

Addressing the Role of Sustainable Public Procurement as a Panacea for Sustainable Development in the Local Government Areas: The Episode of Nigeria

Joshua Ikani Ngedu

Liverpool Business School, Faculty of Business and law, Doctoral Academy
L3 5UG, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom

* E-mail of the author: joshnege@yahoo.com

Abstract

The coronavirus has displaced local communities across the nation as their livelihood is compromised. This study explores extensively the challenges confronting sustainable public procurement in the local government areas that bothers sustainable development amid COVID-19. This study conducted semi-structured interviews with eight procurement experts from eight leading local government areas with documented evidence of extensive procurement activity across four geopolitical zones of Nigeria to obtain primary data. Findings from this study suggest a tremendous decline in the livelihood of the rural communities amid the pandemic and ridicule of local government procurement practice across the region. The study also finds a significant level of interference by the state government that continually denies the local government administration from attaining sustainable development compared to their counterparts in the developed societies.

Keywords: Sustainable public procurement, Sustainable development, Local government areas, COVID-19, Sub-Saharan Africa – Nigeria

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1. Introduction

Sustainable public procurement has emerged as a global leading policy paradigm that creates a critical role in promoting sustainable development in the local communities. Scholars and policymakers worldwide embrace the concept of local mobilisation as it emphasises sustainable development at the grass-root level regarding the economic, social, and environmental benefits (Preuss, 2009; Thomson & Jackson, 2007). Both the private sector and the public sector of the economy need procurement for further growth; however, this is not achieved in a vacuity (Arrowsmith, 2020). While public procurement is the acquisition of goods, works, services, and utilities using public funds to meet the growing needs of the overwhelming citizens within the boundaries of the law, sustainable procurement is empirical evidence that a suitable supplier and contractor are selected and fit for a specific project. "Sustainable procurement (SP) is procurement that is consistent with the principles of sustainable development, such as ensuring a strong, healthy and just society, living within environmental limits, and promoting good governance" (Walker & Brammer, 2012). In a similar and current understanding, sustainable public procurement addresses *a process whereby organisations 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 for the organisation, but also for the society and the economy, whilst minimising damage to the environment (DEFRA, 2006; UN, 2015; UNEP, 2018), cited in (Sönnichsen & Clement, 2020).*

On the other hand, sustainable development addresses the need to manage social, economic, and environmental resources for the benefit of future generations (Usang & Salim, 2016). Today, these extraordinary global economic initiatives are faced with the situation of the COVID-19 outbreak, which continues to create more havoc on humanity, particularly around sustainable consumption and production (UN, 2020c).

2. Responsible Consumption and Production (RCP) – According to the United Nations, RCP refers to *"the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations"* (UN, 2020c). RCP is critical to a sustainable world and remains the cardinal point to any growing economy, substantially contributes to low-carbon emission, promotes green economies, and conserves natural resources (Tseng, Zhu, Sarkis, & Chiu, 2018; UN, 2020a). Although consumption and production significantly drive the global economy (Tseng et al., 2018), there is also planetary devastation through unsustainable utilisation of the natural resources, as the worldwide footprint is on the increase and projected faster than the trajectory of economic productivity, population growth, a high percentage of unacceptable food forfeiture along the supply chain, and unnecessary medical waste caused in the era of the pandemic (SDG, 2020).

