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Public Procurement as Economic Development Tool in African Nations

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Abstract

This article examined the role of public procurement as a tool for economic development in African nations, highlighting its potential to drive growth, create employment, and support local industries. Public procurement accounted for a significant portion of government spending across Africa, yet its impact on economic development had been hindered by challenges such as corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited technological capacity. Through a desktop review, this study explored the ways African countries have used procurement to advance social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and industrial growth. Case studies from Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, and Rwanda illustrated effective strategies such as inclusive procurement policies, green procurement practices, local content requirements, and digital procurement systems. These examples demonstrated how targeted reforms could help overcome existing barriers and maximize the benefits of procurement in fostering sustainable development. The study concluded that public procurement, when aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national development agendas, had the potential to become a powerful economic driver. Key recommendations included enhancing transparency through digital platforms, promoting inclusive procurement, strengthening local content policies, integrating sustainability criteria, and building institutional capacity. These strategies offered a pathway for African governments to transform public procurement into a central pillar of economic development, contributing to poverty reduction, industrialization, and social progress across the continent.

Keywords: *Public Procurement, Economic Development, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) & African Nations*

1. Introduction

Public procurement, the process by which governments purchase goods, services, and infrastructure, represents a crucial driver of economic activity in many African countries. It accounts for an estimated 15-30% of the GDP in most nations, making it one of the largest areas of public expenditure (World Bank, 2020). When designed and implemented strategically, public procurement can serve as a powerful tool to support national economic goals, such as job creation, industrial growth, and poverty reduction. In African countries, where many private sectors are still emerging and local industries require developmental support, public procurement offers an avenue for governments to stimulate economic activity while simultaneously meeting societal needs (UNECA, 2017). As African governments continue to seek ways to accelerate growth and development, they are increasingly looking at public procurement as an instrument to promote sustainable development, enhance domestic capacities, and reduce reliance on imports.

However, public procurement in Africa faces a myriad of challenges that hinder its full potential as an economic development tool. Corruption, lack of transparency, and inefficient administrative systems are persistent issues that can inflate costs, reduce the quality of goods and services, and lead to significant financial losses (Transparency International, 2019). Additionally, procurement processes in many African countries are often hampered by outdated technologies and limited institutional capacities, which make it difficult to achieve the agility and responsiveness necessary for meeting development goals (African Development Bank, 2021). The absence of robust monitoring mechanisms further complicates the situation, as it impedes accountability and allows unethical practices to flourish. As a result, although procurement can be a catalyst for economic growth, these barriers continue to diminish its efficacy in several African nations.

At the same time, aligning public procurement practices with global sustainability standards, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has emerged as a priority for many African nations. By integrating social, environmental, and economic considerations into procurement decisions, governments can contribute to long-term sustainability while fostering inclusive growth (UNDP, 2018). For instance, prioritizing local suppliers, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs), can help build local capacities, reduce unemployment, and stimulate innovation. Additionally, green procurement practices that prioritize environmentally friendly products and services not only reduce carbon footprints but also promote the sustainable use of resources, benefiting both current and future generations (UNEP, 2020). The African Union's Agenda 2063 further emphasizes the need for transformative procurement policies that empower local industries, reduce poverty, and support inclusive development (African Union, 2015).

This article aims to examine the role of public procurement as a strategic tool for economic development in Africa by analyzing the potential impacts, challenges, and best practices observed across the continent. Through a closer look at successful case studies and reforms, we explore how African governments can overcome existing barriers and leverage public procurement to achieve sustainable economic growth. Additionally, the article offers policy recommendations and strategic approaches to enhance the effectiveness of public procurement, aligning it with developmental objectives such as poverty alleviation, industrialization, and environmental sustainability. As African nations continue to evolve their procurement systems, there is a significant opportunity to transform public procurement from a simple administrative function into a central pillar of economic development and social progress.

2. Problem Statement and Objectives

Public procurement holds enormous potential as an engine for economic growth in African nations; however, its potential remains largely untapped due to several pervasive challenges. Despite substantial spending in this area, inefficiencies, corruption, and bureaucratic constraints continue to undermine the impact of public procurement on economic development. The lack of transparency and accountability in procurement processes has allowed corrupt practices to proliferate, often leading to inflated costs, poor-quality goods and services, and the misallocation of vital resources (Transparency International, 2019). Additionally, the absence of effective procurement policies that favor local suppliers limits opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to participate and grow, thereby hindering job creation and innovation within local economies (World Bank, 2020). Structural challenges, such as inadequate technological infrastructure, further exacerbate these issues by slowing down procurement processes and making them more prone to errors and delays.

