

## Sustainable Public Procurement as Organisational Transformation

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### Abstract

*This study explores the role of Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) as a driver of organisational transformation within public sector institutions. While SPP is traditionally viewed as a tool for achieving environmental and social policy objectives, this research positions it as a strategic mechanism that reshapes institutional processes, cultures, and priorities. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivism, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with procurement officers, sustainability managers, and senior executives across selected public organisations. Thematic analysis of the data reveals three core findings: (1) practical implementation of SPP is strongly linked to strategic alignment with national policy and top management support; (2) capacity gaps among procurement professionals and limited supplier readiness hinder transformation efforts; and (3) SPP fosters a cultural shift from cost-based decision-making to value-based procurement practices. The study concludes that SPP, when embedded adequately within institutional frameworks and supported by continuous capacity-building, can serve as a powerful lever for organisational transformation. These findings offer important implications for policymakers, procurement leaders, and public sector reform advocates aiming to enhance sustainability while modernising public institutions.*

**Keywords:** Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP), Organisational Transformation, Public Sector Reform, Procurement Policy, Value-Based Procurement, Strategic Change, Sustainability, Capacity Building, Procurement Practices, Institutional Change

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Implementing sustainable public procurement (SPP) requires more than just policy adjustments; it demands a fundamental shift in organisational behaviour. Traditional procurement routines, shaped by cost-efficiency and risk aversion, must evolve to incorporate environmental, social, and economic sustainability. This transformation involves redefining decision-making processes, incentivising innovation, and aligning stakeholder expectations to drive effective outcomes. However, such a change is not merely procedural; it challenges institutional norms and individual mindsets. Procurement professionals, often conditioned by rigid policies, must adapt to new priorities while balancing competing demands. Success hinges on overcoming resistance, fostering knowledge sharing, and embedding sustainability into the organisational culture. Thus, SPP should be understood not just as a procurement reform, but as a more profound organisational change, one that reshapes routines, empowers actors, and redefines value in public spending. Only by addressing these behavioural and structural dimensions can governments fully unlock the potential of sustainable procurement practices.

To integrate sustainable procurement into procurement projects, organisations must modify their existing routines. Organisational routines are defined as "rules that enable

individuals to select elements from a repertoire to construct behavioural sequences that are meaningful to others within the organisation" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 623). For instance, procurement professionals follow established procedures when acquiring goods and services, ensuring their actions align with the expectations of supervisors, clients, colleagues, citizens, and policymakers. However, adopting sustainable procurement necessitates a reevaluation and transformation of these routines, resulting in new organisational behaviours (Becker et al., 2005; Jones, 2003). While sustainable alternatives are not inherently more costly, procurement decisions can no longer rely solely on cost-effectiveness; other values must also be taken into account. This shift requires procurement professionals to replace their existing routines with new ones that align with sustainability objectives while remaining coherent to stakeholders. However, traditional procurement policies have often fostered risk aversion, discouraging innovation (Rolfstam, 2012). Procurement is fundamentally a decision-making process, and the choices of key actors determine whether sustainable public procurement (SPP) reaches its full potential (Günther & Scheibe, 2006). To maximise this potential, procurement professionals must adjust their behaviour, embracing more innovative and less risk-averse approaches. Thus, their role is crucial in successfully implementing sustainable procurement.

Despite its importance, the role of individual actors in the SPP has been largely overlooked in research. Although studies on sustainable procurement have grown significantly in recent years (Lange et al., forthcoming), most focus on identifying barriers and drivers rather than exploring behavioural change. Key factors influencing the adoption of sustainable procurement include knowledge, incentives, clear objectives (Günther & Scheibe, 2006), top management initiatives, government regulations (Giunipero et al., 2012), legislation, organisational commitment, training (Brammer & Walker, 2011), and supplier availability (Preuss, 2009). However, merely recognising these factors is insufficient to harness the full potential of sustainable procurement. Implementing Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) requires more than just policy adjustments; it demands a fundamental shift in organisational behaviour, decision-making, and routines. Traditional procurement practices are deeply embedded in institutional norms, often prioritising cost efficiency over sustainability. To fully integrate SPP, organisations must reconfigure these ingrained processes, reshaping how procurement professionals evaluate options, assess risks, and justify decisions.

