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Sustainable Public Procurement as Organisational Change

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Abstract

Although studies into sustainable or green procurement are on the increase, it re-mains a field still in its infancy. Most studies to date have focused on only three subjects; two of which are closely related: 1) drivers of and 2) barriers to sustainable procurement; and, 3) the impact of sustainable procurement on the environmental, financial or operational performance of organisations. To mature further, the field of sustainable procurement must move beyond identification of barriers and drivers and examine how and why these factors influence SPP, as well as who are involved. A theoretical framework derived from the organisational change literature offers help in these respects given this field is much more mature. However, some persistent gaps exist here also, which need to be closed. First, too little attention has been paid to the outcomes of change processes. We will therefore examine, qualitatively and quantitatively, the outcomes of the change process, either in the form of behavioural change, or as the implementation of sustainable procurement. This will help scholars, procurers, and managers understand what makes the implementation of the change successful. Second, the research examines different aspects of the change process and, thereby, helps to close another gap in the literature: i.e. a lack of research into the process of change.

Keywords: Sustainable Public Procurement, Organisational Change, Procurement Policy

1.0 INTRODUCTION

To implement sustainable procurement and apply it in procurement projects organisational routines have to be changed. Organisational routines are “rules that allow people to select elements of a repertoire in order to construct sequences of behaviour that make sense to others in the organisation” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003: 623). For example, procurers have rules in the process of acquiring goods and services that help them procure these in a way that makes sense to them, as well as their supervisors, clients, co-workers, citizens and politicians. The introduction of sustainable procurement requires existing organisational routines, and thus behaviour, to be questioned and, subsequently, altered into a new organisational routine (Becker, Lazaric, Nelson, & Winter, 2005; Jones, 2003).

Although sustainable alternatives do not have to be more expensive, simply selecting the most cost-effective option is no longer possible, as other values have to be taken into account. Procurers will thus have to change their existing organisational routine for a new one, which makes sense to them and others. However, previous procurement policies have led to procurers becoming more risk-averse and less likely to partake in innovative projects (Rolfstam, 2012). The procurement process is considered to be a decision-making process where the decisions of key actors determine whether the full potential of SPP is used (Günther & Scheibe, 2006). To use these full potential procurers thus have to make the right decisions and, to do so, they will have to change their behaviour and become less risk-averse. Therefore, actors, such as procurers, play an important role in the implementation of sustainable public procurement.

However, in most studies into SPP this has been overlooked. The number of studies into sustainable procurement has increased significantly in recent years (Lange, Telgen, & Schotanus, Forthcoming). The majority have focused on the identification of the barriers and drivers of sustainable procurement (Appolloni, Sun, Jia, & Li, 2014) that are important in understanding what causes variations in the implementation and implementation of sustainable procurement. For example, studies show that various factors could increase the uptake of sustainable procurement: e.g. knowledge, incentives and a clear aim (Günther & Scheibe, 2006); top management initiatives and government regulations (Giunipero, Hooker, & Denslow, 2012); national or international legislation, procurement commitment and training (Brammer & Walker, 2011); and supplier availability (Preuss, 2009). However, identifying these barriers or drivers is not enough to utilise the full potential of sustainable procurement.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Procurement as a policy tool

Governments try continuously to govern developments in society (Bovens, 't Hart, & Van Twist, 2012). Their governance is aimed at ensuring the security and safety of their citizens, but also at 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 its own operations. These goods and services range from buying paper and pencils to commissioning fighter planes, cleaning services, and public road works.

The public procurement market is regarded as the largest business sector in the world (Hawkins, Gravier, & Powley, 2011). It represents 16% of gross domestic product in the EU (Rolfstam, 2009). The 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 outcomes in society. 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 varies 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 know not only what factors influence the implementation of sustainable procurement, but also why these factors exist; who are involved; and, perhaps more importantly, how they influence the implementation of SPP. For example, we know that commitment is considered to be an important driver of the implementation of sustainable procurement (Erdmenger, 2003; Hoejmosé & Adrien-Kirby, 2012; Michelsen & de Boer, 2009). Yet, 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 actually increase the implementation of SPP? What determines how committed somebody is? And, how can we increase the level of commitment? Assessing how the barriers and drivers of SPP play a role in its implementation should examine also how actors play a role in these barriers and drivers. Which barriers and drivers actually influence their behaviour and decision-making process? The role of actors in the mechanism between the identified barriers and drivers of SPP to a large extent has thus 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 aim of the research the main research question is: *To what extent and how do organisational factors and actors influence the implementation of sustainable public procurement in the Ghana?* The next chapter discusses how organisational factors and actors are expected to play a role in the implementation of 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 to be very important (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). 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 to reach goals desired in society and to achieve public value. However, procurement is not recognised yet within public administration research as an important policy instrument and thus as a valid research subject. This is a bit odd, since public procurement projects, as such, are often the subject of academic research.

However, studies frequently fail to take the role of procurement into account 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 (Branden & 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 specializing in environmental issues, rather than in journals with a clear public administration background (Lange et al., Forthcoming). Hence, our research into SPP adds to public administration research 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 & Jørgensen, 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 recognised widely as vastly different from their 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 role that factors and actors play in the implementation of a procurement policy in a public sector context and, therefore, is highly relevant for public administration research.

2.4 Practical Relevance

After the start of the economic crisis in 2009, the Ghanaian government was forced to take economic recovery measures and begin cutbacks 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.

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

The paper build on the findings of the empirical studies summarized in the previous section and now move beyond the findings of the individual studies to answer the research question and present an overall conclusion of the research. The research question was: The analysis of this study and that discussed in chapter 6 are derived from the same sample. *To what extent and how do organisational factors and actors influence the implementation of sustainable public procurement in the Ghana?*

The answer to the research question is that in the implementation of SPP actors seem to matter more than factors. Only actors were found to significantly and directly influence the degree of SPP in procurement projects. This answer is based on the following four main conclusions from the research.

The behaviour of two specific actors (i.e. public procurers and change agents) was crucial in the implementation of SPP. The behaviour of *public procurers* directly determined how much SPP was implemented in the procurement projects. The procurers were able to increase the degree of SPP in the projects by behaviour such as: looking up additional information; challenging suppliers to develop sustainable alternatives; or, speaking positively about sustainable procurement with colleagues. Such behaviour increased the implementation of both compulsory and voluntary SPP, although it had an especially large influence on the inclusion of voluntary SPP.

The behaviour of *change agents* was also vital in the implementation of SPP. These change agents, usually sustainability advisors, carried out several activities to help procurement project-teams progress towards implementing (more) SPP in their procurement projects. Their activities included organising workshops, providing tools or giving advice. These had a direct and positive effect on the degree of sustainable procurement of the projects and helped project teams overcome barriers and make them more willing and able to implement SPP in their projects. Change agents were, in a way, informal leaders who showed procurers and project teams how to implement SPP.

However, the intensity of the behaviour of change agents also mattered. The more *pro-active* and *embedded* the change agents were the more sustainable procurement the projects became. Less pro-active change agents with less personal contact with the project teams resulted in procurement projects with less SPP. Thus, doing *something* was better than doing nothing, but more pro-active and embedded change agents generated much more results.

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