





# The house that Zondo built: State Capture Commission implications for local economic development in South Africa's construction sector



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**Background:** The Zondo Commission exposed how corruption and collusion undermined South Africa's state and business relations. However, little is known about its impact on small businesses and local economic development, particularly in the construction sector.

**Aim:** This study explores the perspectives of small business owner-managers in the Eastern Cape, interviewed during a national construction summit in East London.

**Methods:** A sample of 25 small business owners based in the local economies of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa was interviewed for this study, all participating at a national construction sector summit in East London. Thematic analysis was done using qualitative solutions and research (QSR) NVivo 9 software.

**Results:** Using building trade metaphors to frame the findings, this study identifies three central themes and their implications for local economic development. Firstly, there is a need for scaffolding, concerted efforts to establish consolidated partnerships between the state and business sectors to support an ethical code of practice. Secondly, a gateway must be provided as an access point for anonymously reporting any violations of this code. Thirdly, a strong foundation is essential to uphold ethical standards, especially within procurement processes.

**Conclusion:** The findings of this research highlight the need for collaborative efforts to fortify an ethical framework for local economic development within the construction sector.

**Contribution:** By proposing structural reforms to reinforce ethical standards in procurement and professional conduct, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on post-state capture reform and provides actionable insights for policymakers aiming to strengthen ethical accountability and support sustainable practices in South Africa's small business sector.

**Keywords:** state capture; small business; construction; governance; ethics; South Africa; local economy.

## Introduction

State capture is a global phenomenon (Momokhere 2018). In South Africa, state capture has been described as institutionalised and entrenched (Pillay, Chitunhu & Chivandire 2023). State capture refers to the situation where private individuals or private organisations hold the state to ransom to advance private interests (February 2019; Mtimka 2016). In view of this, Momokhere (2018) views state capture as a form of 'elite corruption' at the core, influencing not just issues related to wealth but the political administration of a country and, in so doing, state capture, to some, represented the creation of a monopoly by a few individuals in controlling state-owned enterprises (Semosa & Legodi 2023). Ultimately, state capture is akin to undermining the capability of the state to serve public interests (Jonas 2016).

State capture has a range of negative impacts. By nature, state capture is an unconstitutional act conducted by individuals or firms (Kotze 2018). Ultimately, state capture has the potential to destroy public trust in the role of the state (Swilling 2019). Some researchers (e.g. Labuschagne 2017) locate the effect of state capture to have political ramifications leading to a dysfunctional state. In essence, corruption exists as an impediment to the ideals of fully experiencing the benefits of a development state (Matshaya et al. 2023). Ultimately, this may limit the chance of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2022) and the Sustainable Development Agenda (Teichmann, Falker & Sergi 2020).

In countries like Tunisia, state capture is attributed to having its origin in the political elite flouting regulations for private gain and reducing competition (Rijkers, Freund & Nucifora 2017). To all this, the South African government not only acknowledged the existence of state capture but also the necessity for action against those who caused it (State of the Nation 2022). A study from Benin attributes the business context to be one with agents that potentially influence how decisions are made within a country context (Canen, Ch & Wantchekon 2023). This also includes the presence of politicians, political brokers and their work with business people. Often, prosecution of corruption cases, including those of state capture, takes longer due to the intricate web of relationships requiring thorough investigation (Andrews 2018).

From a public administration and local economy perspective, administrative and legal reforms are needed to combat corruption (Antonyan & Polakov 2022). Such efforts by state organisations also have the potential to shape how society is organised (Patterson 2024). The business sector is also attributed as an indicator of the mood and sentiment that are cross-cutting, fusing elements of society, the economy and the political situation (Dieleman et al. 2022). Other scholars flag the need to study aspects related to what has been referred to as the 'dark side', accounting for the negative of misconduct within the leadership and business context (Cooke 2024:1). In South Africa, the business sector, including small businesses, is considered very important (Peterson & Chinyamurindi 2024).

Despite the noted importance of the small business sector in South Africa, some challenges continue to exist. Goldman and Kruger (2021) position the role of contextual factors as limitations to the success of business in South Africa. For instance, in the construction sector, this includes considering the role of competition and business operation (Alumbugu, Shakantu & Saidu 2021; Matarirano, Chiloane-Tsoka & Makina 2019). This focus may also include the necessity to understand how businesses interact with legislative mandates for enhanced operation and functioning (Okanga & Groenewald 2017).

