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A Fiasco in Pavements and Contracting Out

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A Fiasco in Pavements and Contracting Out

On my daily commute going through South Ninety Street in Cairo, Egypt, I persistently commented to my younger daughter and expressed my amazement about the road pavement condition. This sounds like a very boring and lame topic to be discussing every morning, but not really. Yes, my daughter made me promise after a while not to comment or discuss the pavement any more during our short commute, but I still open my mouth wide in amazement, though silently, each morning when passing by. I have realized however that there are a number of core public administration issues entailed, including: poor management of contracting out, sub-contracting and public private partnerships (PPP). The current article allows me space to vent my frustrations.

For at least the past five years, there has been continuous work related to the mid-road pavement, starting with attempts to install pipes, electricity lamp posts, excavation work and planting trees, flowers and all types of decorative work that never seemed to end. As soon as the workers finish with one segment of the pavement, you get to see other workers starting again either with the excavation to install another type of pipe, or you get to see the still freshly painted pavement border collapsing and the sand spreading all over the asphalt road. I am not only amazed by the never-ending work, the haphazard task scheduling and the poor quality of the pavement borders that collapse as soon as finalized, but also the extravagance and complication in the choice of the pavement design. It turns out that approximately every 500 meters segment along the winding 20 kilometers street was assigned to a business enterprise in the region to be responsible for its innovation. The end result was a hodgepodge of attempted non-aesthetic decorative work combining black and white marble, white pebble stones, red bricks, plants, light bulbs and billboards with the names and logos of the business enterprises.

What happened was as follows: the local urban planning and administrative authority has decided to embark on a PPP arrangement with the business community in the area, to help out with the mid-road pavement construction and innovation. Theoretically, this sounds like a rational and sound policy that enables local authorities to realize their goals through mobilizing resources outside of the government budget, concentrating on their core activities and relieving themselves from the burden of managing the short-term employment arrangements for the thousands of workers involved. Realistically, what happened was that the business companies contracted out the needed operation to diverse suppliers, who in turn depended on sub-contractors for each of the specialized tasks involved, whether related to sewage, electricity, planting or decorative work. Because of the poor coordination and sequencing of activities, there was a huge waste in resources. The result was the evolving saga where one group of workers comes to work, only to demolish the work of the other preceding groups, who have to start again, in a continuous vicious circle. You fix the tiles, then excavate to insert pipes, then fix the tiles, then dig out holes to plant trees, then fix again, then decide to replace the lamp posts, and the waste goes on infinitely.

What can be done better?

- *Having a long-term urban development plan* in place shared with all involved so that there are no surprises;
- *Having clear performance standards* for all types of contracted and sub-contracted tasks and activities;
- *Logical sequencing of activities* to put a stop to the vicious circle of continuous excavation;
- *Calling for simplicity*: Even if it is the business community that is paying for the renovation, there is no need for extravagance and using multi-colored marbles and tiles to decorate the middle pavement on a highway in a developing country;
- *Ensuring quality of operations* so that once a task is finished, there is no need to repeat it the next day or week. There should be quality specifications for pavement borders so that they do not collapse and disintegrate in a short time;

- *Activating accountability mechanisms* through local elected councils and neighborhood committees to monitor performance of urban renovation activities and express citizens' concerns.

On finishing this short article, and on passing through South Ninety Road again, new leagues of workers have started their de-construction work of the pavement one more time, unbeknownst to all the previous decorating, advertising, electricity, plumbing and other teams, as the plan for a monorail train going exactly through the middle pavement has just started!