

SUSTAINABLE PROCUREMENT: AN INTERNATIONAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF 30 OECD COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT: Sustainable procurement is on government agendas across the world, and entails public sectors buying goods and services in socially, environmentally and economically responsible ways. The way in which sustainable procurement is implemented depends on the national sustainable procurement policy guidance, which varies from country to country. To date, there has been no systematic comparison of sustainable procurement policy in different countries. In this study, we conduct an analysis of sustainable procurement policy documents for 30 OECD countries, to understand which elements make up policy and which aspects of sustainable procurement are emphasized in different countries. The method adopted entails content analysis of documents, and we find that countries vary in their social and environmental emphasis in their policies, and that countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand have the most comprehensive policy guidance.

INTRODUCTION

Governments are increasingly concerned with addressing sustainable development objectives, which were outlined by the Brundtland Commission as development that meets the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). One way in which governments are attempting to meet sustainability goals is to reconsider the way that the public sector buys goods and services, termed sustainable procurement.

The reason that sustainable procurement is an increasingly important aspect of the journey towards sustainable development for governments is that public sector spend on goods and services is large, and can be up to 25% of GDP in many countries (OECD, 2009). In addition, as the public sector is concerned with the common good and societal well-being, it may have a natural affinity with longer term sustainable development objectives. Indeed, it has been suggested that in the future sustainability should be a conceptual focus for public administration (Fiorino, 2010). This can be compared to the focus on short-term returns that typifies the private sector (Darnall, Potoski, & Prakash, 2010; Koppenjan & Enserink, 2009). This public sector affinity with sustainable development may have the effect of 'pulling' the demand for sustainable goods and services through the market. Governments can not only ensure they are buying more sustainably, but can through the scale of their spend influence suppliers and markets to adopt sustainability practices.

This study adopts an international comparison approach, to understand how sustainable procurement policy is expressed in different countries. This study aims to scrutinize policy in different countries to identify which of the social, economic and environmental elements of sustainable procurement are emphasized, and to compare and contrast policy approaches. The research questions posed in this study include:

- How is sustainable procurement defined in different countries?
- What elements make up sustainable procurement policy?

- Which elements most frequently occur in sustainable procurement policies?
- How does sustainable procurement policy vary across countries?

This study makes several contributions to the field. For policy makers, practitioners and academics interested in sustainable procurement, it is useful to see how sustainable procurement policy has been defined and interpreted in different countries. The study allows us to identify which countries are policy innovators and which countries are lagging behind in developing sustainable procurement policy. To date, we are not aware of any studies that have assessed sustainable procurement policy internationally. Also, sustainable procurement can be seen as having social, environmental and economic elements, and this study allows us to analyze which elements have greater emphasis internationally.

This paper is structured as follows. A literature review is presented next, which reviews sustainable procurement research, and comparative policy analysis literature. The method for the comparative study is then presented, detailing the data collection method. The findings of the study are presented next, providing answers to the research questions. The discussion places the findings in the context of the literature. Finally, the conclusions discuss the implications for policy, practice and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Sustainable Procurement?

Sustainable procurement can be defined as buying goods and services in environmentally, socially and economically conscious ways. Our focus here is on sustainable *public* procurement where governments and the public sector meet their needs for goods and services in sustainable ways, as opposed to sustainable purchasing and supply amongst private sector companies. Investigations of sustainable procurement have either focused on green procurement

(Coggburn, 2004; Eisner, 2004; Faith-Ell, 2005; Faith-Ell, Balfors, & Folkson, 2006; Geng & Doberstein, 2008; Günther & Scheibe, 2006; Ho, Dickinson, & Chan, 2010; Thomson & Jackson, 2007; van Calster, 2002), or have encompassed social, environmental and economic issues (Brammer & Walker, 2011; Walker & Brammer, 2009b). This broader perspective on sustainable procurement aligns with the view that sustainability needs to balance political/social, economic and environmental systems (Fiorino, 2010).

Our intention in this article is to ascertain how sustainable procurement is defined internationally, and what elements make up policy guidance.