### State capture and the business sector

The 2016 state capture report, conducted by the former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela, uncovered numerous cases of state capture, shedding light on instances where private interests unduly influenced government decisions and policies. At the core of state capture in South Africa was the involvement of an elite group of influential business people influencing the society (Myburgh 2017). As a result, state capture has weakened the governance processes and the developmental agenda in South Africa (Momokhere 2018). This is also coupled with the prevailing uncertainty that has already been happening within the business sector (De Koker & Du Plessis 2020). A response is required by businesses even to those factors not within their control, especially in view of the level of uncertainty (McIntyre 2018).

As a result of findings from the State Capture Commission, a nuanced response by different business sectors started to emerge. For instance, the first report led to a broad conversation within the accounting profession about the need to improve issues related to regulatory monitoring and compliance (Small 2022). One area of interest was the discussion around the efficacy and transparency of the tender system in South African society (Molepo 2024), particularly in relation to government contracts and procurement processes. Munzhedzi (2016) makes a broader argument about the need to monitor and strengthen public sector procurement capabilities, as these are possible outlets where corruption manifests. Monitoring the progress of the South African State Capture Commission becomes essential. Since the release of the Zondo reports, there has been a need for the public to continue monitoring interventions that promote the recommendations of the reports (Pienaar & Bohler-Muller 2023).

The literature makes three clarion calls, as informed by the release of reports from the South African State Capture Commission. Firstly, at a general global scale, there is an acknowledgement of the challenges posed by corruption to society (World Bank 2023). Growing calls are noted to not only understand the challenge of corruption but also enforce strategies as responses to such challenges (Leib et al. 2021). Secondly and related to the first point, a need exists to continually understand the nature of corruption in South African society to assist with improving aspects related to governance. Such an effort can include assessing the responses of varying sectors of society to the recommendations of the South African State Capture Commission (Dassah 2018). This is a noted issue internationally, and there are calls to understand how anti-corruption policies and responses can be implemented for society's benefit (Castro & Gradillas-Garcia 2022). Thirdly, the construction industry in South Africa is argued as important in enhancing the competitiveness of the nation (Matarirano et al. 2019) and an important vehicle for local economic development (Construction Industry Development Board 2018). There are growing calls to understand how such sectors potentially contribute further to the ideals of the developmental state in view of the noted challenges related to corruption (Majikijela et al. 2025). The focus of this proposed research is on South African small businesses within the construction sector in view of these calls.

### Research objectives

There is recognition of the need to study the impact of state capture on businesses. There is a lack of empirical research on the work of the Commission (especially from a cross-disciplinary perspective), offering a multi-layered interpretation of the work of the State Capture Commission. Therefore, this study has aimed to fill this gap by studying the impact of state capture on the construction business in East London, South Africa. Two objectives guided the study. Firstly, the study explored the understanding of the findings of the State Capture Commission from the vantage point of a

sample of small business owner-managers in the construction sector. Secondly, the study also proffers suggestions for how South Africa can enhance the construction sector, informed by how small business owner-managers interpret recommendations from the State Capture Commission.

## Literature review

### Theoretical literature

Regarding theoretical literature, this study focused on issues related to dynamic capabilities. The dynamic capability view suggests that firms and businesses must be responsive to an ever-changing world (Chwilkowska-Kubala 2019). In essence, dynamic capabilities explain why some organisations perform better than others when there is change (Zott 2003). Dynamic capabilities manifest in processes that happen in organisations, such as the formation of alliances, product development and strategic decision-making (Eisenhardt & Martin 2000). These capabilities are heavily influenced by changes happening in the business environment, resulting in opportunities and complexity as threats (McIntyre 2018). One such factor that potentially emerges as essential within the current business climate of South Africa is the role and influence of what has been described as state capture.