2.1 Impact and response to COVID-19 amid Sustainable Consumption and Production

COVID-19 was characterised as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 11th of March 2020. While the effect is still counting, it has affected 37,554,022 people and a total fatality figure of 1,077,228 globally, devastating the economy and labour market, distorting consumption, and production supply chain, and creating an endless array of challenges to the aviation, tourism, and hospitality industries which potentially engenders significant decreases in revenue, jobs, life expectancy, and sustainable businesses (ILO, 2020; WHO, 2020). Unfortunately, the previously underestimated pandemic has escalated into a significant negative economy, with a worrisome future projected to remain for a while due to the growing portents of economic recession worldwide (ILO, 2020; Shah & Farrow, 2020). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the catastrophic effect of the coronavirus is already eminent in the global arena, and the impact would remain with us for a long time; however, a swift and well-coordinated strategic response is required to reduce the direct impact of the virus at the national and international levels while extenuating the global economic fallout (Sohrabi et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). This implies that protecting frontline workers and their families remains a priority while considering the income losses due to the decline in economic activities. Responding further to the consequences of the pandemic, consumers are faced with the threat of purchase of goods and services, delays in capital investments, and the hiring of workers globally (ILO, 2020). From the local perspective, it is pertinent to acknowledge a multilateral social dialogue between the employees, employers, and the government to implement a strategic policy for sustainability. Addressing these challenges of the pandemic, countries now could change their consumption and production pattern to a more sustainable reality by commencing a national framework that requires a robust regulatory plan and policies of the UN Goal 12, Target 7, that seeks to promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, by national policies and priorities (Tseng et al., 2018; UN, 2020c)

2.2 Sustainable Public Procurement – a global perspective

The concept of SPP accounts for a vast and wider spectrum of products and services over its life circle, considering economic opportunities, social equity, and environmental consequences (Sönnichsen & Clement, 2020). This process integrates the requirements, criteria, and specifications that have a direct and positive impact on the environment and supports economic development and social justice (DEFRA, 2006; UNEP, 2013). It accounts for an average of 12% of GDP in OECD countries and accounts for up to 30% in developing countries with enormous purchasing powers, capable of driving the market economy towards sustainability, in that way promoting the transition to a green economy (UN, 2020c). From a global perspective, public authorities remained the significant consumers, and this is achieved by using their purchasing power as a weapon to drive the market economy by allowing environmentally friendly goods, works, services and potentially make a positive contribution to sustainable consumption and production, which is part of the hallmark of sustainability (UN, 2020b). For effectiveness, sustainable public procurement requires absolute environmental modalities for products and services in ways that promote procurement to the benefit of the larger populace. In Europe, for instance, many countries have developed operational guidance that streamlines the fundamental criteria of the core, verifiable, and comprehensive environmental standards of the SPP (Tseng et al., 2018; UN, 2020b). While this guidance remains the pinnacle for sustainable procurement, it applies to a vast majority of products and services for the sustenance of the environment and is found in textiles products, server room, and cloud services, imaging equipment, consumables, operating and maintaining facilities, organic constituents of growing media, gardening practices to enhance biodiversity, utilisation of low emission vehicle, manufacturing and end-of-life of cleaning products and other cleaning accessories (UN, 2020b)

2.3 Sustainable Public Procurement – the case of local governments in Nigeria

The people at the local area, constituted by law that possess substantial administrative control, encompass councils with small communities of government functionaries with specific government attributes (Omagbon, 2016). Over the years, local government authorities have scrutinised the urgency for the effectiveness of the procurement system for sustainable development in the communities regarding the economic, social, and environmental benefits (Preuss, 2009). Local governments are consistently acquainted and encouraged to make their spending decision reflects the act of probity, transparency, and best value for money (Usang & Salim, 2016; Arrowsmith, 2020). In the developed nations where procurement is receiving a greater share of attention, local government procurement is unclassified and subject to a growing spectrum of initiatives, a concept that seemed to integrate procurement into the corporate social responsibility (CSR), promoting social justice, environmental sustainability and minimising economic inequalities, predominantly in the aspect of consumer behaviour and business production (Walker & Brammer, 2012; Preuss, 2009; Saha & Paterson, 2008). There is no doubt that many local governments globally embrace policies and programs that promote the drastic reduction of their environmental footprints and consequently improve the quality of life for citizens (Saha & Paterson, 2008).

In Nigeria, for instance, local government is regarded as a strong arm of the government and, by the constitution, bestowed with the responsibility of providing positive innovations to the people at the grass-root in

the aspect of education, health, infrastructure, sanitation, road projects, and collective wellbeing of the communities (Usang & Salim, 2016). Like many countries around the world, Nigeria's local government is disproportionately disrupted with COVID-19, which is associated with endless arrays of economic fallout, health hazards, food shortages, job losses, as well as environmental degradation. The outbreak of the coronavirus has consequentially amplified the already existing derogatory situation in the local communities where human challenges of sustainable public procurement remain on the horizon (UN, 2020d).