Previous Research on Sustainable Procurement

The vast majority of sustainable purchasing and supply research has been conducted in private sector manufacturing contexts, with just 14% of articles published in the last 20 years addressing public sector contexts (Walker, Forthcoming). What scant research there is on sustainable public procurement has tended to focus on green procurement tools (Coggburn, 2004; Günther & Scheibe, 2006; Li & Geiser, 2005; Swanson, Weissman, Davis, Socolof, & Davis, 2005), and on how sustainability can be encouraged when the public sector buys from suppliers in specific industries (Hall & Purchase, 2006; Matthews & Axelrod, 2004; Sonnino, 2009). Some articles report on case studies of sustainable procurement, such as Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Bala, Muñoz, Rieradevall, & Ysern, 2008) and Belfast City Council (Murray, 2000).

Other studies have investigated the prevalence of sustainable procurement practice across the UK public sector (Preuss, 2009; Preuss & Walker, 2011; Walker & Brammer, 2009a), and also in the context of the UK health and local government sectors buying from small businesses (Walker & Preuss, 2008). Some studies have focused on green procurement practice in China (Geng & Doberstein, 2008), and across Asian countries (Ho et al., 2010). In the US, equitable procurement in US federal government has been linked to purchasing from small firms that are women/minority-owned (Smith & Fernandez, 2010; Stephen et al., 2000).

One study examined the state of development of national action plans regarding green or SP in the EU (Steurer, Berger, Konrad, & Martinuzzi, 2007). Of the 27 EU member states, their analysis showed that only a third of governments had adopted an action plan concerning SP by April 2007, with a further 5 countries having a draft policy concerning SP that had not yet been adopted. Countries with relatively well-developed plans included the Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom, while countries still in the early stages of developing national action plans included Germany, Greece, the Slovak Republic and Malta.

Sustainable procurement practice has been compared across countries (Brammer & Walker, 2011), and the importance of national policy context upon implementation was emphasized. Whereas Brammer and Walker (2011) focused upon sustainable public procurement practice and surveyed public sector buyers in different countries, our aim in the current study is to scrutinize the variance in the national policy context for sustainable procurement across countries. To date, as far as we are aware, there has not been any research that has analysed sustainable procurement policy internationally.

Policy Diffusion

International comparative analysis has been a feature of public administration research (Heady, 1998; Jun, 1976), seeing it as a way to learn from other countries and sometimes seeing it as a means to enhance administrative capabilities in less developed countries. It entails comparing and describing similarities and differences among administrative systems across nations. Looking at differences and similarities in public policy between countries is common in comparative studies (Allardt, 1990; Jackman, 1985). The importance of communicating with and learning from other countries has been emphasized with regard to environmental policy, as international interest in the concept of sustainability has grown (Fiorino, 2001).

Within environmental literature, several studies have explored the international diffusion of environmental innovations (Beise & Rennings, 2005), environmental corporate practice (Hoffman, 2001),

voluntary environmental and social standards (Castka & Balzarova, 2008; Corbett & Kirsch, 2001; Corbett & Kirsch, 2004; Delmas & Montiel, 2008b; Vastag, 2004), and environmental policy instruments (Jordan, Wurzel, & Zito, 2003). These studies suggest that a variety of factors influence the spread of environmental initiatives internationally.

Delmas and Montiel (2008) suggest that the spread of ISO 14001 in the chemical industry is influenced by factors such as whether a country already has a history of adopting other environmental standards, the extent of government environmental commitment, the presence of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the extent of trade ties with countries that have been proactive in ISO 14001 adoption. They explored the relationship between such factors with data from 131 countries.

Jordan et al (2003) suggest that the adoption of new environmental policy instruments (NEPIs) (e.g. environmental taxes, voluntary agreements, eco-labels, tradable permits) in 8 countries was driven by certain drivers of change. These include dissatisfaction with regulation, perceived superiority of NEPIs, the governance 'turn' in academia and policy-making circles, instrument changes in the EU, growing international competition and economic recessions in EU member states, and growing domestic political support for change.

It is interesting to consider the variety of factors that influence the propensity of nations to be policy innovators, and what leads some countries to be institutional entrepreneurs, followers and laggards. In this exploratory study we have the more modest intention of identifying similarities and differences in sustainable procurement policy internationally, and plan to explore the factors affecting a nation's propensity for sustainable procurement policy development in a later tranche of research.

METHOD

The following section outlines the method for the study, including sampling, and data collection, coding and comparison.

Sampling of Countries

This study drew data from the public procurement websites of 30 developed countries. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international organisation of 30 countries that accept the principles of representative democracy and free-market economy. Most OECD members are high-income economies with a high Human Development Index (HDI) and are regarded as developed countries. We chose the OECD group of countries to set a limit to our sample. Future research could usefully explore the state of sustainable procurement policy in developing countries as well.

