Consortia for Export of Construction Services in Singapore

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Abstract

After a period of continuous decline since 1998, the volume of demand for construction in 2003 was less than S$10 billion (US$1.00 = S$1.76), half the peak level in 1996. The progressive decline was precipitated by the Asian financial and economic crisis in 1997, and has persisted despite the recovery of the economy in Singapore. It is suggested that the level of activity will continue to be around S$15 billion in the medium term. Thus, the construction market in Singapore will not offer a sufficient volume of work for firms in the industry to grow. It has been suggested in several studies, and has been realised within the industry that firms must export their services to the region in order to thrive.

Singapore firms have been operating overseas since the 1970s. Their activities have tended to be within the South-East Asia region. Currently, China and India are considered to be countries which offer considerable potential volumes of activity. Singapore firms have different competitive advantages in each of these countries, and some firms have recorded significant successes. The literature highlights some pre-requisites for success in international construction. From these conceptual constructs, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have no scope in this market. A major recent phenomenon in Singapore is the formation of both uni-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary consortia to seek, bid for, and undertake construction projects overseas.

This paper focuses on the SME consortia which are being formed in Singapore for international construction. It is based on a field study comprising interviews of senior practitioners and members of some consortia. The paper begins with a consideration of the literature on international construction and, in particular, the prerequisites for success and firms’ strategies. It then presents the situation in Singapore. The results of the interviews are analysed and appropriate inferences drawn. Some appropriate actions for ensuring the formation of strong consortia and enhancing their performance on overseas projects are suggested.

Keywords: international construction, pre-requisites, competitiveness, consortium, corporate performance
1. Introduction

1.1 Aims and Objectives of Study

This paper reports on a research project on the appropriate strategies which can be adopted by Singapore construction enterprises to penetrate the market in South-east and East Asia which is expected to grow strongly in the medium-term future. The paper focuses on the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and considers, in particular the consortia which are being formed among such enterprises to export their services to countries in the South-east and East Asia regions. In Singapore, this is a new phenomenon as firms have, hitherto, tended to adopt a “go it alone” approach, resisting admonitions from government officials and researchers highlighting the merits of strategic alliances among the firms. Previous efforts among the local construction firms to form consortia, such as that of Mainland Construction, established by a group of contractors to explore the market in China in the early 1980s, have been very few, and the entities set up have been short-lived. Thus, it is pertinent to study the new phenomenon to assess the sustainability of the consortia and their potential to provide growth opportunities to the construction SMEs, especially in the international market.

The objectives of this study are to:

- consider and evaluate the pre-requisites for success in international construction highlighted in the literature;
- consider the need for Singapore construction firms to seek opportunities overseas;
- discuss export strategies being adopted by Singapore construction firms, especially the SMEs; and
- suggest initiatives for developing further, the export capability of the construction SMEs in Singapore.

1.2 Research Method

The study began with a review of the literature to identify the critical pre-requisites and success factors for international construction suggested by some of the key authors. Works on the historical performance of Singapore’s construction firms in the South-east and East Asia regions were also reviewed. The review also covered the current situation within the Singapore construction industry in terms of demand and output. Some basic questions were then formulated to be used as a guide in structured interviews of senior construction practitioners in Singapore to obtain empirical information for the study.
The structured interviews were held with senior professionals and senior managers of construction and construction-related enterprises, including contractors, engineering and architectural design firms, quantity surveying firms, and financial institutions. Also interviewed were representatives of the professional institutions and trade associations, as well as officers of government agencies involved in the management of the development of the construction industry, and the promotion of exports. A list of the interview questions was sent to each of the interviewees before the interview was held.

The part of the study which this paper reports on relates to the consortia which have been formed among construction SMEs in Singapore for the export of construction services. The questions which this part of the study sought answers to were:

1. how and why the consortia were formed;

2. how the consortia operate, and the relationship among the members; and

3. possible future of the consortia, including their further development.

