7% of the respondents, while QSEs accounted for 33.3%. Looking at access to public sector construction projects, more than half of the respondents have accessed 0–5 state-owned construction projects, which is a major problem. The majority of the respondents' companies have equal to or less than 5 years of experience in the construction industry, which roughly equates to approximately 1 project per year when

4.2. *Procurement challenges of emerging contractors*

Table 2 presents the respondents' level of agreement regarding the procurement challenges emerging contractors face in South Africa. The analysis indicated that all 21 factors examined had mean scores exceeding 2.50 (Oguntona et al., 2019), with the lowest recorded score being a relatively high 2.80. This finding suggests that all identified factors significantly impact the procurement process. However, among the 21 challenges, the study highlighted that late payments from the government ($M = 3.507$, $SD = 1.680$), political interference ($M = 3.427$, $SD = 1.544$), and poorly managed cash flow ($M = 3.400$, $SD = 1.533$) were the most critical issues encountered by emerging contractors in public sector construction projects.

Table 2: Procurement challenges of emerging contractors

challenges	Mean	S.D.	Rank
late payments by the government	3.507	1.680	1
political interference	3.427	1.544	2
poorly managed cash flow	3.400	1.533	3
too much competition	3.373	1.575	4
lack of understanding of pricing techniques	3.320	1.604	5
lack of access to finance	3.307	1.676	6
administrative burden	3.253	1.462	7
insufficient or limited time to complete bids	3.200	1.594	8
the complexity of procurement regulations and their difficulty in implementation	3.187	1.513	9
insufficient bidding information	3.187	1.458	9
selection criteria used	3.160	1.551	11
price of tender documents	3.147	1.531	12
tender procedures are too complicated	3.107	1.573	13
the overall contract value for a single award	3.093	1.444	14
one-man-show (sole management)	3.067	1.605	15
lack of construction management skills	3.027	1.684	16
the publication of prior information	3.027	1.395	16
tender procedure chosen	3.013	1.409	18
poor record keeping	2.973	1.594	19
type of contract	2.867	1.528	20
type of procurer	2.800	1.375	21

(Source: Author,2024)

compared to the projected number of projects executed in the public sector. Therefore, contractors are still encountering hurdles in procuring access to state-owned construction projects.

Conversely, the type of procurer ($M = 2.800$, $SD = 1.375$) was identified as the least challenging factor.

This result aligns with recent studies, such as those by Merana (2018; Amoah & Bikitsha, 2022, Mewomo, 2019), which indicate that delayed payments for completed work lead to project delays, while political interference negatively impacts project

implementation. Additionally, competition is a significant challenge for emerging contractors securing public-sector construction projects. These findings are supported by Thwala and Phaladi (2009), who confirmed that emerging contractors face increased competition due to a continuous decline in demand. Mba zor et al. (2024) highlight that insufficient technical knowledge and human resources techniques and methods remain among critical challenges. Furthermore, Amoah & Bikitsha (2022) revealed that inaccurate pricing of project documents could severely disrupt cash flow, resulting in cost overruns. This issue often stems from the underpricing of specific items in the pricing documents, ultimately leading to financial losses. Various research in South Africa have reported the increased financial difficulties faced by the emerging contractors (Maritz and Mewomo 2016; Mewomo and Maritz, 2016). The study found that these challenges significantly affect the performance and survival of emerging contractors, particularly during economic downturns, and result in cost and time overruns, which were found to have an impact.

Also, the Poorly managed cash flow was identified as another challenge facing emerging contractors; this aligns with the study (Baba & Anugwo, 2024). The findings revealed that this challenge is primarily caused by poor financial planning skills and mismanagement on the contractor's part because poor cash flow management will lead to slow progress on site. Furthermore, inadequate cash flow can cause some projects to get terminated due to cash flow problems since the contractor cannot perform his duties under these circumstances. These findings echo Jardine's (2013) observations on tendering collusion, where small contractors struggle to absorb cost overruns, unlike large firms with strong financial reserves that can distribute risks across their operations. financial constraints and procurement inefficiencies remain major barriers to the sustainability of emerging contractors in South Africa's construction industry.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

This study examined the challenges faced by emerging contractors in procuring construction projects in South Africa. Using a quantitative research approach, a questionnaire survey conducted among emerging contractors in Gauteng confirmed a widespread

consensus regarding the existence of these challenges. The findings identified key procurement challenges, including late payments by the government, political interference, poorly managed cash flow, intense competition, limited understanding of pricing techniques, and restricted access to finance. These challenges significantly hinder the growth and sustainability of emerging contractors, which are widely recognized as key drivers of economic development. Addressing these issues is crucial to fostering a more inclusive and resilient construction industry and strengthening the national economy. From a methodological perspective, this study contributes to the field by employing a quantitative approach to assess procurement challenges. Based on the findings, several recommendations have been proposed as mitigation strategies. Strengthening Procurement Policies: the government and policymakers should enhance the procurement framework to promote greater participation of previously disadvantaged individuals in the economy capacity Building and Training. The Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) should implement and facilitate targeted training programs for emerging contractors. Professionals within implementing agencies should be employed to oversee and deliver these programs to ensure effectiveness. Skill Transfer and Mentorship major contractors should be incentivized through transformation policies to transfer essential skills to emerging contractors, enabling them to improve project execution, financial management, and overall business sustainability. The study is limited to the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB levels 4 and 5) as General Builders and Civil Engineering (CE) emerging contractors and South Africa.

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