

## **The Pakistan Earthquake (November 2005): Why 10,000 schools collapsed**

Letter to RADIX  
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None of my comments that follow are meant to suggest that the destruction of schools and deaths of children is not tragically serious, or that corruption does not matter. Both corruption and earthquake destruction are impassioned and emotive subjects: my concern is that each requires analysis, as does their co-incidence.

First an overview: Chapter 9 (Johann Lambsdorff) in the Global Corruption Report 2005, referred to by Ben, gives Transparency International's tenth annual "Corruption Perceptions Index". Briefly, the index comprises 146 countries, virtually every country in the world, ranked in terms of the degree of corruption perceived from a set of international data sources. Countries where corruption is least perceived are at the top of the ranking. Pakistan comes 132nd. Finland, New Zealand and Denmark are first, second and third. Corruption affects us all, in some degree.

Corruption, in my view, is a cultural as well as purely ethical or financial matter. In many countries, it is a traditional, ingrained and systematic process often regarded as normal and habitual. It can

be simply isolated cases of bribery but is more often a sequential process of baksheesh step by step from the top of a hierarchy down to the bottom - a payment for favour granted, such as construction contracts or subcontracts.

Corruption in construction is invariably last of a long line of such payments, not all of the "30 - 60 percent" goes to one person, but it does mean that only 40-70 percent of an amount of money gets spent on what it is intended for; only a reduced number of buildings built or, more likely, all are built to lower standards by cutting out quantities of steel and/or cement in reinforced concrete etc. As I have repeatedly stated, construction lends itself to short-cuts by the nature of its necessary processes of repeated coverage of what has been done - from foundations in the ground to the last coat of paint.

In the 10,000 communities of Pakistan where schools were destroyed, what other buildings were there that had been built by public funds ? In many, schools would have been conspicuous as the only one, and attracted attention for their failure as such, as well as for the killing of children - a fine distinction perhaps. Dwellings also were destroyed, in which people died, but dwellings, more often than not in rural communities, are self-built and would not, I suspect, have incurred corrupt practices in their construction, or not to such an extent (for the time being, I am assuming the destroyed apartment block, of which we all saw images, to have been urban). Had the children in

Pakistan been sleeping at home, when the earthquake occurred, then child deaths in similar proportions probably would not have appeared so obviously and with such public impact - they would have been obscured within total numbers of deaths. In Algeria, in 1980, another earthquake caused the destruction of schools but on the Friday "Sabbath", so children were not killed while at school.

These, and many other, causes and characteristics, should be seen in national context, and therefore must be remedied in context, albeit with globally sourced assistance. There are professional, financial and physical working practices to ensure against "between 30 and 60 percent of funds for government buildings" being taken by corrupt officials. Such working practices of rigorous management and inspection are themselves relatively costly (against no management at all or to pay local inspectors appropriate salaries to reduce temptation of bribes to look the other way) but are more likely to be nearer single figures as a percentage of project cost with the advantage, where successfully applied, of resulting in earthquake-resistant construction quality.

I have worked in-situ on sites internationally, in developing and developed countries, where generally corruption is alleged to occur, and I have written on corruption in construction. I have faced it and countered it, directly, and I have also suffered its effects, professionally. I know Pakistan not at all and if others have comments to add to mine, then please do so. Corruption is by its nature an elusive subject and as long as description and evidence remains scarce, so will its remedy.

For certain, international assistance for reconstruction will be harder to attract while Pakistan remains so low on the corruption perception index.

James

<http://www.ecie.org/pipermail/radix/2005-November/000077.html>