Another theoretical consideration for this study was the institutional theory of agency (Seal 2006). At the core of this theory is understanding how business responds to institutional arrangements and rules (Baldwin & Cave 1999). Through the institutional theory of agency, the argument is that businesses not only respond to regulatory change but also create structures in response to such change (Al-Hadi & Habib 2023). This may include putting processes and systems in place to ensure compliance with regulations and changes. In essence, such measures also assist in combatting any form of corruption or maleficence (Sarhan & Gerged 2023).

### Empirical literature

There is a growing body of research centred around the findings of the South African State Capture Commission (Swanepoel 2021). The range of these studies is prescriptive in view of the challenges unearthed by the South African State Capture Commission. For instance, general suggestions are made to resuscitate and recapitalise anti-corruption efforts in society (Pillay et al. 2023). Others call for the need for individuals and firms implicated through the South African State Capture Commission to be blacklisted and face criminal charges (Momokhere 2018).

Chipkin (2022) emphasises the need for the professionalisation of public service, citing it as a crucial factor in addressing the challenges stemming from state capture. Additionally, strategies are needed to strengthen governance structures to ensure effective and efficient service delivery, especially at the municipality level (Mudzusi, Munzhedzi & Mahole 2024). The clarion call from spheres of government is to foster corruption-combatting measures (Ferry, Funnell & Oldroyd 2023). Such measures

potentially result in businesses also having what has been referred to as institutional logic in partnership with interest groups around the business as compliance with government regulation (Min, Chen & Tien 2022).

There is an acknowledgement that corruption exists as a context-influenced challenge (Vilanova, Milfont & Costa 2022). Given this, responses can only be contextually influenced to mitigate challenges that may emerge from corruption, especially within the business sector (Kang, Kim & Kim 2023). This can also be done by implementing corruption-combatting measures that ensure effective management controls (Musvota & Mukonza 2021). Several state-owned enterprises in South Africa have been encouraged to incorporate such measures (Soko 2022). This trend is also noted and argued for as crucial in other African countries (Kimani et al. 2021). The argument is that state-level regulations play a crucial role in influencing behaviours within the market, especially at a business level (Al-Hadi & Habib 2023). This responsibility also positions the state as a key driver in promoting governance standards that reach the business sector (Chen et al. 2024).

The study narrowed its focus to understanding how small businesses in the construction sector understand the findings of the State Capture Commission. This focus is important as there are growing calls for the need to expose how corruption, weak oversight and politicised procurement undermine fair competition and ethical governance in South Africa (Swanepoel 2021). Issues of governance, competition and competition are deemed important to the success not just of the construction but also the small business sector (International Monetary Fund 2023). Such a focus becomes helpful to assist in strengthening governance and accountability (Majikijela et al. 2025). From all this, nuanced responses can be proposed to combat corruption (Sargiacomo et al. 2024).

The findings of the State Capture Commission are deeply relevant to the South African small business construction sector, which depends heavily on public procurement and infrastructure projects. The Commission exposed how corrupt networks manipulated tendering processes, inflated contract values and sidelined legitimate emerging contractors (February & Mirzoyev 2024). These practices distorted fair competition and undermined transformation efforts intended to empower small, Black-owned enterprises. Understanding these dynamics is essential for construction small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) seeking to align with ongoing procurement reforms and to operate transparently within a recovering governance environment (Martinez & Pfister 2023). The desired focus is the need to re-build integrity in procurement systems that can enhance access for smaller firms while curbing corruption risks that drive inefficiency and financial exclusion (International Monetary Fund 2023).

The government's implementation of Zondo recommendations, such as digitalising tenders and professionalising oversight, presents both compliance obligations and new opportunities

for ethical small businesses (Swanepoel 2021). Thus, engaging in the Commission's findings is not merely a moral duty but a strategic imperative. For the construction sector, the need is to re-build credibility, secure equitable participation and contribute to a fairer, more sustainable post-capture economy. All these are ideals not just for good governance (Majikijela et al. 2025) but also 'a driver for socio-economic development' (South African Department of Trade and Industry 2023:2).

## Research methods and design

The research was based on an interpretivist philosophy, using a qualitative research approach and semi-structured interviews. This approach has been previously employed in studies on state capture in South Africa (Momokhere 2018) and has been commended for its ability to provide insight into lived experiences (Chinyamurindi 2020). Additionally, it has been lauded for its capacity to comprehend subsequent actions in response to challenges (Chinyamurindi 2016).