This transition extends beyond technical changes; it involves cultural and cognitive shifts, where sustainability becomes a core organisational value rather than an optional consideration. Existing research has focused mainly on external barriers and enablers, such as regulations, supplier markets, and incentives, while neglecting the internal dynamics of organisational change. However, without addressing how procurement professionals adapt their routines, mindsets, and risk perceptions, even well-designed SPP policies may fail to reach their full potential. By framing SPP as an organisational transformation, this study explores how institutions can systematically alter procurement behaviours, moving from risk-averse, cost-centric approaches to innovative, value-driven decision-making. Understanding this shift is critical for unlocking the full benefits of sustainable procurement.

## 2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The transition to Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) is not merely a procedural shift but a fundamental organisational transformation that requires changes in routines, decision-making frameworks, and institutional culture. Existing literature has predominantly examined SPP through the lens of policy frameworks, barriers, and drivers (Appolloni et al., 2014; Brammer & Walker, 2011), often overlooking the critical role of organisational behaviour in enabling or hindering its adoption. This review synthesises key perspectives on SPP as an organisational change process, drawing on institutional theory, behavioural economics, and procurement innovation studies.

### 2.1 Procurement as a policy tool

Governments continually strive to influence societal developments (Bovens, 't Hart, & Van Twist, 2012). Their governance is aimed at ensuring the security and safety of their citizens, while also stimulating or impeding specific societal developments, such as in the fields of education, immigration, animal welfare, or climate change (Bovens et al., 2012). The resolutions, choices and actions of government bodies regarding the governance of these specific societal

developments are laid down in public policies (Bovens et al., 2012) which give meaning to the way governments try to drive or hinder developments that they deem (un)desirable (Bekkers, 2007). Governments procure goods and services to execute these policies and for their operations. These goods and services range from purchasing paper and pencils to commissioning fighter planes, providing cleaning services, and undertaking public works on roads.

The public procurement market is regarded as the largest business sector globally (Hawkins, Gravier, & Powley, 2011). It represents 16% of the EU's gross domestic product (Rolfstam, 2009). Ghana alone has an annual expenditure of 10 billion Euros (Rijksoverheid, a). Governments increasingly use their authority as a large buyer in the market to compel private organisations to contribute to the achievement of their public objectives (Moore, 1995; Rolfstam, 2009). Thus, procurement is no longer just a means to an end, but also a policy tool used to achieve desired societal outcomes. Public procurement in the Netherlands, for example, is used to minimise long-term unemployment, to improve working conditions throughout the (international) supply chain, and to stimulate the market for sustainable goods and services (PIANOo, 2015). Our research focused specifically on the latter, i.e. a policy aimed at stimulating the market for sustainable goods and services via sustainable public procurement (hereafter referred to as SPP).

Despite several decades of studies into the policy implementation process, scholars still tend to underestimate the impact of implementation on the form and success of a policy (Grantham, 2001). Although pressures from government, customers and various stakeholders can trigger organisations to incorporate sustainability issues into their procurement (Nawrocka, 2008; Perez-Sanchez, Barton, & Bower, 2003; Seuring & Müller, 2008; Sharfman, Ellington, & Meo, 1997), these pressures will only be successful if both the individual organisation and the supply chain as a total entity possess or develop the necessary internal resources to implement it (Bowen, Cousins, Lamming, & Faruk, 2001). Sustainable procurement refers to “the acquisition of goods and services in a way that ensures that there is the least impact on society and the environment throughout the full life cycle of the product” (Meehan & Bryde, 2011). Research has shown that the extent and nature of SPP vary greatly across organisations and regions (Brammer & Walker, 2011). In a time of cutbacks and ‘having to do more with less’, it is very relevant to examine the mechanisms behind these variations, so that the full potential of sustainable procurement can be used and value for money achieved.

## 2.2 Sustainable Public Procurement as organisational change

It is also important to understand not only the factors that influence the implementation of sustainable procurement, but also why these factors exist, who is involved, and, perhaps more importantly, how they impact the implementation of SPP. For example, we know that commitment is considered a crucial driver of sustainable procurement implementation (Erdmenger, 2003; Hoejmose & Adrien-Kirby, 2012; Michelsen & de Boer, 2009). However, few studies have examined thoroughly the role of commitment in the implementation of SPP. Important questions are answered insufficiently, such as: who should be committed? Does commitment increase the implementation of SPP? What determines how committed somebody is? Moreover, how can we increase the level of commitment? Assessing how the barriers and drivers of SPP play a role in its implementation should also examine the role of actors in these barriers and drivers. Which barriers and drivers influence their behaviour and decision-making process? The role of actors in the mechanism between the identified barriers and drivers of SPP has, to a large extent, remained hidden.