Data Collection

We collected data on the sustainable public procurement policies in 30 OECD countries. We were unable to directly contact government ministries in any of the countries to conduct phone or email surveys, due to time limitations and cost. All data was collected online from government websites, which included policy papers, government PDF documents, presentations, media releases, links to related government websites, memos, legislation, and laws. Searches for relevant information were conducted in 'Google' by typing in 'Sustainable procurement policy' and 'Hungary', for example. Some countries had a variety of websites and documents, and wherever possible national policy guidance was identified. We did not have the resources to translate documents, so were restricted to policy documents that were given in English.

Data Coding

The process of identifying and coding policy documents took roughly six weeks to complete in summer 2011, and around 5 countries per week were analysed. Two hours per day were spent researching the policies in each country and identifying relevant documents, and then

the rest of the day was spent coding the documents. The policy documents were coded to identify the following themes:

- Definition
- Environmental Guidance
- Social Guidance
- Economic Guidance

We attempted to succinctly summarize the findings to ensure that we were capturing the fundamental aspects of the policy. We did this by highlighting key terms and phrases in the documents. For example, with social guidance, rather than record the all the details of a particular policy, we recorded a key word or phrase such as the “equity in the work place”. We did this to keep the data as condensed and concise as possible.

Data Analysis

We followed Miles and Huberman’s (1994) illustrative display format by constructing a cross-case comparison matrix (Miles and Huberman 1994:93). We did the following:

1. Analysed the raw data set and identified the key terms and phrases (i.e. policy directives) cited in the following three categories: environmental, social and economic guidance. Each category was assessed independently. This step was completed with pen and paper.
2. The key terms and phrases were then used to create a cross-national matrix, whereby the policy directives were placed on a column and the countries on a row. We entered X for countries that cited the policy directive and left a blank space for countries that did not cite the policy directive. In other words, this revealed which countries do and do not participate in the respective policy directive.
3. In some qualitative analysis there is a need for some “estimates of frequency, intensity, and covariation” (p.68) (Miles & Huberman, 1989). Frequency can be used in a cross-national analysis to determine “matched patterns”, “core predictor variables”,

“similarities” or “differences” (p.66) (Miles & Huberman, 1989). We therefore condensed the data by measuring the number of times the policy directives were cited, in order to determine the more popular and least popular directives. The frequency results gave an indication of the dominating features of sustainable public procurement policy across countries.

FINDINGS

How is Sustainable Procurement Defined in Different Countries?

Our analysis included identifying definitions of sustainable procurement, shown in Table 1. Looking across the countries, 12 countries (40% of OECD countries) do not offer a definition in the documents we identified. Amongst the countries where we identified definitions, 10 countries (33%) refer to green purchasing or procurement (GP). However, 8 countries (27%) refer to social, environmental and economic issues in their definitions, providing a more rounded view of sustainable procurement beyond green purchasing. This suggests that for those countries that do offer definitions of sustainable procurement, it is still relatively common to focus on green purchasing, rather than specify social or ethical issues as part of the definition.

Interestingly, 6 countries in their definitions mention the influence that sustainable public procurement can have upon the market (see Table 1 Coding column - M), seeing it as a chance to promote green or socially aware products amongst private citizens, consumers, customers, suppliers, corporations and industries. The definitions of 6 countries mention a life cycle or whole life costing approach (see Table 1 Coding column - LC), moving beyond buying the cheapest product or service to considering value for money on a whole life basis, including maintenance, disposal and recycling.

It is possible to observe mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), where governments mimic the definitions of other governments. This can be observed with the UK's definition of sustainable procurement developed by the sustainable procurement task force, which was subsequently adopted by Australia. Finland and

Hungary both 'take the environmental aspects into consideration', and Austria and Sweden both mention 'sustainable consumption and production'.