### Sampling and research participants

The study relied on the use of a non-probability sample of small business owner managers operating in the construction sector in the local economies of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The sample was drawn from delegates attending a national construction sector summit in East London, South Africa. A total of 25 participants took part in the study. Inclusion criteria existed for taking part in the research.

Firstly, the participants in the study had to occupy a decision-making capacity on behalf of their firm. This is consistent with previous research where this capacity is deemed crucial in making sure that participants in a study are aware through experience of the phenomena the research is about. For this study, the use of small business owner managers was deemed suitable in terms of decision-making capacity.

Secondly, all delegates to the national construction sector summit were recruited from the session focussed on the small business sector. The definition adopted of the small business sector encompassed the guidelines as set by the National Small Enterprise Act (Act No. 102 of 1996, amended in 2004) and the Government Gazette No. 42304 (2019) that an enterprise is classified as small based on its number of full-time employees, annual turnover and gross asset value. Focussing on the construction sector, this would include small businesses that consist of sub-contractors, artisans, builders, electricians, plumbers and project managers who play a vital role in local infrastructure development and employment creation (Construction Industry Development Board 2024). Thirdly, all participants to the study had to be based in any of the local economies of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Table 1 shows a description of the 25 participants who took part in the study, including some of their biographical characteristics.

**TABLE 1:** Demographic characteristics of participants.

Participant	Gender and race	Years of small business operation	Local economy
1	Male (B)	10	OR Tambo
2	Male (I)	11	Buffalo City Metropolitan
3	Female (B)	15	Amathole
4	Female (B)	10	Buffalo City Metropolitan
5	Male (I)	9	Amathole
6	Female (C)	14	Alfred Nzou
7	Male (C)	6	Blue Crane
8	Female (B)	12	Nelson Mandela
9	Male (B)	11	Amathole
10	Male (B)	9	Buffalo City Metropolitan
11	Male (W)	7	Makhanda
12	Male (B)	8	Buffalo City Metropolitan
13	Male (B)	7	Buffalo City Metropolitan
14	Male (I)	12	Amathole
15	Male (W)	6	Nelson Mandela
16	Female (B)	7	Alfred Nzou
17	White (W)	9	Makhanda
18	Male (B)	9	Amathole
19	Female (W)	10	Buffalo City Metropolitan
20	Male (B)	13	Buffalo City Metropolitan
21	Male (B)	7	Amathole
22	Female (C)	6	Nelson Mandela
23	Female (B)	9	Amathole
24	Male (B)	8	Buffalo City Metropolitan
25	Female (B)	8	Buffalo City Metropolitan

W, White person; B, Black person; C, Coloured person; I, Indian person.

### Data collection and data recording

Interview questions were created informed by a reading of the literature, which generally referred to an understanding of state capture as a society-wide challenge. The interview guide was structured following a three-fold strategy. Firstly, questions sought to establish a general understanding of what state capture means for small business owner managers. Secondly, the interview guide explored how small business owner managers were affected by the idea of state capture. Thirdly, a round of questions was formulated to solicit responses on how the small business owner-managers would like recommendations from the State Commission Report to be implemented.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were conducted on the sidelines of the national construction sector summit in East London. A total of 10 interviews were conducted during the week-long event, and the other 15 interviews were conducted online over 3 months. Interview data were recorded with permission from the participants.

### Strategies to ensure data integrity

Firstly, ensuring data integrity was the recording of data. This process assisted in having a point of reference to transcribe all data in preparation for the data analysis. Secondly, interview transcripts were sent to the participants to confirm that the transcriptions were an accurate recording of what had been said. This also allowed for participants to add or remove any information. Thirdly, the research

attempted to space the data collection over 4 months, allowing for time to be able to collect data, including the work of transcribing the data.