2. Export Performance and Local Output Levels

2.1 Export Performance

Singapore construction enterprises have exported their services since the 1970s, and have undertaken projects in Brunei, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand. Some firms have worked further afield, in Australia, Libya, Mauritius, Mexico and Uganda. In recent years, the export drive has taken Singapore firms to Central and Western Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates; as well as the Pacific, such as Fiji.

Table 1 shows that, since records on this business activity started in 1984, the total volume of projects secured overseas by Singapore construction firms has increased from S$118 million in 1984, reached a peak of S$1.6 billion in 1992, and declined to S$431 million in 1998 following the Asian financial and economic crisis which affected the countries in the region which had constituted the market for the firms. The construction export volume has grown strongly since 2001, reaching S$805 million in 2002 and S$1200 in 2003. The higher volume in 2003 is attributed to increased demand from Southeast Asia, India and the Middle East. The volume for 2004 is reported to have reached the S$2 billion mark.
Table 1: Export of construction services by Singapore contractors, selected years (S$million) [1].

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<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Export Volume</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>1595</td>
<td>1170</td>
<td>1546</td>
<td>1338</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key features of the overseas volume are that it is mainly in the form of buildings. In 2001, the export volume comprised: industrial buildings, 48.3%; commercial buildings, 34.2%; and infrastructure, 8.8%. A second feature is that most of the work is done by large firms [2]. In 2001, about 80% of the work was won by only three firms: United Engineers, SembCorp Engineers & Constructors, and Jurong Engineering [3].

In Singapore, the construction export drive has received greatest emphasis during periods of low domestic activity. The first concerted effort, led by the then Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), which had been set up to spearhead the expansion and development of the industry, followed the economic recession in 1984 which precipitated a four-year decline in demand and output. The current emphasis on exports follows the low level of construction activity since the late 1990s, as discussed in the next section.

### 2.2 Levels of Activity in Singapore

Since the Asian economic and financial crisis in 1997, the output of Singapore’s construction industry has been in decline, and predictions that the industry’s decline has bottomed out have failed to be borne out. Table 2 compares the growth in construction GDP since 1998 with that of overall GDP, and shows that the industry has continued to decline as the economy has recovered and grown strongly [4]. Value added in construction fell every quarter between 1999 and 2003, and in some years (notably in 2002, the decline was in double-digit figures).
Table 2: GDP in Construction and its Growth Rate, 1998-2003 [3].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>GDP (1995 market prices) (S$m)</th>
<th>GDP Growth Rate (%)</th>
<th>GDP in Construction (1995 market prices) (S$m)</th>
<th>GDP in Construction Growth Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>138,399</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>12,325</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>147,288</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>11,217</td>
<td>-9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>161,143</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>11,009</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>157,319</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>10,657</td>
<td>-3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>160,853</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>9,503</td>
<td>-10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>164,266</td>
<td></td>
<td>8,635</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The private sector of the construction market faces a glut in most types of property; and public sector demand has lost steam as many projects have been brought forward in a bid to provide opportunities for the industry (leading to an increase in demand of nearly 16 percent in the second quarter of 2002). Table 3 shows the distribution of demand (“contracts awarded”) and output (“certified payments”) from the public and private sectors. The data show that the two sectors accounted for nearly half of the total output each. The data indicate that, in most of the years during the period, the demand from the public sector was higher than the private sector. The massive decline in overall demand in 2003 resulted almost wholly from a decrease in the former.

Table 3: Building and Construction Activities, 1998-2003 (S$ million) [3].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Contracts Awarded</th>
<th>Certified Payments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>16,637</td>
<td>10,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>13,096</td>
<td>6,445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>20,163</td>
<td>12,108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>13,801</td>
<td>7,384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>14,340</td>
<td>9,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>9,956</td>
<td>5,302</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Predictions by various researchers indicate that, in the medium term, local construction enterprises cannot expect a sustainable level of demand in Singapore to enable them to survive, let alone grow. A direct result of the low levels of activity has been a spate of corporate failures which have claimed some of the better established firms. Thus, it has been suggested by many authors and observers that Singapore construction firms must seek opportunities overseas. For example, Mr Cedric Foo, Minister of State for National Development, noted [5]:


“Venturing overseas to develop an external wing will become a necessity for many in the industry in order to overcome the constraints of our small domestic market.”

