

**Lesotho corruption trail leads abroad**  
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The long-running series of corruption trials against leading international construction companies in Lesotho has reached another milestone with a guilty plea from one of the main intermediaries for the bribes.

The trials — the result of the first bribery charges brought against Western companies in Africa — could have serious implications for international development programmes.

Companies found guilty could be blacklisted by the World Bank and export credit agencies.

Jacobus Michiel du Plooy, a South African consultant, has pleaded guilty to paying \$375 000 to Masupha Sole, the former chief executive of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project who is serving 15 years in prison for accepting more than \$2-million in bribes from a dozen Western companies.

The cash was paid on behalf of Italian construction company Impregilo SpA, according to the indictment.

Du Plooy will be sentenced next month.

Impregilo was the lead partner in the Highlands Water Venture (HWV) consortium given the contract to build two of five dams in a 30-year, \$5-billion undertaking, the largest civil engineering project in Africa.

Other members included Kier International of Bedfordshire and Sterling International Civil Engineering of London.

All the companies, including Impregilo, have denied knowingly bribing Sole, although some have conceded that they paid commission to agents.

HWV was charged with corruption in 1999, but the consortium argued in the Lesotho High Court two years ago that it could not, as a partnership, be tried as a single defendant.

A decision to prosecute Impregilo alone has yet to be taken. A company spokesperson said: "Impregilo has done nothing wrong. No criminal charges have been proved against us."

The first corporate guilty verdict was against the Canadian company Acres International last October for a bribe equivalent to almost \$270 000. It was fined \$2,7-million.

This week German company Lahmeyer was convicted on seven counts of bribing Sole.

The next big trial will be of Spie Batignolles of France, the lead partner in a consortium that includes the British company Balfour Beatty. Also charged is the

British consultancy company Sir Alexander Gibb, which is now part of the American group Jacobs.

At a public hearing in the European Parliament last week the British barrister Fiona Darroch said that the failure to support Lesotho "casts a long shadow over the will of the international community".