## Data analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis approach was utilised. Over the 8 months of data collection, the interviews were transcribed soon after each interview. The transcripts were then entered into the qualitative solutions and research (QSR) NVivo 9 data analysis and management software (Reuben & Bobat 2014). The software was used to code each of the transcripts' paragraphs into themes and sub-themes. The coding was done using the participants' own words wherever possible. However, the researchers relied on more than just the software to develop the themes. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the qualitative data by identifying and examining common patterns within the data using widely established norms (Braun & Clarke 2006). In analysing the data through thematic analysis, the six steps advocated in the literature (Braun et al. 2019) were utilised, as shown in Table 2.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Fort Hare Institutional Inter-Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 22 March 2024. The ethics approval number is CHI001-24. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The researchers complied with regulations stipulated that include written informed consent, the right of participation and confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants. The researcher sought to avoid prejudice and ensure all participants enjoyed equal rights and participation in this critical project. Pseudonyms were used to avoid identifying the participating individuals and their small businesses.

## Findings

Through the thematic analysis conducted, the study identified three themes. Firstly, there is a need for scaffolding efforts as a consolidated partnership between the state and the business sector around an ethical code of practice.

**TABLE 2:** Phases of thematic analysis.

Phase	Description
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Actively reading and re-reading data to obtain an overall understanding.
2. General initial codes	Noting essential aspects of data.
3. Searching for themes	Identify codes and form codes into themes.
4. Reviewing themes	Relating the themes to codes and the entire data set.
5. Defining and naming themes	Producing clear definitions and names for themes.
6. Producing the report	Final analysis of themes relating to the initial research question.

Note: The table summarises the work of Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N. & Terry, G., 2019, *Thematic analysis*, Springer, Singapore.

Secondly, there is a need for a gateway as an access point that reports any violation (anonymously) of this ethical code of practice. Thirdly, there is a necessity to establish a foundation that allows for ethical practices, especially concerning procurement issues. These findings are presented next.

### Thematic finding one: The need for scaffolding efforts as a consolidated partnership between the state and the business sector around an ethical code of practice

Participants in the study pointed to the need for continued efforts to establish and enforce a code of practice for the construction sector and how it interacts with government. This appears to emerge from recommendations that also came out of the State Capture Commission. One participant expressed this as something needed, especially where big projects are being put in place:

'A notable issue of concern for the construction sector is how we failed to learn from the 2010 World Cup experience. At that period, we saw the existence of a collusion. The same is happening in the current context. Big projects attract big money, and big money results, in most cases, in corrupt practices. Sadly, some personalities within the state will do everything and anything to flout processes around how things should be done. This places the need for the enforcement of already existing ethical codes, but we also need to re-visit these to keep up to date with what is happening.' (Participant 9)

Another participant also expressed the need to establish and enforce an ethical code, given the changes happening in the construction sector:

'The construction sector is facing what has now been referred to as the construction mafia. In my experience operating in the Eastern Cape, some parts of the country are a no-go area. The idea that one must pay a protection fee so that they can operate their business without threat is worrying. It is really an indictment of the ideals of the free market economy. What is worrying for me is the link of this mafia to people in government. We need to re-visit the rules around what members of provincial and national government can and cannot do especially with links to business.' (Participant 25)

The enforcement of the ethical code, in the view of some of the participants, was not happening. Probed on why this was so, participants flagged the existence of a 'smoke screen' effect:

'It is actually a smoke screen. We all know the rules exist on paper. How these are translated to reality is a matter of concern. Not just a matter of concern, but I really think it is state capture at work. Private interests downplay the capability of the state to allow for different actors in the sector. I know of guys who have closed down. They are literally eaten up and driven out of the construction sector by these rogue elements. What is needed is the enforcement of the policies that are meant to help us all.' (Participant 3)

Table 3 reports on additional quotes supporting narrative one with a common thread of appreciation of existing edicts and an ethical code. Table 3 also illustrates concerns around the need for the enforcement of such.