One of the six strategic thrusts of the industry review exercise, “Construction 21”, was: “Developing an external wing” [6]. The Construction Working Group of the Economic Review Committee (ERC) [7] proposed that 15% of the construction volume (about S$2 billion) should be from exports in 5 years time (an ambitious target at the time because, as shown in Table 1, exports in the early 2000s was about S$800 million). The Construction Working Group of the ERC [8] recommended that Singapore’s construction industry should seek opportunities overseas, especially in China and India which had bright prospects. It identified the following factors facing the Singapore industry: (i) overcapacity of local construction resources in the face of declining demand; (ii) the need to upgrade the capabilities of local firms to compete effectively with their foreign counterparts; and (iii) size and financial constraints which confront construction firms as they attempt to venture abroad.

This stress on construction exports is part of a national policy to internationalise Singapore’s economy which started in the mid-1980s [9]. Like its counterparts elsewhere, Singapore’s construction industry has a pyramid structure [10]. The firms include large ones such as SembCorp Engineers & Constructors, the largest civil engineering and infrastructure group in South-East Asia, and a multiplicity of small firms. However, the call on firms to export their services has mainly been aimed at the larger ones which are expected to possess the required attributes. Thus, what are the options for the SMEs? It would appear that, if the overseas market is the only means by which Singapore construction firms can survive, then the SMEs must find viable means to gain the wherewithal to enter that market effectively and successfully.

3. Literature Review

3.1 3.1 International Construction

The pre-requisites for competition in international construction constitute effective entry barriers. The United Nations Centre for Transnational Corporations (UNCTC) [11] suggests that the most important barrier is technical knowledge. Linder [12] cited the following determinants of the success of European and US firms in the international market as access to: the most efficient means of production; cheapest and best building materials; and engineering knowledge. Constantino [13] categorised the “major competitiveness issues” in international construction into: human resources; management technology; government disincentives to invest; and technical capability. Managerial expertise was the most important among these owing to the peculiarities and problems of overseas projects.

The Market Analysis Task Force of the European Construction Institute [14] ranked the sources of competitive advantage in international construction as: project finance; reduced project timescales; technical expertise, experience and reputation; willingness to carry risks; ability to
procure globally; management and re-use of information; political backing; corporate infrastructure; ability to provide project funding; ability to form partnerships or alliances with firms with skills in construction or other areas such as finance, design and operation; and ability to adopt company structures to work in multi-firm, multi-cultural and multi-discipline networks. The International Construction Task Force [15] advises companies to: identify compatible values and philosophy; sustain long-term relationships; take equity in projects; provide additional services; establish global partners and alliances; develop environmental responsiveness; develop new technologies; utilise information technology; and educate their personnel to work in a new client-contractor environment. Linder noted that the factors which contributed to the superiority of US contractors between the sixties and the mid-eighties included: their technological edge; their domestic track record on major projects; and special niches they could exploit.

Momaya and Selby [16] quantified the international competitiveness of the Canadian, Japanese and construction industries with a three-component model: (i) competitive assets – factor costs, human resources, industry infrastructure, technology, demand conditions, government; (ii) competitive processes – strategic management, formal planning, implementation, human resources development, R&D, synergies; and (iii) competitive performance – productivity, human resources, quality/effectiveness, cost, financial, international, technological. Low, et al. [17] highlight the following sources of competitiveness of UK firms on overseas projects: the extensive and competitive capacity of the UK financial sector; technical expertise and track record on large and complex projects worldwide; global strength of British consultancy firms; and historical political and diplomatic links. The determinants for Chinese firms which have become prominent abroad recently were: abundant supply of cheap and skilled labour; the high degree of motivation of the workers and their ability to work well in different environments; strong government support and financing flexibility; and historical links to developing countries.

