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The Role of Change Agents in Sustainable Public Procurement Projects

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Abstract
To optimise sustainable procurement, key actors should therefore be encouraged to enact new behaviour. According to organisational change literature, change agents should play this encouraging role, as they can increase employees' readiness for change by influencing their beliefs, intentions, and ultimately their behaviour. Recent sustainability studies highlight the importance of change agents as potential catalysts of sustainability initiatives. Moreover, a recent study indicates that actors in sustainable procurement projects might be acting as change agents. However, sustainable procurement literature has not studied the role of change agents in depth. This chapter closes this gap in the literature by showing that change agents are present in procurement projects and that their actions influence the degree of sustainable procurement. We do so by examining what role do change agents play in sustainable procurement projects in the Dutch national government? To answer this question, seven cases of sustain-able procurement projects in two Dutch national government organisations were compared, for which 35 key actors were interviewed. The Netherlands is a relevant case, as a motion in the Dutch House of Representatives led to the development of a sustainable procurement programme, and the political leaders subsequently agreed to implement this programme in all parts of the national government.

Keywords: *Role of Change Agents, Public Procurement Projects*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Governments are trying to reduce the negative environmental impact of production and consumption by leveraging their influence as major procurers of goods and ser-vices (Brammer & Walker, 2011; Ho et al., 2010). Sustainable procurement is a policy tool that helps achieve such desired outcomes in society (Brammer & Walker, 2011; Murray, 2000; Preuss, 2009). It is defined as "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). The procurement process is a special decision-making process where the decisions of project teams determine whether the full potential of sustainable procurement is used (Günther & Scheibe, 2006). Sustainable procurement therefore varies across projects and is not a constant in organisations (Grandia, Groeneveld, Kuipers, & Steijn, 2013; Meehan & Bryde, 2011). Although people might verbally endorse a policy such as sustainable procurement, this does not necessarily lead to behaviour change (Meehan & Bryde, 2011). To optimise sustainable procurement, key actors should therefore be encouraged to enact new behaviour (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). According to organisational change literature, change agents should play this encouraging role, as they can increase employees' readiness for change by influencing their beliefs, inten-tions, and ultimately their behaviour (Armenakis et al., 1993).

Recent sustainability studies highlight the importance of change agents as potential catalysts of sustainability initiatives (Dunphy et al., 2007; Van der Heijden et al., 2012). Moreover, a recent study indicates that actors in sustainable procurement projects might be acting as change agents (Grandia et al., 2013). However, sustainable procure-ment literature has not studied the role of change agents in depth. This chapter closes this gap in the literature by showing that change agents are present in procurement projects and that their actions influence the degree of sustainable procurement. We do so by examining what role do change agents play in sustainable procurement projects in the Dutch national government? To answer this question, seven cases of sustain-able procurement projects in two Dutch national government organisations were compared, for which 35 key actors were interviewed. The Netherlands is a relevant case, as a motion in the Dutch House of Representatives led to the development of a sustainable procurement programme, and the political leaders subsequently agreed to implement this programme in all parts of the national government.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Change agents in Sustainable Procurement

A change agent is defined as "an internal or external individual or team responsible for initiating, sponsoring, directing, managing or implementing a specific change initiative, project or complete change programme" (Caldwell, 2003: 139-140). They were originally considered to be top or senior managers, but any actor, at any level of the organisation, can become a change agent (De Caluwe & Vermaak, 2003). Organi-sational change literature provides many possible actions for change agents. Change agents could for example envision, initiate, sponsor, adapt or carry forward change; build support, direct, manage, listen, reflect, cooperate, refine, lead, train or educate; or provide advice, expertise or process skills (Caldwell, 2003; Kendra & Taplin, 2004).

Change agents operate in an organisational change process typically consisting of several phases that take considerable time to unfold (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). Kurt Lewin's three-step model (unfreezing, moving and refreezing) is the base for a planned approach to change. Based on this and other models of change, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) developed a framework (see figure 5.1) "that matches recommended phases for change agents to follow in implementing change (i.e. phases within which change agents act) with stages in understanding change (i.e. stages through which change targets progress)." Although sustainable procurement is an organisational change, it is at the project level that the decisions of project teams determine whether the full potential of sustainable procurement is attained. In this research we therefore study the role and actions of change agents at the level of the procurement project. We use the model by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) to frame change at the project level and position the activities of the change agent within the different phases of organisational change, relating them to the stages through which the project team progresses. For example, if a change agent is implementing sustainable procurement and encounters resistance, he could organise a workshop to 'unfreeze' the project team and move them to the 'moving/adoption' phase.