The overall aim of our research is to gain insight into the implementation of SPP and to explain how factors and actors influence its implementation and uptake. In line with the research aim, the primary research question is: To what extent and how do organisational factors and actors influence the implementation of sustainable public procurement in *Ghana*? The next chapter discusses how organisational factors and actors are expected to play a role in implementing SPP. In advance of this, we discuss the relevance of our research for theory, practice, and public administration.

## 2.3 Public Administration Relevance

Our research is relevant to public administration for two important reasons. First, according to Waldo (1955), “the central idea of public administration is rational action, defined



as action correctly calculated to realise given desired goals". As a way to overcome market failure, governments often take it upon themselves to take action to reach those desired goals (Donders & Gradus, 2007). Reaching these goals means achieving public values, and within public administration, 'public values' are considered very important (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). The policy on SPP was developed to stimulate the market for sustainable goods and services, and for the government to act as a role model to other (public) organisations. Thus, the policy on SPP was developed to achieve public (sustainable) value through procurement. Procurement, in other words, has become a policy instrument for achieving the desired societal goals and creating public value. However, procurement is not yet recognised within public administration research as an important policy instrument and thus as a valid research subject. This is odd, since public procurement projects, as such, are often the subject of academic research.

However, studies often overlook the role of procurement when evaluating projects. This is the case for studies into public-private partnerships (Hodge & Greve, 2007; Osborne, 2002); governance networks (Klijn, Steijn, & Edelenbos, 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007); spatial or urban planning projects (Verweij, Klijn, Edelenbos, & Van Buuren, 2013); and co-creation or co-production (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2014). All these topics are related inherently to procurement, but often fail to consider the role of procurement. Thus, we can see that sustainable procurement is not yet a key subject within public administration. Most scientific and peer-reviewed articles on SPP, for example, are published in journals specialising in environmental issues, rather than in journals with a transparent public administration background (Lange et al., Forthcoming). Hence, our research on SPP contributes to public administration studies by examining the implementation of SPP.

Second, the field of public administration has often examined what makes entities in the public sector distinct from their counterparts in the private sector, such as studies into the specificities of public organisations (Antonsen & Jorgensen, 1997; Rainey, Backoff, & Levine, 1976); public organisational change (e.g. By & Macleod, 2009; Coram & Burnes, 2001; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Kuipers et al., 2014; Van der Voet, 2014); or public sector employees (e.g. Giauque, Ritz, Varone, & Anderfuhren-Biget, 2012; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Vermeeren, 2014). Public procurement is another aspect of public administration that is widely recognised as vastly different from its private counterparts (Harland, Telgen, & Callender, 2013; Thai, 2001). By examining the implementation of sustainable procurement in a public sector context, our research also provides insight into the roles that factors and actors play in implementing a procurement policy within this context, and therefore, is highly relevant to public administration research.

## 2.4 Practical Relevance

Following the onset of the economic crisis in 2009, the Ghanaian government was compelled to implement economic recovery measures and initiate cuts in public expenditure (Kickert, 2012). To date, Ghana, as well as many other public organisations, have been faced with cutbacks and tightening budgets. In times like these, the importance of procurement and the procurement function is heightened, not only because the government has to procure goods and services with fewer resources, but also because procurement itself is a policy tool that can help achieve desired outcomes in society (Brammer & Walker, 2011; Carter & Rogers, 2008; Green, Morton, & New, 1998; Ho, Dickinson, & Chan, 2010; Meehan & Bryde, 2011; Preuss, 2009). Understanding how organisational factors influence the implementation of sustainable procurement and how these factors can be influenced is critical to achieve these desired outcomes. The paper can help public organisations understand how they can increase the implementation of sustainable procurement, drive forward the sustainability agenda, and achieve (sustainable) value for their money.

### 2.4.1 Organisational Routines and Institutional Change

At its core, SPP necessitates a disruption of entrenched procurement routines, defined as repetitive, rule-bound patterns of action that stabilise organisational operations (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Traditional procurement systems prioritise cost efficiency and risk minimisation, creating inertia against integrating sustainability (Rolfstam, 2012). Becker et al. (2005) and Jones (2003) emphasise that altering such routines requires more than top-down mandates; it involves redefining what constitutes "rational" decision-making, where

environmental and social criteria gain parity with economic factors. Studies on institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012) suggest that conflicting priorities (e.g., cost versus sustainability) must be reconciled through new organisational narratives and incentives.