**TABLE 3:** Additional quotes for thematic finding one.

'When you speak to ordinary contractors, the message is the same, there is no trust. Government processes are perceived as compromised, and business practices as self-serving. A code of practice could rebuild some of that trust, but only if both sides are serious about implementation and accountability.' (Participant 6)	'The tender system is where everything falls apart. You cannot talk about ethics in the sector without addressing how tenders are awarded. If procurement remains opaque, then all the codes and policies are meaningless. Transparency in how decisions are made is the starting point.' (Participant 12)
'The codes we have were designed for a different era. They don't address the new realities. Take for instance, the rise of digital platforms in construction, or the way local syndicates are able to hijack projects. We need to modernise these frameworks so that they speak to today's problems, not yesterday's.' (Participant 8)	'Enforcement cannot just be the responsibility of the state. Professional associations, unions, and even community-based structures must play a role. Otherwise, the code becomes something external, imposed from above. If business and communities own it, then it becomes a living practice rather than a document on a shelf.' (Participant 17)
'I think part of the challenge is cultural. People know codes exist, but they also know nothing will happen if they are ignored. That culture of impunity is entrenched. Until leaders at the highest levels are held accountable under the same ethical framework as small players, it is very hard to build trust that any code of practice is more than just words on paper.' (Participant 1)	'The biggest gap we see is that government expects business to self-regulate, while business expects government to police corruption. Neither side can go at it alone. What we need is a consolidated effort – a partnership anchored on a transparent code of practice, with real consequences when rules are broken. Without this, unethical practices will simply shift from one project to the next.' (Participant 14)

### Thematic finding two: Access points to report violations of the ethical code of practice

The second theme shows that it is important to create clear ways for people to report ethical rule violations without giving their names. A common feature of such reporting concerned the necessity for anonymity:

'There is an appreciation for government efforts to create whistle-blowing platforms. Such efforts are appreciated as they form part of the work to restore confidence in organs of state that may have appeared to be compromised. However, more needs to be done to protect those who come out to expose corruption. Their protection becomes very important, and real commitment and guarantee of anonymity are important starting points.' (Participant 18)

Related to the point of anonymity, others called for the need to protect those who blow the whistle in exposing construction sector corruption cases:

'Protect whistle-blowers. I liked how things worked out from the State Capture Commission. Such a model of protecting witnesses and treating them with dignity can be something that can be emulated. Maybe we need such a commission even at the provincial level. Definitely, we need ways to protect those participating and expose maleficence.' (Participant 21)

And another participant added:

'Efforts are noted in the role of entities and offices such as the auditor general. I guess what we also need is the creation of capabilities that are specific to a sector. It becomes important, especially in the construction sector.' (Participant 13)

Table 4 reports on additional quotes supporting thematic finding two, linking how the State Capture Commission model could assist in enhancing not just the exposure of corruption but also protecting those who expose such corruption.

**TABLE 4:** Additional quotes for thematic finding two.

'The problem is not just whether you can report, but whether you survive after reporting. Many colleagues are scared of retaliation from losing contracts to even physical harm. Unless there are genuine safeguards, people will remain silent.' (Participant 8)	'Reporting must not only be through government offices, because sometimes those very offices are compromised. We need independent channels, professional bodies, ombud structures, or even civil society watchdogs so that people have choices on where to take their concerns.' (Participant 7)
'You will be shocked how many workers on the ground don't even know that whistle-blowing platforms exist. Communication is poor. If reporting tools are not accessible in local languages and in simple formats, then they remain a tool for the few, not the many.' (Participant 5)	'One frustration people have is that you report and then nothing happens. There is no feedback. That makes people lose faith in the system. A credible mechanism must not only receive reports but also show visible follow-up.' (Participant 22)
'We should be using technology more. Anonymous apps, secure online portals, or even blockchain-based reporting could make it harder for information to be tampered with. Technology could give whistle-blowers confidence that their voices won't be silenced.' (Participant 20)	'Reporting is just the first step. If no one is held accountable, then what is the point? The whole chain from reporting to investigation to prosecution must be clear and transparent. Otherwise, whistle-blowing just exposes people to risk without changing the system.' (Participant 16)

### Thematic finding three: The necessity of establishing a foundation allowing for ethical practices, especially concerning issues of procurement

The third theme that emerged from the data highlights the need to establish a framework for ethical practices, especially concerning procurement issues. Participants in the study flagged the need to improve aspects related to procurement. A consensus was first an appreciation of the importance of a 'well-oiled' procurement process, especially within the construction sector:

'In the procurement space is where all the corruption happens. This was shown in witness testimony from the State Capture Commission. The Zondo Commission also confirmed the challenge of procurement from a South African context and even globally. We also know of this as those who operate in the construction space. The cases are well-documented, and we live through this.' (Participant 16)

