“A Matter of Standards”

Last week I mentioned a lady called Inga who had had a pleasant social interaction with two smartly dressed young gentlemen who politely visited her house and provided advice regarding her gas regulator and hose. Being troubled by having too much cash in her handbag she was extremely pleased when these gentlemen offered to relieve her of the burden and in return were good enough to leave in her care a brand new gas regulator of far superior quality than her previous model complete with an SNI (Indonesian National Standards) marking. The gentlemen in question had identification cards, an official letter from their good friend the president of Pertamina complete with various “chops” (rubber stamps) and a dozen signatures authorising them to make the visit on behalf of some very important person who was probably struggling with a distinct absence of wealth.

My comment at the time was that people need to be just a tad wary of young men selling gas regulators door to door. These people look all very official and are able to produce more authorisation than a truckload of spies. They provide technical advice about your equipment when in reality they have as much technical knowledge as Albert Einstein’s hairdresser.

Inga’s experience was rather worrying particularly at a time when substandard gas cylinders can be readily found for sale on the street, gas cylinders are exploding all around us and victims are dying all over the country. Not surprisingly people are a little uneasy. It appears the government’s recent national programme to issue many millions of sets of gas equipment to the ordinary citizens of Indonesia provided an opportunity for unscrupulous people to produce substandard, cheaply made products and pass them off as the genuine article. These copies are highly likely to carry the official SNI stamp to make people believe they are genuine and so hide the crime.

This is of course highly illegal and, sadly for a country like Indonesia, damages the people’s trust and undermines the whole concept of having national standards.

It is important, however, that we don’t assume that fraudulent use of Indonesian standards markings on products is a widespread problem, this is certainly not the case. Indonesia has many very successful manufacturing operations which demonstrate high quality and compliance with stringent standards.

Most cars and motor cycles are, for example, locally assembled brands such as Toyota, Daihatsu, Panther, Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki, all names associated with quality products. Similarly white goods such as washing machines may also carry international brand names but are also made locally. Indonesia manufactures many products such as sports shoes, clothing, coffee, tea, furniture which are exported all over the world. Some of the ceramic wall and floor tiles made in Indonesia are of particularly high quality but perhaps the most shining example is that of Bandung based Dirgantara which for some time now has been producing components for Airbus 380, 320, 330, 340 and 400 aeroplanes, there are no more demanding standards than those of the aerospace industry.

This leads us to an important question for Indonesia’s future. What is going to happen in world manufacturing over the next few years and its relationship to world political power? In recent years the surge of economic development in China has been staggering raising the question of what would happen if China took over most of the world’s production of consumer goods. Would this...
leave other developing nations (such as Indonesia) unable to use manufacturing as a way of developing their economies and, more importantly, unable to generate the vital jobs needed to raise the standard of living of its people. Already Europe and America have large numbers of unemployed and, while the financial crisis has sent many businesses to the wall, how much of this can be linked directly or indirectly to the worldwide trend of moving manufacturing operations to China?

The fear of total domination of world manufacturing by China is, however, perhaps not as likely as one might think. In recent months workers in China are starting to demand better pay and conditions, the competitive advantage has already started to erode. This is what happened to Japan twenty years ago.

There is however another consideration which brings us to the relevance of these questions - Standards.

Last year a man called Paul Midler published a book called “Poorly Made in China”. He is an expert in manufacturing and worked as a consultant to help businesses set up and operate there. His book is full of examples of how business leaders in China operate their businesses and how, once established, they bend the terms of contracts or start lowering the standard of their products simply to make more money. He suggests that there is an ongoing struggle to achieve standards and the even more difficult task of maintaining them. Very difficult in an environment where there is always another money making trick being played on the buyer. This leads him to believe that China will never be able to totally dominate world manufacturing.

This bodes well for Indonesia. Clothing and shoe manufacturers have had a particularly tough time in recent years losing business to China. If Indonesia can get its act together and learn to work to quality standards it can give China a run for its money.