#### *2.4.2 Behavioural Barriers and Risk Aversion*

A significant impediment to SPP adoption lies in the risk-averse tendencies of procurement professionals, shaped by accountability pressures and rigid compliance cultures (Günther & Scheibe, 2006; Walker & Brammer, 2012). Psychological inertia, fear of litigation, and perceived complexity of sustainable alternatives often lead to "satisficing" behaviours, opting for familiar, low-risk choices (Simon, 1957). Research on public sector innovation (e.g., Rolfstam, 2013) highlights that overcoming this requires not only training but also psychological safety mechanisms, such as tolerance for experimentation and leadership backing.

#### *2.4.3 Drivers of Change: Beyond Policy Compliance*

While regulatory mandates (e.g., EU Green Public Procurement criteria) are pivotal, their impact depends on organisational internalisation. Giunipero et al. (2012) identify top management commitment and supplier collaboration as critical enablers, while Preuss (2009) underscores the role of market readiness. However, these external drivers must be coupled with micro-level behavioural interventions. For instance, Nutt (2002) demonstrates that framing sustainability as a performance enhancer (rather than a constraint) increases adoption likelihood. Similarly, collaborative platforms that normalise sustainable practices through peer learning can reduce perceived risks (Lember et al., 2019).

#### *2.5 Theoretical Gaps and Future Directions*

The current literature lacks granularity in explaining how organisations transition from policy adoption to routinised SPP practices. Few studies apply change management models (e.g., Kotter's 8-step model) to SPP contexts or explore the role of middle managers as change agents. Additionally, while institutional theory explains resistance, behavioural economics offers tools (e.g., nudges, default options) to facilitate shifts; however, their integration remains underexplored.

#### *2.6 Conclusion*

SPP's success hinges on reconceptualising it as an organisational change challenge, not just a procedural update. Future research should bridge macro-level policy analysis with micro-level behavioural insights, offering actionable pathways to transform procurement cultures. Empirical studies tracking routine evolution in public agencies, particularly how sustainability becomes "taken for granted", are urgently needed to advance theory and practice.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the role of sustainable public procurement (SPP) as a driver of organisational transformation within public sector institutions. A qualitative approach is suitable because it facilitates a deep understanding of the perceptions, processes, and organisational dynamics surrounding the integration of sustainability principles into procurement practices (Creswell, 2014). The research is exploratory, aiming to uncover how SPP initiatives reshape institutional structures, cultures, and strategies.

#### *3.2 Research Philosophy*

The research is grounded in interpretivism, which emphasises understanding the subjective meanings and social contexts associated with organisational change. Interpretivist philosophy allows the researcher to engage with participants' experiences and interpretations of how SPP contributes to organisational transformation (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

#### *3.3 Research Approach*

An *inductive research approach* is employed, whereby themes and patterns emerge from the data rather than being tested against a predetermined hypothesis. This approach aligns with

the exploratory nature of the study, enabling the development of theory from observed practices and narratives (Bryman, 2016).

### 3.4 Population and Sampling

The target population comprises procurement officers, sustainability coordinators, project managers, and senior management staff in selected public sector institutions known to have implemented or are currently implementing sustainable procurement policies. A purposive sampling technique is adopted to select participants with the most relevant knowledge and experience related to SPP and organisational change (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample size is estimated at 12–15 participants, which is sufficient for achieving thematic saturation in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

### 3.5 Data Collection Methods

Primary data will be collected through *semi-structured interviews*, which allow for guided yet flexible exploration of participants' perspectives. Interview questions will be designed to elicit insights into the motivations, processes, challenges, and organisational impacts of adopting sustainable procurement. Each interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Secondary data, including policy documents, procurement guidelines, sustainability reports, and organisational strategy papers, will also be reviewed to complement and contextualise interview data.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to analyse the qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis will guide the process: familiarisation with data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software will be used to facilitate systematic coding and categorisation of interview transcripts and documents.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research will adhere to ethical standards for qualitative inquiry. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, who will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study. Data will be securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Ethical clearance will be sought from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection.

