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#### Article

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Research Article

# Sustainable Public Procurement as an Instrument for Sustainable Development: An Exploratory Study of Local Government Areas in Low-Income Countries

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## Abstract

Sustainable public procurement is recognised as an essential part of sustainable development, striving to reconcile and account for public expenditures on goods and services across different contracting authorities to achieve public procurement objectives. While the contribution of the sustainable public procurement sector is receiving growing attention in developed societies, the role of sustainable public procurement is quelled in developing communities. Numerous studies have examined the role of public procurement in promoting sustainable development within local government areas in the Western context. Regardless, there is no empirical study of this nature in developing countries. Therefore, this study explores the multifarious mechanisms through which local government authorities in low-income countries, such as Nigeria, employ their public procurement functions to foster sustainable development that encompasses economic, social, and environmental benefits. Design/methodology/approach: The study reviewed policy documents and practitioner documents on public procurement and sustainability available through the Bureau of Public Procurement, which is the designated commission for public procurement in Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative approach, thirteen local government areas were utilised to explore the challenges and opportunities for addressing sustainability imperatives through public procurement. Using semi-structured interviews, this study conducted 24 interviews with public procurement professionals to gain in-depth knowledge of the extent to which sustainability is incorporated into current public procurement practices and how sustainable public procurement can be utilised as an instrument for sustainable development. Findings: This study confirmed some of the challenges reported in the literature. In addition, the study identified contextual factors, including a lack of autonomy, nepotism, the absence of e-procurement, reluctance to change, and the lack of rule of law, that contribute to the challenges of achieving sustainable public procurement in Nigeria.

## Keywords

Sustainability, Public Procurement, Sustainable Development, Local Government Areas

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## 1. Introduction

The introductory stage of this study outlines the aim, objectives, research questions, and limitations. It discusses the background and emphasises the detailed explanation of the problem statement. Following the general background of the study, this section provides the academic and empirical justification for the significance of addressing the utilisation of sustainable public procurement in achieving sustainable development for local government areas in low-income countries, specifically Nigeria.

According to the United Nations [40], public procurement is the most critical function of any government, without which the development goal of any society remains implausible, which constitutes the lifeblood of government services and programs. Public procurement accounts for a substantial portion of the taxpayer's money [6]. To achieve its strategic objectives, the government needs to ensure that it has access to the necessary resources and products to meet its obligations to citizens. The effectiveness of future public procurement is linked to the government's capability to deliver these services efficiently. [11, 17].

### *The Imperatives of Sustainable Public Procurement*

The significance of public procurement cannot be overstated, as it addresses critical aspects of social freedom, economic development, and environmental integrity. Public procurement can be utilised as an instrument for sustainable development, as evidenced in several ways, including the promotion of health capital, good governance, poverty eradication, and the advancement of science and technology.

**Health Capital** - This is one of the most fundamental areas impacted by public procurement. The health sector is empirically dependent on the procurement of medicines, health services, and products; this relationship directly affects the lives of the citizens [24]. This is important because effective and efficient public procurement from the health sector's perspective signifies the high quality of healthcare and better medical equipment, which in turn engenders higher life expectancy among citizens.

**Promote Good Governance** - When public procurement becomes sustainable, it plays a crucial role in ensuring good governance and the government's capacity to deliver the required goods and services to its citizens. A well-defined and functioning public procurement system is enshrined in sustainability principles, including non-discriminatory practices, zero tolerance for corruption, value for money, increased effectiveness and efficiency of delivery, a positive impact on a country's investment climate, accountability, and transparency. A good government represents a functioning regulatory system that permanently protects the interests of its citizens, introduces institutional settings, has a proven capacity, and is a healthy, well-designed procurement process [16]. A further assertion claims that the government can equally increase public spending by being the largest buyer, thereby creating the latitude for job opportunities to thrive [41].