Based on previous empirical data1, two degrees of sustainable procurement have been developed: A) compulsory and B) non-compulsory. Compulsory sustainable procurement can entail A1) no implementation, A2) partial implementation or A3) full implementation of ecological criteria. Non-compulsory sustainable procurement can entail B1) non-compulsory ecological criteria (e.g., ecological award criteria) and/ or B2) a design that adds value to its surroundings (e.g., generating electricity). In this research these degrees of sustainable procurement are used to categorise the implementation of sustainable procurement in a specific project.

2.2 Methods and Case Selection

The roles of change agents in seven sustainable procurement projects in two Dutch national government organisations were examined. Because we wanted to learn whether and how change agents are involved in sustainable procurement projects, a case study was deemed the best design. Via an expert survey the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Waterways and Public Works (RWS) were identified as two organisations where variance in the degree of sustainable procurement within pro-curement projects could be expected. Policy advisors in both organisations were contacted and, via a snowball procedure, seven relevant procurement projects were identified. A case is defined as a procure-ment project procured in 2012-2013 and carried out by a dedicated project team consisting of procurement professionals working in a procurement department of a ministry or agency. A case was considered relevant if it fell under one (or more) of the 52 product categories of the Dutch sustainable public procurement policy, and if the degree of sustainable procurement could be determined. At the start of the project, cases with variation in the degree of sustainable procurement were selected. However, during interviews, it often became apparent that a project had a higher degree of sustainable procurement than initially thought. Organisational and project character-istics, such as the type and size of the organisation and procurement department as well as the size (> 1 million Euros) and duration (> one year) of the project, were kept similar.

Interviews were the main source of data. However, internal documents and publicly accessible information about the procurement projects were also studied. Interviews were held with key actors. An actor was defined as a key actor if he or she had a lead-ing role in a project (e.g., project leader or procurer), was able to influence the degree of sustainable procurement, or was identified by other key actors as a key actor. A snowball procedure was used, and interviews were carried out until no additional key actors were suggested. In all cases the project leader, procurer, and sustainable procurement policy advisors were considered key actors and were subsequently interviewed (with the exception of one procurer who refused to cooperate). In total, 35 interviews were held (on average five per case). The interviews lasted, on average, between 1 and 1.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To facilitate the analysis and allow for a systematic comparison of variables in and across the cases, all the transcripts were systematically and manually analysed on a case-by-case basis. A log containing the origins of all the quotations was kept.

To identify change agents in the procurement projects, the definition of Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) was operationalized. In this research an actor is considered to be a change agent if he or she performed observable actions to initiate, sponsor, direct, manage or implement sustainable procurement during a procurement project and if these actions were recognised by key actors within the project. In the following, we first provide a short description of what is procured in each case and then an in-depth case comparison of the role of the change agents in the cases.

2.2.1 Cases of Sustainable Procurement

The first case involves the procurement of a quay for a marine harbour in the Nether-lands by the Defence Real Estate Department. The second case involves the procurement of vehicles plus ten years' maintenance by the Defence Materiel Organisation. At the time of writing, not all projects are finished, and therefore not all details (e.g. exact amounts, names or details of the procurement criteria) can be published, as publication of these details could hinder the procurement process. The vehicles will be used in heavy terrain but not in dangerous situations, and are bought 'off the shelf'. The third case is a combined procurement by the Ministry of Defence and FMH3 for more than 2,000 warm beverage machines (WBM). WBM fall under category management and are therefore procured by the Ministry of Economic Affairs4. The fourth case involves the reconstruction of 23 kilometres of highway. Re-placing intersections with roundabouts and constructing central reservations, bike paths, flyovers and a bike tunnel should improve the safety of this dangerous road. The fifth case involves replacing a sluice in a canal. It is a special project because it is the first design, build, finance, and maintain5 contract for a wet works project. The sixth case also involves the renovation of a sluice but also includes the construction of a second lock chamber and widening of the canals to increase its capacity and dimin-ish waiting time. The seventh case involves the combined procurement of cleaning, catering, and security services for all RWS locations. Integrating these three services into one contract allows RWS to outsource the management of these services.