TABLE 1
Definitions of sustainable procurement

Country	Definition	Coding
Australia	"... a process whereby 3565minimizing3565 meet their needs for goods, services, works and utilities in a way that achieves value for money on a whole of life basis in terms of generating benefits not only for the 3565minimizing3565n, but also to society and the economy, whilst 3565minimizing damage to the environment."	SEE, LC
Austria	"Green procurement in public administrations and in companies helps to relieve the strain on the environment. By supporting the market position of green, eco-efficient and intelligent products and services, sustainable patterns of production and consumption are promoted".	GP, M
Belgium	Sustainable public procurement pertains to a process where the public authorities endeavour to purchase goods, services and works with a reduced negative environmental and social impact through their life cycle by comparison with goods, services and works which fulfil the same primary function as goods, services or works purchased elsewhere	SEE, LC
Canada	Green procurement is the integration of environmental considerations – alongside quality, performance, price and availability – into the procurement process, from planning to final disposal. Green procurement means that environmental impacts of the goods we procure have been appropriately considered using techniques like total life cycle costing	GP, LC
Czech Republic	Green public procurement covers areas such as the purchase of energy-efficient computers and building components, lighting equipment, recyclable paper, clean vehicles, environment-friendly public transport, electricity deriving from renewable energy sources, household appliances or air conditioning systems complying with state-of-the-art environmental solutions. It is about setting an example and influencing the market place. By promoting green procurement, big buyers can provide industry with real incentives for developing green technologies	GP, M
Denmark	No definition	-
Finland	Sustainable procurement is taking the environmental perspective into consideration	GP
France	No definition	-
Germany	No definition	-
Greece	No definition	-
Hungary	Green public procurement takes "environmental aspects into consideration"	GP
Iceland	No definition	-
Ireland	"Green public procurement is consistently taking environmental	GP, M

	factors into account in procurement decisions, it would provide huge leverage to move the market towards providing environmentally superior goods, services and works in a cost-effective way".	
Italy	given in the context of food: "To guarantee the promotion of organic agricultural production of 'quality' food products, public institutions that operate school and hospital canteens will provide in the daily diet the use of organic, typical and traditional products as well as those from denominated areas, taking into account the guidelines and other recommendations of the National Institute of Nutrition".	GP
Japan	"to participate voluntarily and actively in the efforts to build a society in which all citizens participate and share a fair burden for environmental conservation in accordance with their socio-economic activities. Because the national government is by far one of the largest economic bodies that employ and consume large amounts of goods and services, it is responsible for significantly reducing the load on the environment through environment-friendly economic activity. Furthermore, by taking the initiative, the national government can lead by example and inspire local governments, corporations, and private citizens to volunteer".	SEE, M
Luxembourg	No definition	-
Mexico	No definition	-
Netherlands	"Sustainable Public Procurement is defined as taking into account environmental and social aspects in all phases of any procurement or tendering process financed by public money. With regard to environmental aspects, it concerns the impact on the environment, for example from using energy, reducing waste during the production process or using recyclable materials. With regard to social aspects, it concerns issues like child labour, human rights and fair trade".	SEE
New Zealand	"Sustainable public procurement means Government agencies must consider long-term economic viability, minimizing environmental impact and being socially responsible when procuring goods, services or works at all stages of the project. Instead of considering only the Day One price, they must consider the comparative costs and benefits of products and services throughout their operational life".	SEE, LC
Norway	"The Government wants the public sector to lead the way as a responsible consumer and demand environmentally sound products and services which have been manufactured in accordance with high ethical and social standards".	SEE
Poland	"Green Public Procurement is to consider environmental aspects during contract award procedures and to seek for solutions, which limit the negative impact of products and services on the environment. A wide spectrum of social considerations, which may be integrated into public procurement, such as combating all forms of discrimination and social exclusion, improvement working conditions etc."	SEE
Portugal	No definition	-
Romania	No definition	-
Slovakia	No definition	-
Spain	No definition	-
Sweden	"Green public procurement is a market-based powerful and controlling tool in the work of guiding society towards long-term and sustainable consumption and therefore production"	GP, M
Switzerland	"Green Public Procurement is opting for goods and services that respect the environment, such as purchasing energy efficient	GP, M, LC

	computers and buildings, office equipment made of environmentally sustainable timber, recyclable paper, electric cars, environmentally friendly public transport, organic food in canteens, electricity stemming from renewable energy sources, air conditioning systems complying with state of the art environmental solutions. It is also about setting an example in the market-place, by promoting green procurement, and developing green technologies. Life-cycle costs are also considered in contracts and purchases".	
Turkey	No definition	-
United Kingdom	"A process whereby organizations meet their needs for goods, services, works and utilities in a way that achieves value for money on a whole life basis in terms of generating benefits not only to the organization, but also to society and the economy, whilst minimizing damage to the environment" – Sustainable Procurement Task Force	SEE, LC
United States	"Environmentally Preferable Purchasing means products or services that have a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared with competing products or services that serve the same purpose". This comparison applies to raw materials, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, use, reuse, operation, maintenance, and disposal".	GP

What Elements Make Up Sustainable Procurement Policy?