Furthermore, while the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 emphasize the importance of sustainable, inclusive, and locally focused development, many African nations struggle to align their procurement practices with these frameworks. Procurement policies often lack provisions for environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and local content, resulting in missed opportunities to foster green growth and empower marginalized groups (UNDP, 2018). The limited capacity of procurement officials to execute complex, strategic procurement processes is another critical barrier, as many government agencies lack the training, resources, and systems necessary to implement modern procurement practices effectively (African Development Bank, 2021). These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive reforms to transform public procurement into a tool that not only meets immediate needs but also advances long-term development goals. This article aims to explore and address these pressing challenges by examining public procurement as a strategic tool for economic development in African countries.

3. Methodology

This study employs a desktop review methodology, drawing on existing literature, policy documents, case studies, and statistical reports to analyze the role of public procurement as a tool for economic development in African nations. The desktop review approach enables a comprehensive examination of the current state of public procurement in Africa, the challenges faced, and the strategies employed by various countries to enhance procurement effectiveness. This section outlines the key sources of information and the specific criteria used to select and analyze relevant materials.

The data for this study were collected from a range of credible sources, including academic research articles, government reports, policy briefs, and publications from international organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations, African Development Bank, and Transparency International. Key sources also include documents from regional bodies like the African Union and various African national procurement agencies. These sources provide insights into the legal, economic, and institutional aspects of public procurement in Africa, along with evidence of best practices and challenges observed across different contexts. By relying on diverse, authoritative sources, the desktop review ensures a well-rounded understanding of public procurement's current landscape in Africa.

To maintain the quality and relevance of the analysis, this study follows specific criteria in selecting documents for review. The materials selected must (1) focus on public procurement policies, practices, or outcomes in African countries, (2) provide insights into procurement's role in economic development or sustainable growth, and (3) discuss challenges, reforms, or innovative practices in the public procurement sector. Emphasis is placed on recent publications (from the last decade) to reflect current trends and ongoing reforms. The review also prioritizes case studies of African nations that have implemented public procurement reforms, as these provide valuable context for identifying best practices and areas requiring improvement.

The desktop review employs a thematic analysis approach, whereby data are organized and categorized into themes based on the article's objectives. Key themes include the role of public procurement in economic development, challenges in procurement processes, alignment with sustainable development goals (SDGs), and successful reform case studies. Thematic analysis allows for a structured examination of information, enabling the identification of common patterns, gaps, and innovative strategies across different African countries. By focusing on recurring themes, this method highlights both the shared challenges and unique approaches in African public procurement systems.

4. The Role of Public Procurement in Economic Development

Public procurement plays a critical role in shaping economic development, particularly in African countries, where it constitutes a significant portion of government spending and accounts for up to 30% of national GDP in some cases (World Bank, 2020). As a major channel through which public funds flow into local economies, public procurement can be leveraged to stimulate industrial growth, foster job creation, and support the development of local businesses. By strategically directing procurement towards local suppliers and service providers, governments can create a multiplier effect, where spending on public goods and services circulates back into the economy, generating additional value and economic activity (UNECA, 2017). For example, awarding contracts to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) within a country not only provides these businesses with the opportunity to grow but also strengthens the domestic supply chain, making the economy more resilient to external shocks. This effect is particularly important in African nations, where domestic industries are often underdeveloped, and the need for economic diversification is paramount.

Moreover, public procurement can serve as an effective tool to promote inclusive growth by prioritizing procurement practices that support historically marginalized groups, such as women-owned and minority-owned businesses. In many African nations, where income inequality and regional disparities are persistent issues, inclusive procurement practices can help bridge economic divides and empower disadvantaged communities. Inclusive procurement policies, such as set-asides for women- and youth-owned businesses, can create new economic opportunities for those who are often excluded from mainstream economic activity (UNDP, 2018). For instance, Kenya and Rwanda have introduced quotas that reserve a certain percentage of government contracts for women, youth, and persons with disabilities, directly boosting their participation in the economy (UN Women, 2019). Through these targeted policies, public procurement not only addresses economic inequality but also helps foster a more diverse and dynamic business environment.

Public procurement also has significant potential to support innovation and technological advancement by incentivizing domestic industries to meet high-quality standards and adopt

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cutting-edge technologies. Governments can encourage innovation by embedding quality and sustainability criteria in their procurement requirements, prompting suppliers to enhance their capabilities. For example, procurement policies that prioritize environmentally friendly products or sustainable practices push industries to adopt greener and more efficient methods of production, contributing to a more sustainable economy (UNEP, 2020). Additionally, through contracts for infrastructure, health, and education, governments can indirectly foster knowledge and technology transfer by engaging with international and local partners. By setting standards that require technical expertise, African governments can elevate local industries and build a workforce skilled in high-demand fields, such as renewable energy, information technology, and advanced manufacturing. This approach not only enhances national capacities but also aligns with the global push towards sustainable development.