Construction SMEs do not possess any of the competitive factors highlighted in this section; they have limited corporate sizes, resources including managerial expertise, and track records on major projects. Thus, the literature does not consider how such firms can export their services. For example, Janssen [18] notes that global competitiveness “outside of Europe” (p. 718) does not directly concern the typical SMEs.

### 3.2 Developing Export Capability in Singapore Construction

It has been recognised in many studies that concerted and systematic efforts must be made to develop the capability of Singapore construction firms to export their services. A study into the potential to develop world-class Singapore construction firms found the following success factors of international construction [19]: (1) marketing – ability to understand the culture of the host country; contacts within the host country; a unique business approach; (2) management – quality of management; ability to structure partnerships; focus on key niches; development of core strengths; (3) experience and technology – possession of, or access to, technology in key areas; and (4) financial ability – financial resources BOT type projects; capability in structuring financial packages. After reviewing the literature, the NUS and NTU [19] summarised the
differences between the international construction contracting firms operating in Singapore which were undertaking the bulk of the large projects in the country and their local counterparts as: (i) corporate size; (ii) length of corporate history; and (iii) track record – volume, variety and geographical distribution of projects, as well as performance on these projects.

In Singapore, the literature previously urged construction SMEs to merge in order to create viable corporate entities which would be able to enter the international market (see, for example, The Economic Committee [20]. Recent works have paid some attention to the formation of consortia and other strategic alliances among such firms. In its recommendations under the export thrust of developing an external wing, the Construction 21 Steering Committee [21] urged the Construction Industry Joint Committee (CIJC) (the umbrella organisation for the construction industry’s professional institutions and client and trade associations) to encourage companies to take proactive efforts, and form consortia, to venture abroad. Ofori [22] suggests that the CIJC can help to co-ordinate initiatives by its constituent organisations including: arranging for the sharing of overseas experiences by firms; encouraging the formation of consortia for overseas projects; and setting up co-operative business arrangements with overseas counterparts.

The vision of the Construction Working Group of the ERC [23] for the construction industry in Singapore is for it to develop into one that will encompass all aspects of the construction value chain, from design to maintenance. It envisaged a few global sized firms supported by a network of specialist companies. Among the three broad headings under which the Group made its recommendations was: “Increasing the economic pie by venturing overseas”. The suggestions included: harnessing talent and expertise with the public sector; forming joint ventures between public and private enterprises; and offering export credit and credit insurance to local construction enterprises.

The Building and Construction Authority (BCA), Singapore’s construction industry development agency, assists construction, property and real estate enterprises to export their services [24]. The mission of the BCA is "to develop an advanced and competitive construction industry", and its vision is: “A construction industry amongst the best in Asia”. The export assistance activities of the BCA include:

1. providing information, mainly through the Export Digest, a portal containing information on potential investment opportunities overseas
2. offering various export development incentives directly, or providing information on possible sources of appropriate schemes
3. organising and leading trade mission trips, visits, conferences and exhibitions
4. providing firms with information on the overseas market including contact persons and project leads
promoting and supporting the formation of consortia by Singapore construction enterprises to undertake projects overseas.

International Enterprise Singapore (IE Singapore) is the country’s export development and promotion agency. It is actively involved in promoting the export of construction services [25]. The vision of IE Singapore is to be an expert agency in firm-level growth, market intelligence and internationalisation strategies. Its main functions are to provide market information, and assist firms to build up their business capabilities and find overseas partners. The support schemes offered by IE Singapore to firms in the economy as a whole, in particular, manufacturing, which are relevant to the construction consortia include:

- iPartner is extended when at least four companies come together, to be used to employ a Business Development Manager to look after the group.
- International Bidding Assistance Scheme, to cover up to half of the cost of bidding; purchasing tender documents; travelling to engage in discussions with clients; and engagement of consultants
- International Consortium Assistance Scheme (ICAS) helps meet legal costs of consortium formation.