Indonesia has a very comprehensive range of National standards developed and administered by the Badan Standardisasi Nasional and compliance markings, the letters SNI, are found on many products. Legal frameworks are in place to support the standards and it is a criminal offence to use the standard mark on non compliant goods.

Standards cover many things, everything from cosmetics to children’s toys. Some standards are merely guidelines but many of the more important standards are legally binding notably the standards for electrical and gas installations and equipment.

In recent months there has been a national drive to make all motorcyclists wear crash helmets complying with the national SNI standard. This has been very successful and you may note that in the urban areas the only people wearing substandard helmets these days tend to be tourists on a deathwish wearing their plastic mixing bowls hidden under a covering of vinyl viking horns.

From a property point of view there are some very important standards to be aware of including:

- Building guidelines are in SNI 03-17281989
- (note that each regency has its own set of building regulations).
- Calculation procedures for concrete building structures are in SNI 03-2847-1992
- The electrical installation standard commonly known as PUIL 2000 is SNI 04-0225-2000 and
Building foundations and concrete structures are particularly well covered and provide detailed specifications for reinforced concrete design, concrete mixtures and the alloys and strengths of reinforcing steel. These are particularly important for our safety when considering the earthquake resistance of buildings.

As already said there is a comprehensive legally binding set of electrical standards largely based on the European electrical standard.

For a catalogue of standards or to obtain copies of individual standards contact the Badan Standardisasi Nasional (BSN) which is in Jalan Gatot Sabroto Jakarta, tel 021 574 7043 or email: bsn@bsn.or.id

If we as consumers become aware that these standards exist and start to demand compliance this will be a positive step to establishing higher standards in building construction. Higher standards will be better for everyone in the long term.

We can achieve this by insisting that any building contracts that we sign include a clause that stipulates full compliance with Indonesian standards, you may even state the more important SNI standards to be included.

Once this is in your contract you have a measurable benchmark against which construction can be compared. You can get an inspector to check your building both during construction and on completion and any breach of compliance with the relevant standard can be identified.

Let us be realistic, one of the major problems is that many people in the construction industry either don’t know that the standards exist or don’t know what the standards are. By insisting on compliance then the construction industry will have to do their homework and become more aware.

How else can we protect ourselves:

Where possible stay with tried and tested products with international names (many are in fact made locally under supervision). This is helping to promote and develop quality Indonesian manufacturing.

Buy from reputable dealers and look for guarantees on products you buy.

In many areas this is straightforward. The Indonesians are very tuned in to quality and reliability, most will agree for instance that if you buy a motorcycle Honda is believed to be the best and this is why Honda outsells all the others. Go for the standards.

For almost anything there are cheap versions readily available in Indonesia but it is wise to remember the old adage “you get what you pay for” and certainly many people who decide to save money end up with problems that cost more to solve than paying the right amount in the first place.
Conversely many people here go for stylish expensive fittings believing they are getting higher quality but end up with expensive repairs when they have a problem. High cost does not necessarily mean high quality and for some of the more exotic “fashion” brands Parts might not be available and repair might not be possible.

In Indonesia it is best to stick with main stream high reputation items. Electric water heaters - Ariston, large water pumps Grundfos, Shimizu for small ones, air conditioners Panasonic, Mitsubishi, Toshiba and Daikin, gas cookers Modena and for ceramic bathroom equipment Toto. Bathroom and kitchenware is a prime example. Toto items are locally made but are of high quality, they are reliable, not overly expensive, parts are always available and these days a good range of styles is available.

International brands locally produced will always comply with SNI standards, prices are reasonable and you get an international quality.

There are certain items in our houses that could be particularly dangerous if they do not comply with SNI. I am thinking particularly of gas regulators, electrical extension leads and power boards. I have been examining all three items for several years and have difficulty finding products that I feel totally confident about. Powerboards for example, no matter how well made they may appear on the outside they very often may, or may not, have the earth cable connected. I make up my own these days.

As a final word of caution I have come across people who insist on Australian or British standards being followed for their electrical installations. Firstly I suggest that we should not assume that these standards are superior to the Indonesian standards and secondly it is well to remember that certain aspects of Australian or British standards may in fact be illegal in this country.

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