Within the sustainable procurement policy guidance, it was possible to identify different elements of social, economic and environmental guidance. The elements are listed in Table 2 below, and show that public procurers are asked to meet multiple objectives in their procurement decisions. The analysis reveals that sustainable procurement guidance tends to provide a substantial amount of economic guidance, which could be described as good procurement practice to meet economic aims of value for money. These economic objectives can be broadly grouped together, including:

- Promoting a healthy and competitive domestic market place, including making market-based decisions, conducting market analysis, considering public private partnerships, buying from local suppliers, supporting SMEs, stimulating growth or promoting innovation
- Providing value for money, including cost reduction, improvement in efficiencies and considering avoiding the purchase
- Meeting targets, including meeting trade obligations, meeting thresholds, considering performance
- Following procurement processes, including competitive tendering and transparency

The environmental guidance can also be grouped, and includes

- Considering the product, including specifying environmental criteria, eco-labeling,
- Considering the end of life of products /services, including life cycle analysis, reduce, reuse, and recycle,
- Sharing best practice, including green events and expert advice
- Meeting targets, including following a national action plan
- Considering environmental impacts, including considering environmental performance of suppliers, and impact on biodiversity

The social guidance can also be grouped, and includes:

- Considering the working conditions of supplier employees, including Fair Trade, following ILO conventions, and respecting human rights
- Promoting equality, including buying from suppliers owned by marginalized peoples,
- Ensuring ethical procurement, including transparency and anti-corruption
- Improving performance on well-being indicators

Looking across the elements of sustainable procurement, there seem to be more economic elements (16), followed by environmental elements (12) and social elements (10). In the next section we consider how these elements of sustainable procurement are represented in the policy guidance of different countries.

Table 2: Elements of sustainable procurement drawn from policy guidance in OECD countries

SEE aspect	SP element	Description
Economic	Competitive tender	Contracts for goods and services need to be put out to competitive tender
	Market based	Procurement decisions depend on the market for that product or service
	Innovation	Procurement should encourage innovation
	Cost reduction	Procurement should reduce costs
	Efficiencies	Procurement should improve efficiencies
	PPP	Public-private partnerships can include sustainability criteria
	Performance	Procurement should be considered in terms of performance management
	Support SMEs	Procurement should support SMEs
	Meet trade obligations	Procurement should meet trade obligations
	Market analysis	Procurement should involve market analysis
	Thresholds	Procurement should meet thresholds
	Explore not buying	The possibility of not procuring should be considered
	Value for money	Procurement should achieve value for money
	Growth	Procurement should stimulate growth
Environmental	Buy Local	Procurement should entail buying from local suppliers
	Transparent	Procurement should be transparent
	Product criteria	Environmental product criteria should be included in specifications
	Environmental performance	Environmental performance of suppliers should be assessed
	Eco-labelling	Products with eco-labels should be procured
	Lifecycle	Products should be subject to life cycle analysis
	Reduce environmental impact	Procurement should reduce environmental impacts
	National action plan	Environmental procurement should be in accordance with a national action plan
	Reduce, reuse, recycle	Consider reducing, reusing and recycling products as part of the procurement decision
	Targets	Procurement should meet environmental targets
	Best Practice	Procurement should follow best practice
Social	Green events guide	Procurement can involve holding green events
	Biodiversity	Procurement should support biodiversity
	Expert advice	Expert advice is available for green procurement
Social	Marginalized peoples	Procurement should support marginalized peoples

Equality	Procurement should promote equality
Living / working conditions	Procurement should ensure decent living / working conditions along the supply chain
ILO Conventions	Procurement should be from suppliers that follow ILO conventions
Wellbeing indicators	Procurement should ensure wellbeing indicators are met
Ethics	Procurement should follow ethical principles
Fair Trade	Procurement of fair-trade products is advocated
Anti-corruption	Procurement should follow anti-corruption principles e.g. No bribery
Transparency	Procurement processes should be transparent
Human rights	Procurement should support human rights

Which Elements Occur Most Frequently in Sustainable Procurement Policies?