2.2.2 Case Comparison

To facilitate the case comparison, more comprehensive information about the pres-ence, position, and activities of the change agent, the different phases within which change agents act, the stages through which change targets progress and the degrees of sustainable procurement are presented in table 5.1. Interesting patterns become visible when we compare the seven cases. These will be discussed in the next para-graphs. However, first we will clarify the content of the table via a short description of the first case. According to row 1 in table 5.1 in the Defence real estate case (column 1) a change agent can be identified (column 2). This change agent is a sustainability advisor (col-umn 3) employed by the Ministry of Defence. As a change agent he carried out several activities (column 4) including advising, organising and presenting. He for example wrote articles for the corporate magazine and brought in external experts to inform people about the possibilities of sustainable procurement.

He carried out these activities in all three phases of the change process (column 5) to help the project team progress from possible resistance through exploration to the: FMH is part of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and provides facility services (including procurement) for multiple ministries. Facility goods procured by the government are categorised (e.g. office supplies. energy, catering) and subsequently appointed to a specific ministry responsible for developing a government-wide procurement strategy and often procurement. Warm beverage machines are part of the catering category, which is assigned to the Ministry of Economic Affairs. In a DBFM-contract the entire construction process (design, build, finance and maintenance) is integrated in one contract for which the supplier is responsible.

This project is in the planning phase; therefore, the contract has not been drawn up. The reported degree of sustainable procurement reflects what the project team has prepared and researched and plans to include in the contract. He for example invited the project leader to a 'sustain-able infrastructure day' he organised. By inviting the project leader, he hoped to spark his interest in sustainable procurement and motivate him to explore the possibilities of sustainable procurement. Ergo, via his actions he was trying to bring the project leader from the first to the second stage. It soon became apparent that (even prior to his action) the project team was very willing to explore the possibilities of sustainable procurement and be a pilot case. He subsequently assisted them in this exploration process towards commitment. For example, he acquired software for the project team to calculate the environmental effects of the design of the quay. With his actions in the three different phases of the change process, he assisted the project team in progressing towards the commitment stage. This commitment re-sulted in a project with full implementation of the ecological procurement criteria, sustainable award criteria that also add value to their surroundings by reusing excess energy (column 7).

Are there change agents and what are they doing? According to table 5.1 in six of the seven cases a change agent could be identified (column 2). All change agents are male civil servants employed by the Ministry of Defence or

RWS. In all but one case (Sluice 2), the change agent was a sustainability advisor and thus not formally part of the project team. In the Sluice 2 case, he was the technical manager and thus a formal member of the project team. The activities (column 4) that the change agents carried out varied across the cases. For example, the change agent in the real estate case regularly organised workshops about sustainable procurement, while the change agent in the Sluice 1 case posted in-formation on the intranet. However, all change agents were advising the project teams to help remove knowledge barriers. Example activities included answering specific questions, providing up-to-date information about developments in the market or assisting in calculating the environmental effects of their projects. A key actor in the Sluice 1 project explained, "Whenever I run into something and wonder how I am going to deal with it, I plan a meeting with [the change agent], and he explains it to me". The change agents do not implement sustainable procurement themselves but help the project teams implement sustainable procurement by providing them with advice, knowledge, tools or a helping hand – or, as one of the respondents stated: "They say, 'I'll help you get on your way and show you how you could handle it, but you'll have to do it yourself.'"

In addition to their activities at the project level, the change agents also carried out activities at the departmental and sometimes organisational and inter-organisational levels to further the change process. They for example had meetings with change agents from other organisations, gave presentations about their work in other departments or tried to motivate other organisations to take part in the change process. One change agent said: "This afternoon I am going to another location, where I rarely go. I am going in a different role, but I am still casually going to ask 'what are you doing with sustainability'?" However, their activities at the different levels are often intertwined, as the projects often serve as pilots. One change agent explains: "At the moment we have 5 or 6 forerunner projects and we are already seeing that it can make a difference. That's why we are going to expedite the roll out. Because we could prove it."