**Poverty Eradication** - According to the United Nations [40], Goal 1 emphasises the need to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere by 2030." However, achieving this goal depends on what you and I can do! Becoming engaged in decision-making goes a long way to making a difference in the fight against poverty reduction. Also, ensuring that intergenerational knowledge is equitably distributed, voices are heard, human rights are promoted, and innovations are encouraged. This includes cognitive reasoning abilities at all ages that support transformational change in the lives of people in local communities, particularly in developing countries [33]. To address these global realities, sustainable public procurement can serve as an instrument of transformation by providing capital investment through local sourcing initiatives in respective economies [32]. Furthermore, SPP ensures that suppliers' sourcing activities are domiciled in the respective countries where procurement functions are taking place, thereby influencing the degree of job creation opportunities, capability in spending categories, individual contributions, rise in national income, and economic opportunity advancement in the communities [13].

While SPP creates this robust economic environment to achieve this goal, private organisations are not marginalised. The private sector plays a crucial role in determining whether the growth is inclusive and adequate to justify poverty reduction and potentially promote economic prosperity for the poor and marginalised local communities [41]. In further development, Science is not left alone in the pursuit of ending poverty. However, it also plays a notable role in its realisation. For instance, the triumph in science has made it possible to have access to safe drinking water and reduce the rate of mortality caused by waterborne diseases and other related ailments resulting from water deficiency [27].

**Science and Technology** - In public procurement, Science and technology are vital in advancing human knowledge, which can only be harnessed through financial discipline, resource management, and value for money. Science and technology provide several instruments to mitigate risks and identify other possibilities, guiding these actions [6]. Through the practical and efficient use of public resources, scientists in the social and natural sciences are encouraged to do more. Today, there is an excellent expansion in medicine, infrastructure, education, and other services that support human needs, particularly the vulnerable and those with disabilities in the local communities [33]. [1] Affirm that science and information technologies prioritise knowledge-sharing and experience opportunities. According to [8], when public procurement becomes sustainable, it can provide sufficient resources that aid productive research, which may be a valuable solution to knowledge scarcity. [26] Further added that sustainable public procurement could build a sustainable society with sufficient organisational knowledge and awareness, which is responsible for the purchasing of goods, works,

and services, and this is because sustainable development in any society is possible.

## 2. Achieving Sustainable Development

Humanity can achieve sustainable development that meets the present's needs without jeopardising the next generations' ability to meet their own needs. Hence the concept – Our Common Future. According to the World Bank [42], the satisfaction, aspiration, and innovation of human knowledge remain the critical objectives of development. Globally, public procurement serves as an essential bridge between public demand and market supply, possessing the capability to drive corporate behaviour through its institutional arrangements [10]. However, in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, most people require food, shelter, clothing, employment, and many other essential necessities of life [3]. In Nigeria, for instance, beyond these basic needs for these vulnerable people comes the legitimate ambition for a better life. According to [21], these challenges in Nigeria's local government areas imply a world of inequality and impoverishment, characterised by an economic, social, and environmental crisis. Sustainable development deals with meeting the necessities of everyone and, by extension, satisfies their aspirations in the pursuit of a better life through public procurement for rural citizens [26]. [31] argued that the performance and service complexity in the local government areas are of great concern and suggests the need for a workable model that can reflect a practical reality of the local government areas of Nigeria.

### 2.1. Retrospective View of SCP

According to [34], consumption is sustainable if the living standard exceeds the bare minimum standards everywhere, with the potential for long-term options. Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) have been regarded as the driving force that potentially drives the global economy by using natural resources and the environment upon which our present and future development of humanity depends [40].