From the analysis of policy guidance in different countries, it was possible to ascertain which sustainable procurement elements most frequently occur in sustainable procurement policy guidance internationally. The frequency of sustainable procurement aspects are given in Table 3.

Sixteen aspects of economic sustainable procurement were elicited from the policy guidance in different countries, with a total of 104 occurrences (mean=3.47 per country). Most of the 30 OECD countries make have guidance on competitive tendering (18), considering the market for a product/service (12), and cost reduction (10). Fewest countries provide guidance on transparency (1: Australia).

Twelve aspects of environmental sustainable procurement were elicited from the policy guidance in different countries, with a total of 102 occurrences (mean=3.4 per country). Most of the 30 OECD countries have guidance on product criteria (22), environmental performance (19), and eco-labelling (15). Fewest countries provide green events guidance (2: Austria and Finland), biodiversity (1: UK) or provide expert advice (1: Netherlands)

Ten aspects of social sustainable procurement were elicited from the policy guidance in different countries, with a total of 31 occurrences across countries (mean = 1.03 per country). The most frequently occurring were guidance on marginalized people (6), equality (5) and living / working conditions (5).

- Economic - competitive tendering, market-based decision-making, cost reduction, and supporting innovation
- Environmental - environmental product criteria, assessing environmental performance of suppliers, eco-labeling, and life cycle analysis
- Social - supporting marginalized people, promoting equality, and ensuring decent working conditions for supplier's employees

How does sustainable procurement policy vary across countries?

The countries with the most elements to their sustainable procurement policy were Australia (19), New Zealand (16) and the UK (15). These countries have quite comprehensive guidance that covers the three aspects of sustainable procurement in detail. The countries with the least guidance were Slovakia (1) and Turkey (0); these countries seem to be at the start of considering sustainable procurement policy guidance.

The countries with the most environmental guidance are Finland (7) and New Zealand (7), covering issues such as environmental product criteria, assessing environmental performance of suppliers, eco-labeling, life cycle analysis, reducing environmental impacts, target-setting, reduce/reuse/recycle, best practice and green events guidance.

The countries with the most social guidance are Australia (4) and the Netherlands (4). Australia emphasizes the use of procurement to provide opportunities for aboriginal owned businesses and ensuring procurement ethics, and gives guidance on marginalized people, equality, ethics, and anti-corruption in procurement. The Netherlands has a greater emphasis on the rights of supplier employees and well-being, with guidance covering living/working conditions, ILO conventions, well-being indicators and human rights.

The countries with the most economic guidance are Australia (10), followed by Ireland (7) and the UK (7), covering issues such as competitive tendering, market-based decision-making, cost reduction, supporting innovation, efficiencies, public private partnerships and supporting SMEs.

DISCUSSION

This study analysed the sustainable procurement guidance in 30 OECD countries. It found that definitions of sustainable procurement vary across countries, with 40% of OECD countries not providing a definition of sustainable procurement. Of the 60% that do provide a definition, 33% focus on green procurement issues, whereas 27% include social, environmental and economic aspects in their definitions. This suggests that the fuller definition of sustainable procurement is not dominant internationally, and that a significant amount of policy guidance does not express a definition to guide practitioners.

A variety of economic, social and environmental elements make up sustainable procurement guidance, with economic elements being most prevalent, followed by environmental elements and social elements occurring least frequently. This might suggest that public procurement internationally is in the first instance concerned with promoting sound economic procurement that promotes competitive markets, achieves value for money, meets targets and follows procurement processes. Next most prevalent is environmental policy guidance, with elements include greening the product, considering product end of life, sharing best practice, meeting targets and considering environmental impacts. Social elements are less widespread, and include considering the working conditions of supplier employees, promoting equality, ensuring ethical procurement, and improving performance on well-being indicators.

Countries vary in their sustainable procurement policy guidance, with some OECD countries such as Australia and the UK providing quite extensive policy guidance, and others such as Slovakia providing barely any. This aligns with the findings regarding the limited extent of national action plans on SP in Slovakia and other countries (Steurer et al., 2007). Considering that OECD countries are typically viewed as developed countries, this suggests that policy guidance is patchy across developed countries. Developing countries are likely to have even less guidance, so sustainable procurement policy could be viewed as still nascent internationally. Developing countries could emulate the countries leading in sustainable procurement policy, and as they start to consider sustainable procurement they could incorporate the various elements that leading countries include in their policy guidance.