The BCA and IE Singapore collaborate in their provision of support for construction enterprises. For example, they organise joint missions. In summary, the export development assistance schemes do not directly subsidise the firms’ production costs, but help in the companies’ marketing efforts before they win projects overseas.

4. Field Study

A series of alliances have been formed to explore the regional construction market. These consortia bring together firms with different expertise to form strong groupings. They focus on exploiting a niche area which Singapore has built up expertise in. They include the Airport Consortium and the Maritime Consortium which are based on Singapore’s acclaimed excellence in the planning, design and development or airports and harbours respectively. The Sindia Consortium focuses on housing, and has won the contract for the design a major township development project in Hyderabad. Sindia includes CESMA, a subsidiary of the corporatised arm of the national housing agency, HDB Corporation.

Some of the consortia have been among SMEs. These have been of two broad forms. The first type provides greater size among firms in the same segment of the industry such as the consortium formed by SEP Partnership, JGP Architecture and Singapore Garden City Pte Ltd. to undertake the mater planning of a township in the Cixi New Economic Development Zone, Ningo City, China [26]. The second type of consortium provides both size and depth of expertise. An
example is the STA Consortium, discussed below. In the latter form, the SMEs are utilizing the “Total Singapore Capability” approach advocated by Ofori [27].

The leader and another prominent member of one of the construction SME consortia were among the interviewees. The results are now summarised.

**4.1 Consortium’s History**

One of the interviewees noted that Singapore has featured prominently in the news in India over the past few years because of the physical achievements of the country (including housing and infrastructure), the lack of corruption, and as one interviewee noted, “how we organise to make things happen,” for example, how the country and individual investors organise themselves to attract finance. The interviewees believed that the opportunities for Singapore firms in India can be seen in the common link of both countries to the British legal and administrative systems, and the large volume of unmet infrastructure needs – roads, water, and electricity – although its IT system is very good.

In July 2003, over 20 Singapore construction companies visited India in a mission organised by the BCA. After hearing many presentations of potential projects by Indian government officials and practitioners, some of the SMEs on the trip were interested in forming an alliance. After a series of meetings, the STA Consortium (STAC) was registered in Singapore as a limited private co-share partnership in September 2003 comprising 14 companies initially; the number of firms has increased to 16. STAC is dedicated to India; this is stated in its agreement. STAC members are not forbidden from joining other consortia. There are no written ground rules. The members have agreed to be transparent. The STAC was formed with the encouragement of the BCA, and with practical help under two government’s schemes: the Economic Grouping scheme of the Singapore Productivity and Innovation Agency (SPRING Singapore) and a grant from IE Singapore. Upon its formation, the STAC also applied for an iPartner grant of S$1 million.

**4.2 Mission and Operations**

The mission of the STAC is: “Our consortium aims to offer our customers the best business practice and the highest ethical standards.” Members of the consortium provide the following services: master planning, township planning, park and streetscape design, architectural and engineering design and consultancy, project management, interior design, quality assurance consultancy, materials engineering and testing, geotechnical services, and materials and equipment supply.

The member companies come together in name under the STAC as a flag but each operates as a business organisation by itself. The interviewees perceived the STAC as a marketing tool to fly the Singapore brand name on behalf of the SMEs. The consortium comes in with its marketing
track record. It is the point of contact by clients and potential business partners. Said one interviewee:

β “STA Consortium is a flag you can carry with you if you are going to India as an SME. Because you will never be Sembawang, CPG, etc. [large enterprises]. It offers the members an opportunity. It also helps the Indian clients….”

However, they noted that the client must be confident in the individual company with which it transacts business. Members pay an agreed sum of money to support the secretariat and operations of the consortium. However, they keep whatever they earn. The members of the STAC providing architectural design services have been the busiest. They choose other project participants from the consortium, as and when they win commissions.