Participants also cited the challenge related to procurement, especially when dealing with the state. Most of the perceptions around dealing with the state appear to show a level of mistrust as to the transparency of the process of procurement:

'How transparent are the processes of procurement? The definite answer here is that the process is not transparent at all, and dare I add, there is always some background work happening. For every advertised tender, know what is in the public domain and that stuff away from the public. Sadly, the latter is what is happening and dictating the order of the day. Procurement needs attention.' (Participant 1)

Concerning procurement, participants also flagged challenges of doing business with the government. Many of the construction firms taking part in the study cited the government as their primary client. The perennial challenges of the government taking too long to pay were flagged. However, the possibility of government officials' interference with the procurement process, especially the tender process, was an issue of concern:

'How transparent are the processes of procurement? The definite answer here is that the process is not transparent at all, and dare I add, there is always some background work happening. For every advertised tender, know what is in the public domain and that stuff away from the public. Sadly, the latter is what is happening and dictating the order of the day. Procurement needs attention.' (Participant 19)

Table 5 reports on additional quotes supporting finding three.

The third theme emphasises the importance of ensuring transparency and fairness in the sourcing process, which can significantly impact organisational integrity and stakeholder trust, ultimately fostering a culture of accountability within procurement activities.

## Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore from the vantage point of a sample of small business owner-managers the implications of the state capture commission for local economic development within the construction sector of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Further, the study sought to proffer suggestions for local economic development, especially to assist the construction sector, informed by how small business owner managers interpret recommendations from the State Capture Commission.

The findings of the study show the need for scaffolding efforts to create a consolidated partnership between the state and the business sector based on an ethical code of practice. A starting point for this work is for the public to see the recommendations of the State Capture Commission being enforced (Pillay et al. 2023). When this takes place, it may restore public trust in the state and its efforts to address the challenge of corruption (Momokhere 2018). Further, the study and its findings point to the need for a gateway as an access point that reports any violation (anonymously) of this ethical code of practice. Such a finding magnifies possible measures that could inform the needed re-vamp of mainly state-owned enterprises (Soko 2022). Moreover, the findings highlight the need to improve processes that help to enforce

an ethical code within the construction sector. Notably, such a move is in line with trends being advocated for, especially in several Global South countries (Kimani et al. 2021). The role of improving this within the confines of business becomes an important starting point (Al-Hadi & Habid 2023).

The findings reveal a prevailing perception that the construction sector in South Africa is vulnerable to interference and could easily become a breeding ground for corruption. This perception underscores three critical imperatives. Firstly, there is a need to scaffold and consolidate partnerships between the state and business sectors to support a shared ethical code of practice. Secondly, establishing a secure and anonymous gateway for reporting violations of this code would strengthen accountability mechanisms. Thirdly, a strong governance foundation is required to uphold ethical standards, particularly within procurement processes where risks of malpractice are most pronounced. Collectively, these measures form an integrated framework to promote transparency, ethical conduct and resilience within the small business construction sector.

A need therefore exists to address such challenges by also proffering interventions to manage such challenges (Vilanova et al. 2022). The study magnifies the need to address aspects related to procurement and corruption (Kang et al. 2023). Addressing procurement-related issues, including putting in place management controls, could lessen the procurement challenges (Musvota & Mukonza 2021).

A number of state-owned enterprises in South Africa have been encouraged to incorporate such measures (Soko 2022). The same trend is noted and argued for as crucial in other African countries (Kimani et al. 2021). The argument here is that the role of state-level regulations is crucial in also influencing behaviours within the market, especially at the business level (Al-Hadi & Habib 2023). Such a responsibility also positions the state as an essential vanguard in the promotion of governance standards that reach the business sector (Chen et al. 2024). An implication of this could be to strengthen corporate governance practices and promote the establishment and enforcement of governance standards in the business sector (Ferry et al. 2023).