For policy makers in different countries, it is interesting to consider whether it would be of benefit to have greater international cohesion

and uniformity, or whether a plurality of views of sustainable procurement policy is advantageous. It seems that greater communication and information sharing on policy would be beneficial (Fiorino, 2001). Some elements of sustainable procurement policy could be common to all countries, such as encouraging suppliers to follow ILO conventions. Other elements will depend on the broader policy context, existing procurement policies, legislation, regulation and even constitutions of individual countries, such as societal equality being promoted in the United States (McCrudden, 2004; Smith & Fernandez, 2010; Stephen et al., 2000). As concepts of ethics and acceptable labour conditions mean different things in different countries (Carter, 2000; Cooper, Frank, & Kemp, 2000; Gonzalez-Padron, Hult, & Calantone, 2008; Tadepalli, Moreno, & Trevino, 1999), and countries have differing legislation, it may be inappropriate to try to develop universal international policy guidance.

On the other hand, sustainable development and issues such as climate change, water usage and resource depletion do not just affect one country, and their solutions need to be global. Environmental and social problems are not bound to domestic borders. Rivers can transport pollution through many countries. Child labour in one country can be used to provide goods for consumption in another country. OECD countries have higher incomes and higher consumption rates relative to the rest of the world, which may also mean that OECD countries are also potentially the greatest source of environmental degradation. The solutions to such problems may need to be cross-national as well. International collaboration on sustainable procurement could be valuable to develop joined up approach from governments across the world.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analysed sustainable procurement policy in 30 OECD countries, and found a variation in the context and extent of policy guidance. There are a number of important implications for policy makers that develop sustainable procurement policy guidance. This study reveals the variety of elements make up sustainable procurement policy. Policy makers can use Table 3 as a means to assess their policy guidance, and which elements might be lacking. Policy makers in developing countries can use the same table as a template for policy guidance development, ensuring they incorporate

the elements most frequently encapsulated in policy across countries. For practitioners that are engaged in sustainable procurement, this research provides an overview of what sustainable procurement can comprise of. It may be that enthusiastic sustainable procurement champions could, if appropriate, go beyond the policy guidance of their country, to emulate best practice in other countries. Sustainable procurement is not static, and is likely to evolve as practitioners get more experienced in balancing economic, social and environmental objectives in the procurement processes. Policy guidance on sustainable development generally is likely to get greater prominence as concern over issues such as climate change increases (Fiorino, 2010), and procurement practitioners may wish to go beyond compliance in order to get a head start.

There are several other opportunities for future research. Some countries report very little or nothing at all in the area of sustainable procurement policy, and we did not delve into the reasons for this. It has been suggested that 'for students of comparative politics who employ . . . cross-national analysis the deviant case is a nuisance, to be discounted or even excluded because of its tendency to bias' (Ravenhill, 1980). Greece and Mexico both had documents in their respective languages relating to sustainable development policy, which we did not translate due to lack of resources. Time constraints did not allow us to contact government officials in the respective countries for further interview-based research. We would have liked to investigate deviant cases in more depth to understand why policy guidance was not available.

Conducting more research on the ground in various countries would most likely provide more depth and clarity to our findings. It would also be useful to explore the relationship between policy and how it is actually implemented in practice. It would be valuable to develop a survey based on our fuller understanding of the elements that make up sustainable procurement policy, to ask policy makers directly what they give guidance on, and to ask practitioners which aspects they actually implement. A previous study of sustainable procurement practice (Brammer & Walker, 2011) drew on purchasing social responsibility and sustainable supply chain management items developed in private sector manufacturing contexts (Carter, 2005; Carter & Carter, 1998; Carter & Jennings, 2004). Developing a questionnaire that is specifically tailored for the public sector and draws more directly on sustainable procurement policy and practice would be an important progression for the field.

Having identified what characterizes sustainable procurement policy in different countries in this exploratory study, it would be salient to explore the factors that influence nations to be proactive or reactive in their sustainable procurement policy adoption. Studies of policy diffusion (Delmas & Montiel, 2008a; Jordan et al., 2003) might provide some theoretical framing to help understand why some countries are policy innovators, and some countries are lagging behind.

Sustainable development may be one of the greatest challenges facing governments in the future. This study reports on how governments provide policy guidance on buying products and services more sustainably. Considering the scale of public sector spend, sustainable procurement can make important inroads to sustainable consumption and production, and may have the power to influence markets in pursuit of sustainable development objectives.

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