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In the run-up to the FIFA World Cup 2010, South Africa is now in the transport limelight.

It has the challenge of developing its attractiveness as a safe haven for foreign direct investment whilst developing its own regionally and internationally competitive industries and empowering home grown engineers and managers to fill the skills shortage that the country currently faces. International rates are not affordable by most government institutions and procurement rules make it difficult to justify employing international expertise. This balancing act is reflected in the procurement practises for professional engineers and management consultants to work client side in large integrated public works programmes – on roads, rail, ports and airports infrastructure.

South Africa has shown its ability to innovate through design in many engineering sectors. For example the emerging ITS industry has benefited from technologies that had their roots in the country's defence industry. Location-based applications are underpinned by best-in-class GIS systems and comprehensive digital mapping. The wireless communications industry is competitive and in many parts of SA provides essential services where it would take too long to install fixed lines.

Transition and learning

In this transition phase, the norm is to employ small teams within government that selectively procure local and international consultants to bootstrap large procurements for services, for example road operations. The responsibility for programme management is devolved to a greater degree than in developed countries such as the UK. Consequently, the selection of competent contractors to operate its airports or roads (for example) is critical and the use of Service Level Agreements that describe KPIs is then equally important to ensure that delivery quality targets are met throughout the contract duration. Long-term strategic planning to ensure best value has never been more important to a country that is often regarded as setting the standard for other developing nations in Africa where culturally planning horizons have been much shorter.

Each of these ambitious projects (there are many more) places an additional burden on national and regional government transportation authorities. This pressure can help drive up the efficiency by which national and local government agencies can meet deadlines but also increases the risk of programme delays and adversely impact the quality of programme management.

South Africa has a strategic need to nurture, upgrade and retain its own competences in systems design and programme management – these 'soft' assets are often forgotten when we look at ITS success stories worldwide. Having a high quality fleet of buses does not make a bus service and having high quality roads does not make a transportation system – as many developing countries have found to their cost. Furthermore, the classical model of upgrading a nation's infrastructure suggests that local innovation is best. Simply buying ready-made solutions as templates from other countries or cities will not work. Johannesburg is not London and Cape Town is not Bogotá. Consultants take note.

Early signs, mostly good

The momentum behind the preparations for 2010 has generated many news stories that shows that the country can specify, procure and manage many large scale projects that meet local needs, in many cases funded and operated by the private sector with accompanying levels of risk as part of in return for operating concessions.

Not all news has been good though – the bold attempts to recapitalise (upgrade) the nation's fleet of informal taxi services at a cost of R7m (€0.8m) has met resistance although by 2010 should result in about 80 per cent of the fleet being replaced with newer and safer vehicles. In May 2008 the Department of Transport, through the South African National Roads Agency Limited (SANRAL) awarded the final contract of its R11.9 billion for the initial construction phase of the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project (GFIP) to upgrade and extend the Gauteng highway network – all funded through the issue of government-backed bonds. An operating concession for electronic tolling will be awarded separately but for a shorter period, probably 10 years or less.

The implementation of Bus Rapid Transit in Johannesburg, the rapidly developing Gautrain link to the OR Tambo International Airport and a new airport link proposed for Cape Town are all helping to fuel market interest that is expected to drive growth in South African professional consulting companies, initially enabled through a mix of local and imported skills.

Facing the long term

So, mostly good news then and an opportunity to show design and programme delivery competence can compete internationally. When the final whistle has blown on the next World Cup the long-term challenge will be to develop this. **TH**

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