Globally, countries are confronted with the reality of achieving sustainable development goals to attain middle-income status, as projected by the United Nations [33]. In developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, SCP offers numerous green and decent job opportunities, new markets for urban and rural dwellers, and effective natural resource management for citizens [40]. Building a global coalition across continents and among different stakeholders, SCP can contribute equally to the global impact of low-carbon and green economies, as well as poverty eradication, in line with the concepts and principles of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12 [40]. SDG aims to guarantee sustainable consumption and production patterns, thereby improving living standards in both developed and developing countries. Target seven (7) validates a significant position as a promoter

of this goal by encouraging sustainable public procurement practices in accordance with national guidelines [39]. Sustainable procurement is more than just integrating social, environmental, and economic factors in making procurement decisions that focus on and look beyond the traditional economic paradigm. However, based on whole-life cost, success measures, and associated risks regarding the environment and society, this decision entails initiating a strategic procurement function within the context of performance management, value for money, and corporate social responsibility, with a priority on the communities [27]. Sustainable public procurement emphasises how the government buys goods, works, and services through documented suppliers, considering certain factors such as value for money, which prioritises the right price, time, quality, functionality, and availability. It justifies an environmental factor related to green public procurement. It also considers the social aspects of poverty eradication, unemployment, inequality, fair trade, labour conditions, and human rights [28].

### 2.2. Global Awareness of SPP

Sustainable public procurement in focus, driving sustainability in the direction of public procurement in the broadest perception requires a procurement process that considers social, economic, and environmental factors. As rightly acknowledged by the international community, which includes a sustainable public procurement target in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [33]. Goal 12, Target 7 (12.7), focuses specifically on promoting "public procurement practices that are sustainable, under the national policies, guidelines, and priorities. According to [34], sustainable public procurement is progressively gaining a global embrace from national and local authorities. Many organisations and government agencies monitor their implementation of sustainable public procurement policies and continually set specific targets. It is essential to encourage integration among stakeholders throughout the entire procurement structure to transform the value chain, along with production and consumption patterns [29]. Focusing on public procurement procedures requires cooperation between the public and private sectors. Critical to achieving this goal is creating multi-stakeholder collaboration and knowledge-sharing platforms at the international, national, and local levels [41].

## 3. Challenges Towards the Implementation of Sustainable Public Procurement in Nigeria

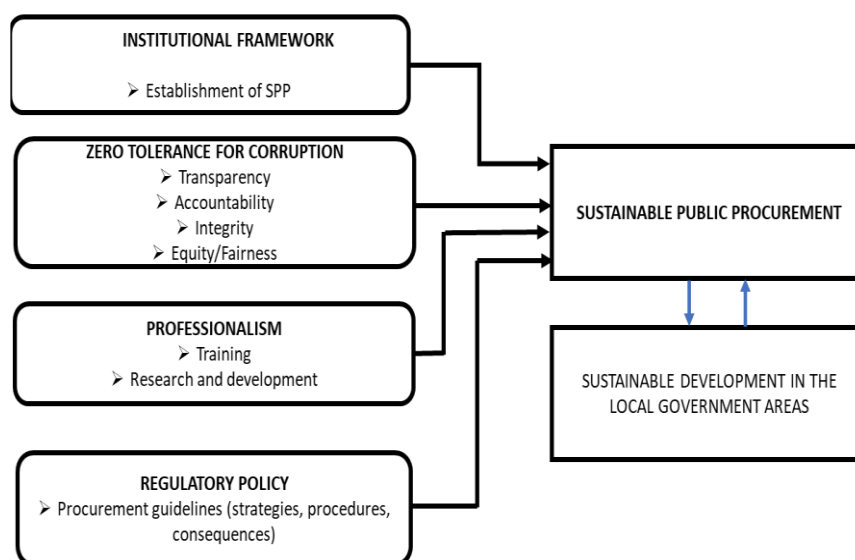
Numerous challenges constrain the implementation of sustainable public procurement in local government areas. These challenges are predominantly focused on the economic deficiency, social injustice, and environmental deprivation of people living in rural communities whose earnings are insignificant and who rely on agricultural produce for survival.

This study identified six potential challenges to sustainable public procurement and developed a framework of challenges that underpins its performance in local government areas of low-income countries.