The members of the consortium are aware that they have something special. One interviewee noted:

β “The vehicle for consortia is leadership as well as the fuel to drive the consortium, not committees. Some say the fuel is money… We need to get the government to understand that the SMEs are still capable. There is a gap of mindset between the SMEs and government but this is only a mindset.”

At the time of the interviews, STAC was prospecting on 18 projects. Whereas there had been many in-principle agreements and memoranda of understanding, it was clear that the process of winning contracts was a long one.

Member companies of STAC pass on business contacts to other members. The interviewees noted that this has surprised observers (including officers of the BCA and IE Singapore which have encouraged such co-operation among local firms for several years) as Singapore firms are well known to be secretive and unwilling to share information. The members of the consortium are not relying on the opportunities it brings them, but are finding niches for themselves, as well as seeking to improve their capabilities to enhance their performance and competitiveness. Members of the consortium are aware of the challenges their firms face in the overseas market. One said:

β “My staff are 10 times more expensive than those in China, and 20 times more expensive than those in Cambodia so if I do not make them run at least 20 times faster, I’m in trouble.”

The company uses information technology and codifies documentation in order to improve the efficiency of his personnel.
4.3 Future Developments

The interviewees were open to the possibility of collaboration among some of the consortia. There are initiatives within the consortium to bring together smaller teams of the members. For example, one of the members of STAC, A.Alliance, an architectural firm, is forming the Alliance Business Unit where members can receive information free of charge until they win large projects. They will then start to pay a small fee. The interviewees also highlighted the scope for teaming up with firms outside the consortium, both large and small, including those in which the government has some ownership (called “government-linked companies” (GLCs) in Singapore). The interviewees noted that it would be good if the professional institutions and trade associations provide support to the consortia.

The interviewees also suggested that the government should be adventurous and entrepreneurial, and be willing to take risks. They noted that some projects require government involvement, and that the government should be keen to participate in what one interviewee referred to as “hybrid projects”.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The construction consortia which have been formed among SMEs in Singapore are, perhaps, surprisingly to readers elsewhere, a new phenomenon in the country. However, some of these groupings have already undertaken some significant projects in China and India. Thus, they have successfully negotiated some of the pitfalls of international construction highlighted in the literature (see, for example, a long list of potential risks outlined by Wong et al. [28]). There is scope for the consortia to do even better. Continuous improvement and growth should be watchwords of the consortia.

The active support of the BCA in helping consortia to be formed, identifying opportunities and contacts for them and helping them to execute their projects has been decisive in their success. It would be appropriate for the BCA to seek ways by which it can continue to add value to the efforts of the consortia. Continued direct links between the BCA and the consortia, and structured feedback systems would help to achieve this.

The construction consortia or portions of them should explore opportunities at home to build up their track record; such groups would be most suitable for design and build projects which form a growing part of the market in Singapore. This would help them to learn together and improve their performance, as well as establish their experience and credibility. It would also enhance their ability to compete with their larger local and foreign counterparts. Moreover, firms which work together on design and build projects should consider forming establishing longer-term collaborative arrangements such as export-oriented consortia. At the broad level, the SME consortia can be blocks for building the construction industry in Singapore as an integrated entity.
The SME consortia have brought together firms with complementary expertise, but mainly among planning, design and contracting firms. There is scope for other firms in the construction value chain, such as suppliers and financial institutions, to join some of these consortia. Finally, the individual members of the consortia should take advantage of the government’s development schemes for SMEs. It would also be good if appropriate schemes for partnerships similar to the consortia were formulated and offered.

Singapore enjoys a good reputation in the region for the quality of its township planning, building design, and construction workmanship. Efforts should be made to maintain and even enhance this reputation.

References


[19] NUS and NTU, op. cit. (ref. 1).

[20] Economic Committee, op. cit. (ref. 11)

[21] Construction 21 Steering Committee, op. cit. (ref. 8).


[23] Economic Review Committee Subcommittee on Domestic Enterprises, op. cit. (ref. 9).