**TABLE 5:** Additional quotes for thematic finding three.

'Procurement should be about giving everyone a fair shot. But in practice, the small guys are excluded before the process even begins. The rules are there, but the way they are applied always seems to favour those with connections.' (Participant 11)	'Delayed payments are not just inefficiency, they are a form of corruption. They create dependency, forcing contractors to go begging for what is already theirs. If procurement is to be ethical, timely payment must be part of the foundation.' (Participant 24)
'The politicisation of procurement is the real cancer. If every project must carry a political stamp of approval, then the entire process is compromised. Ethical procurement will only be possible once politics and service delivery are separated.' (Participant 7)	'The people running procurement offices must be properly trained professionals with a strong ethical code, just like accountants or auditors. Right now, it often feels like procurement is run by people who see tenders as a business opportunity for themselves.' (Participant 3)
'We need to digitalise the system in totality. If the whole tender process was online, traceable, and open to public scrutiny, it would be much harder to manipulate. Transparency comes with visibility.' (Participant 20)	'If we cannot get procurement right, then the rest is a waste of time. Procurement is the entry point for everything. This includes projects, money, contracts. If that foundation is rotten, then the whole sector will remain vulnerable to corruption.' (Participant 4)

## Contribution of the study to the local economy

The study contributes to the growing body of literature seeking to understand issues related to the State Capture Commission. This contribution is in line with a range of international calls made through exposing case experiences of how state capture has happened in these countries (Sargiacomo et al. 2024). The research exposes the sense-making around the findings of the State Capture Commission from an essential sector, namely that of construction (Martinez & Pfister 2023). In driving towards the construction sector being a crucial socio-economic player as espoused (South African Department of Trade and Industry 2023), the findings magnify aspects of how the sector can be improved to achieve this ideal.

## Implications of the study

Drawing from the study findings, several implications can be proposed. Firstly, there is a need to continuously prioritise the conversation around state capture by embedding it within public discourse, professional training and policy review processes. This entails sustained engagement between government, business and civil society actors to reflect on lessons from the State Capture Commission, ensuring that ethical governance becomes a routine agenda item rather than a reaction to crises (Chipkin 2022). Secondly, incorporating the principles and findings of the Commission into organisational ethics frameworks, procurement guidelines and capacity-building initiatives can cultivate institutional memory that discourages systemic abuse of power (Mudzusi et al. 2024). Thirdly, higher education institutions, industry associations and regulatory bodies can integrate case studies and training modules on state capture into their curricula and professional development programmes, nurturing a new generation of ethical leaders (Min et al. 2022). Fourthly, continuous public reporting and civic dialogue around anti-corruption reforms will help sustain vigilance, transparency and accountability, thereby insulating the construction sector and broader public institutions from the recurrence of capture-like dynamics.

## Limitations of the study

The study has limitations. The chosen sample consisted of owner-managers of construction firms operating in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. However, the sample is not representative of all construction firms in the Eastern Cape Province or even nationally. Secondly, participants were asked to reflect on the State Capture Commission and its implications for the construction sector. Directly, the State Capture Commission saw an interplay of state-owned enterprises and the context in which they worked. The experiences of the construction sector owner managers who took part in this study were not directly affected by the issues at play at the State Capture Commission. Thirdly, qualitative studies are usually subjective. Based on these limitations, caution should be exercised when interpreting the findings of this study.

## Future research

Based on the findings of the study, future research can be proposed. Firstly, even within the construction sector, a need exists to widen the reach. This could, for instance, be done by conducting a national study aimed at understanding the issues. Secondly, future research could be conducted in other sectors of business. Thirdly, future research could also narrow its focus on understanding how public management processes and practices can be used to enable a culture of business. This can include ascertaining the strategies in place within the public management context, including the role of municipalities in fighting elements of corruption. Future research could also explore the governance mechanisms needed to make sure that those things exposed by the State Capture Commission do not happen again.

## Conclusion

The study makes an essential contribution to studies that explore the understanding of the recommendations from the State Capture Commission. Such conversations become essential for efforts to enhance aspects related to sound corporate governance and challenging aspects related to corruption. Further, from the context of the study, the development of the construction sector is vital for South Africa. Such development should be accompanied by strides being made concerning capability development. The two go hand in hand and should not be isolated.

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### CRedit authorship contribution

Yamkela Majikijela: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Mthuthuzeli Swartz: Methodology, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. Nosiphiwo Zondani: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Willie Chinyamurindi: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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The authors report a partnership with COGTA in conducting this research.

### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Willie Chinyamurindi, upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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