These challenges highlight the intricate factors that make achieving sustainable public procurement impossible. Findings from this study identify the absence of an institutional framework, zero tolerance for corruption, a lack of professionalism, and the absence of a regulatory policy as Independent Con-

structs. At the same time, sustainable public procurement and sustainable development are viewed as Dependent Constructs.

Below is a framework for the challenges of SPP in this study, which is expected to be adopted as a prototype. Implementing this framework will undeniably elevate the living standards of individuals in the local government areas of Nigeria and, in turn, drive progress in developing communities throughout Africa by harnessing sustainable public procurement for sustainable development.



*Figure 1. Framework of Challenges from SPP.*

Institutional Framework - Sustainable public procurement and sustainable development are the two fundamental concepts of this study. The framework of this study is a demonstration of the significant role sustainable public procurement plays in achieving sustainable development in local communities. Despite these phenomena and strategic dispositions, it is argued that the performances and functionalities are restrained based on existing realities. The effective government structures, frameworks, and oversight functions are necessary to prevent and minimise irregularities in the institutionalisation of public procurement. Studies assert that the executive functions of the government are structured in a manner that reduces officials' ability to alter procedures and to operate functions without due process and the involvement of their citizens and their representatives [12]. It is further argued that doing business with a particular office or ministry must follow an objective, clear, and well-established process, and everyone must be informed. Therefore, this study believes that to ensure compliance with the law and protect the best interests of taxpayers, information should be made available to citizens.

In Nigeria, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and other anti-fraud agencies were established by Nigeria's Constitution to monitor, report, and prosecute all financial mismanagement and other forms of corruption

through the legal system [33]. Although this institution claims to have made considerable strides in combating economic and financial misappropriations in recent decades, numerous opinion leaders and academics in Nigeria and abroad hold a differing perspective. A qualitative study was conducted on the role in resolving systemic corruption and to ascertain how institutional and organisational factors influence the performance of the EFCC [7]. This study concludes that the commission is incompetent to fight financial crimes in Nigeria due to a lack of commitment, an incompetent workforce, poor budgetary allocation, and an inefficient judiciary. Therefore, the institutional framework is integrated with other minor constructs that power the "sustainable public procurement" as the engine driving sustainable development in local communities.

Zero Tolerance for Corruption - In the context of this study, zero tolerance for corruption encompasses transparency, accountability, integrity, and equity/fairness. Zero tolerance emphasises the objectives and principles of procurement that promote the practice of sustainable public procurement. It is a concept that seeks to isolate all possibilities of financial irregularities from the structure of the procurement practice. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, globally, between 13% and 20% of gross domestic product on average is spent on public procurement and



nually [18]. Several economic actors hold the view that with such an enormous amount of money at stake, there is a greater chance of waste emanating from the government's financial activities, which tend to undermine the achievement of sustainable development, particularly in the local communities [10].

Professionalism in sustainable public procurement entails training, research, and development. This study provides theoretical evidence and the concept that the problems of sustainable public procurement in local communities for sustainable development could be effectively addressed through the practice of training procurement officers across the region.

The implication of professionalism and education for procurement officers is critical and necessary to ensure zero tolerance for corruption and other forms of unethical display, leading to the subsequent collapse of procurement institutions. This assertion was previously suggested in the adopted institutional theory, which provides clues and guidelines on how adequate training and professionalism can significantly enhance procurement performance and yield good returns, producing evidence of accomplishment and ultimate functionality [29]. The existing literature indicates a lack of representation in terms of procurement professionalism among professional bodies that regulate and monitor the ethical conduct and certification of practitioners in Nigeria, thereby creating a gap in procurement management at all levels of government [13]. The body of knowledge demands that, for effective and efficient performance, acknowledging and registering with professional bodies elevates moral values, increases productivity, and fortifies security for diligent procurement practices that constantly promote ethical conduct at all stages of the process [15].