3. Challenges of SPP in Nigeria's LGA amid Covid-19

The challenges confronting sustainable public procurement for sustainable development in Nigeria's local government areas are inexplicable; it requires a shared partnership of every stakeholder to address as a matter of urgency regarding the current wave of the COVID-19.

3.1 Corruption, the Fundamental Adversary of the State

The government often comes up with sophisticated plans to build up better communities using the local might through the local government procurement system to actualise its developmental objective (Saha & Paterson, 2008). However, this study suggests that there are "hawks and hyenas" within the corrupt system and would attempt every phase possible to derail this original plan. This study's primary data reveals a wild spread of corruption, which has undermined procurement performances regardless of time and season. The entire institution has lost its credibility to corruption and compromised one way or the other. Many corrupt and sharp practices have invariably led to inefficiency, misappropriation, and general rot in the government. Sustainable Public procurement must be handled with great impunity to promote sustainable development in the local government areas.

3.2 Lack of Autonomy in the Local Government Administration

From its inception as the 3rd tier of government, the local government controls a certain level of power and arrays of endless autonomy to deliver good governance to the communities. Based on documentary evidence, the local government should control their resources and develop their beloved communities. Unfortunately, the control is only manifested on paper, just like a toothless bulldog. Local government outrightly lacks the capacity to manage the resources of the government for the rural communities due to the monopoly of power by the state government. There is an inundating spring of dominance that has prevented the local government from carrying out their statutory functions due to interference by the federal and state governments. There is a constant shortage of funding for local government procurement to drive sustainability, given these alarming involvements. The account of local government procurement is precarious, as there is perpetual financial turbulence capable of deprivation to the communities' basic needs. Political interference in the affairs of the local government is disparaging. Until there is recapturing of the local government mandate where both federal and state governments demonstrate transparency, accountability, and integrity, the chances are that nothing meaningful can take place. Emphatically, the local government procurement activities cast doubt due to the government's influence on the local procurement activities. Ironically, the state receives more attention than the local government areas who need the attention more, as most people reside in vulnerable communities where the basic needs of humanity are needed, especially in health, agriculture, potable water, accessible roads, and irrigation. Until there is an autonomous local government system where we have a national economy that the local government receives its directives from the federal government just as the state government does, and elections are conducted by independent electoral commission instead of the state government, then we are far from getting public procurement in the local government right. Most of the time, the local government chairmen are hand-picked by the state governors to serve their interests. Findings suggest that the state governments across the nation have let the people down time and again. Until there is an intervention from the government that listens to the yearnings of the disadvantaged people to assuage this occurrence, impoverishment will continue to ravage the livelihood of the ordinary people, particularly at the grass-root.

3.3 Apathy on the part of Government and Stakeholder

In the context of this study, apathy demonstrates the overwhelming behaviour of the stakeholders regarding the management of goods, works, services, and utilities for the tiers of government, particularly the local government areas of Nigeria. Empirical evidence suggests a growing level of negligence on government properties that connote the wrong approach from both sides of the aisle. There is no proper handling of government property, and the attitude of staff towards work is unchanged, especially towards government property. Apathy on the government's part towards the local communities regularly looks at the unkept environmental hazards directed to many local government areas. This act of apathy is clear evidence of how far the government is from the people. The Covid-19 pandemic is now a justification for the government to neglect the people's request, as pointed out by the communities. Apathy on the government's part towards the local communities is regularly looking at the unkept environmental hazards directed to many local government areas. This act of apathy is clear evidence of how far the government is from the people. The COVID-19 pandemic is now a justification for the government to neglect

the people's request, as pointed out by the communities. Rather than seeing this moment as a wake-up call to assuage the ordinary person's misery, ironically, more discomforts are inflated. For instance, some states have gone as far as depriving their citizens of the COVID-19 palliatives that alleviate the harsh reality of time and the country's situation.