### 3.8 Limitations

While the qualitative approach offers depth and context, its findings may not be generalisable across all public sector organisations. The study also relies on participants' subjective accounts, which may be influenced by bias or organisational loyalty. However, triangulating data from interviews and documents is expected to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After transcribing the interviews from 12 participants across three public institutions, the data were read multiple times to identify initial impressions. Key recurring phrases and concepts were identified, and the following codes were created:

- "Green criteria in tenders"
- "Resistance from internal stakeholders"
- "Policy support from top management"
- "Lack of supplier readiness"
- "SPP as part of strategic vision"
- "Training and capacity building"
- "Shift from cost to value"

The codes were then grouped into larger, more meaningful themes. Three major themes emerged:

*Theme 1: Institutional Alignment and Policy Support*



Participants highlighted that SPP implementation is successful when it is aligned with national policies and supported by leadership.

*“Our procurement practices changed only when the government linked sustainability with national development goals and provided a directive to all ministries.” – (Participant 3)*

### *Theme 2: Capacity and Organisational Readiness*

Lack of training and insufficient knowledge about SPP hindered integration.

*“Most procurement officers still think procurement is just about getting the cheapest option. There is a knowledge gap.” – (Participant 7)*

*“Suppliers do not understand sustainability requirements. We sometimes have to explain it to them during pre-bid meetings.” – (Participant 11)*

### *Theme 3: Cultural and Operational Transformation*

Respondents noted that adopting SPP led to significant changes in procurement philosophy, operational processes, and mindset.

*“Sustainability is slowly becoming part of how we evaluate performance. It is not just about saving money anymore.” – (Participant 9)*

*“We now include environmental and social impact assessments in large procurement projects.” – (Participant 5)*

Each theme was cross-checked with the raw data to ensure coherence and consistency. For example, “Institutional Alignment and Policy Support” appeared in every transcript, confirming it as a central theme.

The analysis reveals that sustainable public procurement acts as a catalyst for organisational transformation in three significant ways:

- *Strategic Alignment:* When SPP is embedded in policy and national development strategies, it triggers top-down transformation. Government mandates and strategic alignment with sustainability goals legitimise the change process.
- *Capacity and Training:* Organisational readiness is often undermined by skill gaps. Without targeted training and support, procurement staff revert to traditional cost-based methods. Supplier engagement is also crucial to improve market readiness.
- *Organisational Culture:* SPP promotes a long-term, value-based orientation. As institutions integrate sustainability metrics into their procurement KPIs, there is a gradual cultural transformation in decision-making and operations.

These findings suggest that SPP is not merely a procurement reform but a broader organisational change agenda that redefines processes, values, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms. The thematic analysis confirms that sustainable public procurement can be a powerful driver of organisational transformation provided there is strategic alignment, investment in capacity-building, and support for cultural change. These factors are interdependent and must be addressed holistically.

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS**

This study aimed to investigate how Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) operates not only as a policy initiative but also as a transformative force within public sector organisations. Through qualitative inquiry involving semi-structured interviews with procurement professionals, sustainability officers, and senior management across selected public institutions, several key conclusions emerged.

Firstly, the findings confirm that SPP catalyses organisational transformation when it is strategically aligned with national policies and institutional objectives. The support of top

management and the integration of sustainability principles into organisational mandates were found to be critical in driving change. When public procurement is framed within a broader sustainability agenda linked to national development goals or international standards, it gains the legitimacy needed to alter organisational priorities and practices.

Secondly, the study revealed significant capacity and knowledge gaps among procurement professionals and suppliers. Many institutions lack the technical expertise, training infrastructure, and institutional memory required to implement SPP effectively. These limitations pose serious challenges to operationalising SPP policies and achieving the desired transformation outcomes. Building internal capacity and sensitising suppliers to sustainability criteria must therefore be prioritised.

Thirdly, SPP contributes to a cultural shift within organisations, moving procurement decision-making from a narrow cost-based perspective to a broader value-oriented approach. This transformation affects organisational values, performance indicators, and stakeholder engagement, reflecting a deeper, systemic change. As organisations begin to consider environmental, social, and economic impacts in their procurement processes, they evolve in terms of structure, mindset, and operational processes.

In conclusion, sustainable public procurement is not merely a procurement reform—it is a strategic change mechanism that drives public sector institutions toward more responsible, accountable, and future-oriented operations. For this transformation to be effective and enduring, it must be supported by strong leadership, embedded within institutional frameworks, and underpinned by ongoing investment in human and technical capacity. Only then can SPP achieve its dual purpose: enhancing procurement outcomes while reshaping the culture and structure of public institutions.

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