**Regulatory Policy**—Within the framework of this study, regulatory policy refers to the legal and regulatory framework governing public procurement, encompassing procurement policies and laws, strategies, procedures, and associated consequences. In addressing the independent constructs of the study's framework, regulatory policy is identified as a critical driver of sustainable public procurement. This application aims to define the rules that govern procedures and processes from every perspective, delivering the quality of procurement management principles in their entirety. Some of the procurement legal and regulatory frameworks are referred to as the constitution, national procurement laws, and procurement regulations. A country's constitution remains the fundamental law that regulates every citizen or inhabitant in that country and is uncontradictable, incontestable, binding, and supported by all. The elementary principles and laws of a country determine the government's powers to guarantee certain rights of the citizens without fear or otherwise [12]. [9] suggests that procurement regulations are the legal instruments of the law in countries that support national procurement laws, which originate from the country's procurement regulatory organs or agencies. This law

supports the procurement regulations by providing detailed explanations regarding the provisions of the law. In Nigeria, the BPP governs procurement activity, the only regulating body responsible for monitoring and providing oversight functions for public procurement of goods, services, works, and utilities at all levels of the government [23]. The regulatory framework of public procurement is critical and, therefore, identified by this study as one of the most significant minor constructs that drive sustainable public procurement to achieve sustainable development.

## 4. Research Methodology

To address the overarching research question: What are the challenges and opportunities in addressing sustainability imperatives through public procurement in the local government areas? This study conducted semi-structured interviews across Nigeria's leading local government areas, including experts in public procurement, regardless of age, gender, or religious diversity. Fifty-three prominent local government areas were contacted and shortlisted for interviews. Twenty-four (24) interviews were conclusive. Therefore, the entire study comprises twenty-four interviews from thirteen local government areas across the six geopolitical zones. This number is a good representation of this study, as it is more prominent and equally provides quality data.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, achieving sustainable development through the instrumentality of sustainable public procurement requires human capital development (HCD) through constant training and professional development. This is the definition of a government willing to put everything on the line to impact sustainable life for its citizens.

The triumph of this study is closely tied to the rule of law. This is because it ensures that 'no one is above the law,' as the government is accountable under the law, and the fundamental rights of citizens are protected, allowing them to live and work safely. This ensures that citizens are not arbitrarily subjected to government decisions or abuse of power; instead, it maintains fairness in the application of the law. We urgently recommend that the rule of law be considered, reinforced, and internalised as the foundational remedy to achieving sustainable development in Nigeria and other developing countries. This study defines the institution, process, practice, and mechanism that promotes the equality of every citizen before the law. Findings from this study confirm that society cannot function properly without the rule of law; without it, there would be no environmental regulations. While crimes would be at their highest, repairs of streets and roads, as well as traffic safety devices, would be irregular. Applying the rule of law is imperative and precisely valuable in this study because it limits the arbitrary power of individ-

uals in authority, particularly those who subvert justice at the expense of vulnerable citizens. Therefore, as rightly pointed out, the rule of law in this study is regarded as a strategy to ensure that public authorities are honest while discharging their duties.

Closely related to training is professionalism. Training and professionalism share a great deal of commonality and are often used interchangeably to convey a similar message, which is enshrined in the improvement of the workforce and the organisation. No wonder this study viewed both approaches in relative terms, given the significance of training and professionalism as a standard practice in public sector procurement. The consultation of indiscriminate websites for additional knowledge and for purchases of goods and services by procurement officers in order to meet the needs of local consumers should be discouraged to allow professional applications of recommended procurement software for effective management and accountability. Findings from this study suggest that procurement practitioners in local government areas are eager to receive adequate training and development to enhance their procurement knowledge and practices, which in turn fosters productivity in these areas.