3.4 Lack of Finance in the Local Government Administration

Every year local government authority comes up with budgets to help with the planning and statutory obligations to disseminate quality services to the local communities. During the budget, the local government wants to procure hospital equipment, maintain schools, build markets for the rural dwellers, and other various services. Nevertheless, only a tiny fraction of allocation is approved by the state government in this budget, making it difficult to prioritise when workers' salary is at stake. Any contractor that executes contracts in local government should be ready for the worst days, as waiting many years for reimbursement is imminent. The local government is perpetually underfunded, and if considered at any time, it is the crumbs they get. With this kind of circumstance and challenges, the local government cannot put up any viable developmental project. This act is unsustainable and can ruin the economy of any given society. In some instances, some of the local government areas are deliberately denied funding because of refusing to support the governor's candidacy. They are out rightly marginalised and further deprived of any form of financial obligation. To these individuals who are in continuous denial of local developmental resources, the concept of democracy is impracticable.

3.5 Absence of E-Procurement/Technological Innovation

The public procurement system's effective accomplishment is not without technological innovation, and this trend would continue to mutate for decades to come. Many developed communities are leaders in these social-economic advancements to encourage the best value for money and foster development. Because of the absence of e-Procurement in Nigeria's procurement structure, inconsistencies have become prominent. The use of the e-Procurement system is fundamental in several ways, limiting the number of human interfaces, promoting accountability, probity, improving speed and accuracy. The application of necessary tools, software, and e-procurement systems conquer the fear of mismanagement that tends to undermine the objective of sustainable procurement and reliance in the entire echelon of procurement practice. For lack of e-procurement systems in the local government areas across the country, numerous projects have failed to see the light of reality. It is evident in the execution of capital projects handled by quack contractors in the local communities, leaving footprints of incompetence and uncompleted projects.

4. Study methodology

This research uses an exploratory approach to contribute to theory building, particularly to the role of what sustainable public procurement implies to the local communities in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria, amid COVID-19, and its relation to the social, economic, and environmental possibilities. Eight public procurement practitioners from four geopolitical zones consisting of eight local government areas participated in the semi-structured interviews to explore the perception of public procurement activities at the local government areas to gain in-depth knowledge regarding the paradigm of local government procurement. Findings suggest that these LGAs are prominent and considered to be a good representation for the conceptual study in retrospect. Additionally, other documentary evidence includes reports published by the United Nations Development Goals, national reports from the BPP, and verifiable reports from donor agencies.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes tremendously to the growing field of literature, particularly to sustainable public procurement in Nigeria's local communities. A society cannot profile any meaningful development when its material resources and human capacity development at the local government areas remain grossly immobilised. This study focused on exploring public procurement activities in Nigeria's local government areas amid the coronavirus pandemic. It confirmed several challenges that bothered in deepened corruption, gross negligence, and government property mismanagement by the public officials and the local communities. Furthermore, the government can establish an anti-corruption tax force at the grass-root to monitor procurement activities to produce a better result and introduce a centralised database system that promotes accountability, transparency, and best value for money. Removing corruption leads the current practice to sustainable procurement. Training should be mandatory for the procurement officers to have adequate knowledge and approaches to enhance their level of productivity, fine-tune their attitudes from illicit corrupt practices, and build their morality to become better practitioners.

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Joshua Ikani Ngedu is a Ph.D. researcher at the Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom. He is a member of the British Academy of Management (BAM), an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA) the United Kingdom, and a member of the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply (MCIPS). Originally come from a small community called Unyi-Ogugu-Ofante, Nigeria, but currently resides in the UK. The author obtained a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria, a master's degree in project management from the faculty of humanities and social sciences, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom. He has over ten years of working experience in the oil and gas industry as an international procurement specialist. He has a great passion for teaching, disseminating knowledge through research, and development believed to transcend the industry's practicality. His areas of interest include but are not limited to sustainable public procurement in low-income countries, corruption in both private and public sector procurement, and project management.