Comparing the phases and stages

When we take a further look at the phases (column 5) and stages (column 6) of the change process, we see that in three cases, the change agents needed to "unfreeze" the situation and create willingness to change. In the Sluice 2 case, one of the team members said: "I did notice that it is very difficult, even within such a team. He might also say that. He often felt like he was the only one who wanted it. […] There certainly was a lack of enthusiasm. Opposition, he might have seen it that way. It was more that people reasoned, 'we are busy enough; let us focus on what we really have to do. And then if we have time and money left for sustainability, we can do that too.'" The change agent however refused to let it go and put all of his time and energy into removing resistance and encouraging the project team and other key actors to be willing to explore the possibilities for developing the most sustainable sluice in the world. He, for example, regularly sent them examples of comparable projects in which non-compulsory sustainable procurement practices were successfully implemented; for example: "In Zealand, they created an entire sluice with dimmable LED lights, making it dark at night rather than completely lit. I send that into the organisation to show them good examples of what can be achieved. […] I just try it again every time. Once a month, I send something and say: 'This has been achieved; we could use that in our sluice.' I try to keep the idea warm, to keep it in their minds. We do have to build that second lock chamber! I hope that they will eventually pick it up."

In the real estate project, the project team was already convinced of the need for more sustainable procurement and had reached the second phase. Although the project team was willing to explore the possibilities of sustainable procurement, the change agent needed to unfreeze the situation to remove resistance at the departmental and organisational levels. One of the key actors explained, "I get the idea that it is not hugely expressed as a priority. My colleague [the change agent] is more or less the only advisor dealing with it. It really is his, how do you call it, mission. And it apparently is really difficult to get the rest of the organisation engaged. You are truly relying on project leaders and project teams that are willing to apply it." The change agent therefore sought good projects with project teams that were willing to explore and help him move the change process further. One of the team members explained: "We were merely toying. He wants to launch it on a larger scale. For now, it is a project in which we applied several facets, or will apply I should say, because we have not put out the tender yet. But, he of course wants to get much more support for it."

In the cleaning, catering, and security case, the change agent felt that there was too much resistance (including at the management level) and that there was little to gain. He thus chose just to advise the actors in the project, appreciate the sustainable procurement practices that were implemented in the project, and spend his time and energy on other projects in which he could have a greater impact. One of the project members stated: "We sat with him and said, 'Gee, I'm afraid we will have to stay at the lowest threshold, difficult as it might be. But we will make sure we grow each year'. And that was a positive point for him. Well, ok, then we are at least doing that." This shows that change agents make conscious choices regarding the specific projects in which to invest their time and energy in order to optimize the implementation of sustain-able procurement at a higher (e.g., organisational) level. In all the other

cases, project teams were already aware of the need to implement sustainable procurement and were willing to explore sustainable procurement practices in their project. In the other cases the second phase of moving and the second stage of exploration had already been reached. If we compare these cases, we see that the change agents in these cases mostly focused on assisting the project teams in exploring sustainable procurement practices and on removing barriers to sustainable procurement implementation such as a lack of knowledge or tools. For example, in the highway case, a team member explained: "I said, 'I need a good advisor, somebody who really has a lot of knowledge about it, because I am not going to experiment. It is too important for that.'" Consequently, his director arranged some time for the change agent to assist them. In these projects the change agents no longer had to focus on motivating or initiating, but were able to focus on ensuring that exploration would lead to commitment by advising, problem solving or coordinating.

Comparing the degrees of sustainable procurement

When we look at the degrees of sustainable procurement (column 7), we notice that in the vehicle case not all compulsory ecological criteria are applied. However, given the unique circumstances under which the Ministry of Defence is operating, they are formally allowed to forego the compulsory requirements if they conflict with operational requirements. All projects however do have non-compulsory sustainable procurement. In five cases non-compulsory criteria are included, and in two cases (one in each organisation), value is added to the surroundings. The fact that all cases include more sustainability than required is an indication that sustainable procurement is becoming institutionalised and emergent sustainable procurement initiatives are relatively common in both organisations. One of the respondents explained: "It actually became something we find normal, that you have to include. It might seem like the attention is gone, but it's actually just embedded in the organisation. It's standard; you automatically include it."