The alignment of public procurement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and regional development frameworks, such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, offers African nations a blueprint for leveraging procurement as a means to achieve broader development objectives. By integrating social, economic, and environmental considerations into procurement decisions, governments can make procurement a pillar of sustainable development. For instance, the SDGs emphasize responsible consumption and production (Goal 12), and public procurement policies that favor eco-friendly products contribute to this goal (UN, 2015). Similarly, Agenda 2063's focus on inclusive growth and sustainable development resonates with procurement practices that prioritize local content, reduce poverty, and drive job creation. As more African countries incorporate these global and regional frameworks into their procurement strategies, public procurement has the potential to become a transformative tool that not only meets immediate governmental needs but also accelerates long-term economic development and social progress.

5. Challenges in Implementing Effective Public Procurement in Africa

African nations face numerous challenges that undermine the effectiveness of public procurement as a tool for economic development, with corruption being one of the most pervasive obstacles. Public procurement, due to its large financial scale and complex processes, is particularly susceptible to corruption, which can manifest through bribes, kickbacks, collusion, and favoritism (Transparency International, 2019). Such unethical practices inflate the cost of goods and services, reduce the quality of public infrastructure, and hinder the intended developmental impact. For example, inflated contract prices and the awarding of contracts to politically connected firms often result in poor-quality products and services that fail to meet community needs. Furthermore, corruption diminishes public trust in government institutions and discourages legitimate businesses from participating in procurement opportunities, creating a cycle where inefficiency and waste become endemic.

Another significant challenge is the lack of technological infrastructure and capacity, which affects the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of procurement processes. In many African countries, procurement is still managed through manual, paper-based systems, which are not only slow but also susceptible to human error and manipulation (African Development Bank, 2021). Without digital platforms to automate processes and track procurement activities, it becomes difficult to monitor expenditures, assess supplier performance, or enforce accountability. This technological gap also limits the ability of procurement departments to analyze data effectively,

hindering evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation. The lack of e-procurement systems, which have proven effective in improving transparency and reducing corruption in other regions, highlights an urgent need for digital transformation in African procurement processes.

Bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited institutional capacity further compound the challenges in public procurement across African nations. Many procurement systems are bogged down by complex administrative procedures and lengthy approval processes, which can delay the delivery of critical goods and services. This bureaucratic drag not only hampers the effectiveness of procurement as a developmental tool but also increases costs for both the government and suppliers. Moreover, the limited capacity of procurement officers, who often lack the training and expertise required for modern procurement practices, poses an additional hurdle. Procurement requires skills in areas such as contract management, negotiation, and risk assessment—competencies that are often lacking in many African public institutions (UNECA, 2017). This skill gap can lead to suboptimal procurement decisions, with contracts awarded to unqualified suppliers or projects delayed due to poor contract management.

The absence of supportive policy frameworks and enforcement mechanisms presents a structural challenge to effective public procurement in Africa. While some African countries have introduced procurement reforms aimed at promoting transparency and competition, the lack of consistent enforcement undermines their impact. In some cases, policies are in place, but without adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, compliance remains low, and violations go unaddressed. Additionally, procurement policies often fail to include provisions that prioritize local content or align with sustainable development goals (SDGs), which are crucial for achieving inclusive and sustainable economic growth (UNDP, 2018). These gaps highlight the need for comprehensive policy reforms that not only establish clear procurement guidelines but also include mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement. By addressing these challenges, African nations can enhance the efficacy of public procurement, ensuring it serves as a genuine driver of economic development rather than a source of inefficiency and waste.

6. Public Procurement and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Public procurement offers African nations a strategic pathway to align government spending with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), transforming procurement from a traditional administrative function into a catalyst for sustainable and inclusive growth. As African countries work toward the 2030 SDG Agenda, procurement policies can be leveraged to promote local industries, generate employment, foster social equity, and encourage environmentally responsible practices. For example, SDG 8, which focuses on decent work and economic growth, can be directly supported by procurement policies that prioritize local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and foster job creation within underserved communities (UNDP, 2018). By mandating that a portion of government contracts go to women-owned, youth-led, or minority-owned businesses, governments can make substantial progress on SDG targets aimed at reducing inequality and empowering marginalized groups. Such inclusive procurement practices contribute to the resilience of local economies while advancing social equality goals central to the SDGs.