The significance of training in sustainable public procurement practice is evident in prior studies, which explains the substantial implication of training and professionalism to the public procurement sector as one of the most successful endeavours in any organisation. Training and development are intertwined and remain among the most significant gestures a procurement practitioner can ever acquire. It defines job performance and is part of employees' skill acquisition that stimulates job longevity, career growth, responsibilities, and contributions to the organisation's mission, wealth, and health. Furthermore, professional training and education are necessary for individuals responsible for procurement activities to effectively address the value of money, probity, and accountability in public procurement. Findings from this study also affirm that procurement performance in organisations can be significantly improved if training for procurement officers is emphasised to address the existing complexities in the supply market. Due to the strategic role of public procurement in sustainability, there is a need for highly trained and professional procurement practitioners to effectively manage and enforce the full implementation of the procurement best practice. Therefore, this study recommends that adequate and effective training be made available in the public procurement sector for procurement practitioners and their indigenous suppliers. This training should encompass both existing and new employees, suppliers, stakeholders, and indigenous individuals.

Furthermore, this study recommends that competent procurement professionals be allowed to manage procurement institutions, particularly at the top echelon, such as the bureau's office of the Director-General (DG).

## Abbreviations

EFCC	Economic and Financial Crimes
DG	Director General
HCD	Human Capital Development
LGA	Local Government Areas
SCP	Sustainable Consumption and Production
SD	Sustainable Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SPP	Sustainable Public Procurement
UN	United Nations
UNPPH	United Nations Procurement Practitioner's Handbook
WB	World Bank

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## Biography

**Joshua Ikani Negedu**, a British scholar, comes from the small and vibrant community of Unyi-Ogugu-Ofante in sub-Saharan Africa - a place that has significantly influenced his unique perspective and academic journey. He has earned a PhD in Business and Management Studies from Liverpool John Moores University. With a background in engineering and project management, he has extensive experience in the oil and gas industry as an international procurement specialist and logistics & supply chain management. Dr Ikani has a deep passion for teaching, disseminating knowledge, conducting research, and advocating for sustainable development in low-income countries, which he believes goes beyond the industry's immediate needs. He considers it his life's mission and vision to convey the urgency of sustainable public procurement practices to the current and future generations. Inspired by teaching and writing, he approaches his work with unwavering enthusiasm.

**Scott Foster** joined Liverpool John Moores University in 2013 and has an extensive background in the private sector, with experience as a General Manager and a Financial Controller at Mercedes Benz. His research focuses on ethical leadership, spirituality, mindfulness, and meaningful work, with a strong emphasis on the interconnection of practice and theory. He has supervised over 30 doctoral students and has been recognized for his contributions to doctoral education with the title of Reader in Postgraduate Research Culture. Scott holds a PhD, MRes, MBA, and AAT degrees from John Moores University, and currently holds the position of Reader in Postgraduate Research Culture and PhD Programme Leader at Liverpool John Moores University.

**Olatunde Durowoju** is a Reader in Education Management and the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion, for the Faculty of Business and Law. He holds a PhD in Management Research from the University of East Anglia, an MSc in Food Production Management from the University of Nottingham, and a BSc in Food Science and Technology from Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. His research interests include operations and supply chain management, information security, impact assessment and transmission, and sustainable and inclusive practices in higher education. He has over 12 years of experience in teaching in Higher Education and has been with the Liverpool Business School since 2015. He has led various module teams and managed several post-graduate programs. Dr. Durowoju has received several awards in recognition of his work, including the LJMU Faculty of Business and Law- Rising Star Award and the LJMU Teaching and Learning Excellence Awards- Academic Leadership Award.

**Jackie Douglas** is a Senior Lecturer in Management at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, from 2005 to the present. Her academic achievements include a PhD from Liverpool John Moores University in 2015, a Master of Arts with Distinction in Educational Management in 2004, and a Bachelor of Arts in Combined Studies in 1998, all from Liverpool John Moores University. She also holds various certifications, including Lean Six Sigma Black Belt Certificate from Kenya Institute of Management in 2014, Lean Six Sigma (Yellow; Green Belt Certificate) from Knowledge Academy in 2012, and others. Additionally, she completed Postgraduate training in PgC Higher Education at Liverpool John Moores University from 2009 to 2010.