The respondents indicated that the change agents played an important role with regard to sustainable procurement. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which their activities directly influenced the degree of sustainable procurement. In most cases the change agent was so embedded in the project that it is difficult to unravel what activity led to what. Nonetheless, in all cases activities were identified that the change agent carried out to help further the change process and progress the project team towards commitment. If we relate the degrees of sustainable procurement (the outcome of the project) to the activities of the change agents, we note that in the cases with the highest degree of sustainable procurement, the change agent was the most embedded and pro-active (Real Estate and Sluice 2). In the case with the lowest degree of sustainable procurement, the change agent was the least embedded and least pro-active. The change agent in the latter case explained that he generally only became involved in a project when asked to do so: "It is the intention that we do all projects. But it depends a little bit on whether a project leader asks for advice and guidance." This is a vastly different approach from that of the change agent in the real estate case, who contacts people himself: "We just want to do it! I could write it all down, but you also need projects. So we looked for projects. I also asked around in our regional offices: 'what do you think are good projects?'" This suggests that a change agent can achieve better results and increase the degree of sustainable procurement in procurement projects when they are embedded in the projects and more pro-active.

Finally, comparing the cases, we can also see that sustainable procurement is not an end state but part of a process. Although most project teams considered applying the compulsory ecological criteria to be business as usual, this did not mean that project teams were equally committed to including additional or non-compulsory sustain-able procurement. Thus, if one wants project teams to implement more sustainable procurement practices, one needs change agents that are continuously able to initiate, sponsor, direct, manage, or implement sustainable procurement initiatives.

3.0 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

To optimise sustainable procurement, key actors should be encouraged to enact new behaviour (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). If they do not match their behaviour to the desired new situation, the full potential of sustainable procurement will not be achieved. According to organisational change literature, change agents can play an important role in achieving such behavioural change. Based on our empirical findings, we draw the following five conclusions.

First, our study shows that, although change agents are only one part of the process towards sustainable procurement, they are an important piece of the puzzle and play an important role. In seven cases of sustainable procurement, a change agent was present and able to help key actors enact this desired behaviour by carrying out activities.

Second, change agents carry out specific activities such as advising, facilitating, problem solving or organising workshops, to remove resistance and assist project teams in progressing towards commitment to implement

sustainable procurement in their projects. This commitment resulted in seven procurement projects with more sustain-able procurement than required.

Third, the activities the change agents carry out appear to vary by change process phase. Consequently, their role within the organisation and procurement projects also varies throughout the change process. It seems change agents are champions of change in the first phase of organisational change, whereas in the exploration and institutionalisation phase they are more advisors. The role and activities of change agents should therefore not be considered as fixed, but as evolving throughout the change process. This allows change agents to match their activities to the needs of key actors and thereby increase the successfulness of their activities. This finding also proves the usefulness of the model of Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) for our study, as it allowed us to connect the identified activities of the change agents to the three phases of organisational change and the three stages through which the project teams progressed.

Fourth, the activities of change agents not only vary throughout the change process but also vary across projects and the organisation. Change agents appear to make conscious decisions regarding which projects to participate in and how much time and energy they will invest in projects in light of them of their goal of increasing sustainable procurement at the organisational level. To fully understand the importance and role of the change agent, his or her activities should therefore be studied at both project- and organisational levels.

Fifth, regarding the role of change agents and the degree of sustainable procurement at the project level, we found an interesting pattern. In the cases with the most proactive and embedded change agents, we find the highest degree of sustainable procure-ment, whereas in the case with the least proactive and embedded change agent, we find the lowest degree of sustainable procurement. This finding is important because it suggests that, to optimise sustainable procurement, public organisations should stimulate change agents to become more pro-active and embedded within projects as this allows change agents to directly influence the decision-making process.Our study has limitations. The first has to do with causality. Although we find the highest degree of sustainable procurement in the cases with the most proactive and embedded change agents, we cannot solely attribute this to the actions and role of the change agents. Other factors and actors were also responsible for the outcome; future research should study further the relationship between actions and outcome. Second, the actions and role of the change agents were only studied at the project level and not the other levels on which they operated. Future research should therefore study change agents at multiple levels, thereby showing the full picture of their actions, role, and results.

Overall, we can conclude that change agents matter in the implementation of sustain-able procurement. In practice, organisations should therefore encourage employees to take on the role of change agents, become embedded in procurement projects and be pro-active in carrying out activities to help project team's progress towards commitment to sustainable procurement and thereby achieve the full potential of sustainable procurement.

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