In addition to social inclusivity, public procurement is a powerful tool for achieving environmental sustainability, specifically aligning with SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production. Green procurement policies, which prioritize eco-friendly products, renewable resources, and sustainable practices, are increasingly recognized as essential to reducing carbon footprints and

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preserving natural resources. By incorporating environmental criteria in procurement decisions, African governments can drive demand for green products, thereby incentivizing suppliers to adopt sustainable practices (UNEP, 2020). Countries like South Africa and Ghana have begun adopting green procurement practices, focusing on energy-efficient infrastructure, waste reduction, and sustainable resource management (African Development Bank, 2021). Such policies not only advance environmental sustainability but also encourage local industries to adopt innovative technologies and practices that are in line with global environmental standards.

The SDGs also emphasize the importance of building resilient infrastructure and fostering innovation, areas where public procurement plays a significant role. SDG 9 focuses on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive industrialization, and encouraging innovation, all of which can be actively supported through targeted procurement strategies. When governments prioritize contracts for infrastructure projects that incorporate innovative, sustainable technologies, they can stimulate the local economy, create jobs, and enhance the quality of public services. For instance, projects involving renewable energy, sustainable water management, and modernized public transportation networks have the potential to improve living standards while driving progress toward sustainable development. Public procurement policies that require contractors to meet sustainability and resilience criteria create a market incentive for the private sector to innovate, ultimately building a more robust and future-ready infrastructure (UNECA, 2017).

Aligning public procurement with the SDGs can help strengthen governance and accountability, supporting SDG 16, which emphasizes peace, justice, and strong institutions. Transparent and accountable procurement practices foster public trust and reduce corruption by ensuring that contracts are awarded fairly and resources are allocated efficiently. E-procurement systems, for example, improve transparency by providing a digital record of all transactions, which can be monitored in real time to prevent unethical practices (Development Gateway, 2020). Additionally, capacity-building initiatives that train procurement officials on best practices contribute to professionalizing the sector, further reducing the risk of corruption and inefficiency. By establishing procurement processes that are transparent, competitive, and aligned with the SDGs, African nations can enhance institutional integrity and build public confidence in government initiatives. Through these practices, public procurement not only serves as a tool for economic development but also lays the groundwork for more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable societies across the continent.

7. Case Studies of Public Procurement as an Economic Development Tool

Public procurement has served as an effective economic development tool in several African countries, providing valuable insights into how strategic procurement practices can stimulate growth, support local industries, and foster sustainable development. Case studies from Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, and Rwanda highlight a variety of approaches that demonstrate the potential of procurement to drive economic progress and create inclusive growth. These examples showcase innovative policies, successful implementation of digital procurement systems, and targeted local content initiatives that other nations can adapt to their own contexts.

Kenya: Empowering Marginalized Groups through Inclusive Procurement Policies

Kenya has made strides in using public procurement to promote inclusive economic development, particularly by reserving a portion of government contracts for marginalized groups. The Kenyan government introduced the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) initiative in 2013, which mandates that 30% of public procurement opportunities be allocated to businesses

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owned by women, youth, and persons with disabilities (Kenya Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Act, 2015). This policy has allowed previously excluded groups to participate in public contracts, enhancing economic inclusion and fostering entrepreneurship. By prioritizing these businesses, the Kenyan government not only supports economic diversification but also addresses socioeconomic inequalities. Since its implementation, AGPO has created employment opportunities, particularly for women and youth, and contributed to poverty reduction efforts by expanding access to income-generating opportunities for historically marginalized populations (UN Women, 2019).

South Africa: Promoting Environmental Sustainability through Green Procurement

South Africa has leveraged public procurement as a means to drive environmental sustainability, aligning its practices with the global push for green growth. Through the adoption of the Green Economy Accord in 2011, the South African government committed to promoting eco-friendly products and services in public procurement. This policy incentivizes suppliers to adopt environmentally responsible practices and aligns procurement contracts with sustainability goals, such as energy efficiency, waste reduction, and water conservation (South African Government, 2011). For example, South Africa's procurement standards for infrastructure projects increasingly emphasize renewable energy components and materials with low environmental impact, supporting the country's transition to a low-carbon economy. This approach not only stimulates demand for green technologies but also encourages suppliers to innovate and integrate sustainable practices into their operations, helping South Africa progress toward its environmental targets while driving economic growth in emerging green sectors (UNEP, 2020).

Ghana: Boosting Local Content and Industrial Development

Ghana has adopted policies to boost local content in public procurement, aiming to foster industrial development and reduce dependency on imports. The Public Procurement Act (Act 663) was amended in 2016 to prioritize local suppliers in certain sectors, particularly for goods and services that can be competitively produced within Ghana (Ghana Public Procurement Authority, 2016). This local content policy has supported the growth of Ghanaian industries by ensuring a steady demand for domestically produced goods, such as construction materials, textiles, and food products, in government projects. By prioritizing local suppliers, Ghana's government has bolstered local industries, promoted job creation, and enhanced the domestic value chain. Furthermore, the policy encourages foreign firms to partner with local companies, facilitating technology transfer and capacity building. This approach not only strengthens the competitiveness of Ghanaian businesses but also aligns with the country's broader industrialization agenda (African Development Bank, 2018).

Rwanda: Enhancing Transparency and Efficiency through E-Procurement

Rwanda provides an example of how digital procurement systems can improve transparency, reduce corruption, and increase efficiency in public procurement. In 2016, the Rwandan government launched an e-procurement system known as Umucyo, which means "light" in the local Kinyarwanda language. This digital platform automates the procurement process, from tender announcements to bid evaluations and contract awards, enabling real-time tracking and increasing public access to procurement information (Rwanda Public Procurement Authority, 2016). By digitizing procurement, Rwanda has reduced the administrative burden and created a transparent environment that discourages corrupt practices. Since its implementation, the e-procurement system has resulted in faster procurement processes, lower transaction costs, and

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greater accountability in public spending. Umucyo has been recognized as a best practice in digital governance, and its success highlights the benefits of adopting technology-driven solutions to enhance efficiency and transparency in public procurement across Africa (Development Gateway, 2020).

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Public procurement, as a vital component of government spending, holds significant potential to drive economic development in African nations. When effectively managed, procurement can stimulate local industries, promote inclusivity, support sustainable development, and create employment opportunities, contributing to broader economic and social progress. However, numerous challenges, including corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited technological infrastructure, continue to impede the ability of African countries to fully realize these benefits. As illustrated through case studies in Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, and Rwanda, strategic reforms can transform procurement from a basic administrative function into a key economic driver. The successful implementation of inclusive procurement policies, green initiatives, local content requirements, and digital systems shows that with the right approach, public procurement can serve as a powerful tool for achieving national development goals and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Moving forward, African nations have the opportunity to build on these successes, implementing targeted strategies to overcome barriers and maximize the impact of procurement on economic growth.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance Transparency and Accountability;** Establishing strong anti-corruption frameworks and adopting digital procurement systems can significantly improve transparency and accountability in public procurement. E-procurement platforms, such as Rwanda's Umucyo system, provide real-time tracking and access to procurement data, making it easier to detect and prevent corrupt practices. Governments should invest in similar systems, prioritize capacity building, and ensure independent oversight of procurement activities to promote public trust and reduce inefficiencies.
2. **Promote Inclusive Procurement Policies;** Inclusive procurement policies that allocate portions of government contracts to marginalized groups, such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities, can help reduce social inequalities and create economic opportunities for underrepresented communities. Programs like Kenya's Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) have demonstrated the benefits of reserving contracts for these groups. Scaling similar policies across African nations can further support inclusive economic growth, stimulate entrepreneurship, and empower communities historically excluded from formal economic systems.
3. **Strengthen Local Content Policies;** Prioritizing local suppliers for government contracts helps develop domestic industries, support job creation, and reduce reliance on imports. Countries like Ghana have shown how local content policies can boost local production capacity and enhance the resilience of the national economy. African governments should consider setting minimum thresholds for local participation in procurement, particularly in sectors like construction, agriculture, and manufacturing. Additionally, fostering partnerships between foreign and local firms can facilitate technology transfer and skills development, strengthening local industry capabilities.

4. Integrate Sustainability into Procurement Practices; Green procurement practices can support Africa's transition to a sustainable, low-carbon economy. Governments should incorporate environmental criteria into procurement guidelines, emphasizing renewable energy, resource efficiency, and waste reduction. South Africa's emphasis on green procurement illustrates the potential for public contracts to drive demand for eco-friendly products and services. By encouraging suppliers to adopt sustainable practices, governments can advance environmental objectives, contribute to climate action, and align procurement with the SDGs, particularly SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production.
5. Build Institutional Capacity and Professionalize Procurement; Effective procurement requires skilled professionals who understand the complexities of procurement processes, contract management, and risk assessment. Many procurement departments across Africa lack adequate training and resources, contributing to inefficiencies and suboptimal procurement outcomes. Governments should invest in training programs to build the expertise of procurement officers, focusing on best practices in contract negotiation, supplier evaluation, and compliance. Additionally, creating standardized procurement processes and guidelines can help streamline operations and improve decision-making across public institutions.

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