

The role of public procurement in the framework of the 2030 Agenda: the approach of institutions and civil society

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Received: 21/03/2022; Accepted: 28/05/2022

Abstract

Public administration is a key agent for achieving development goals, and this is recognised in the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals. This international consensus requires the involvement of a large number of agents, and the mainstreaming of these global challenges into public policies. However, a practice that could be key in this regard, such as public procurement, does not receive sufficient attention within this framework. Faced with a broad range of goals and targets that cover environmental, economic and social issues, the 2030 Agenda lacks an adequate framework and tools to address the solution to these challenges, and public procurement could have greater prominence as a driver of progress for a number of these goals. The paper studies the role and potential of public procurement as an instrument of policy to contribute to the international development agenda. Therefore, the paper analyses documentation and reports of the main institutions that have worked on these issues to date: United Nations, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Despite having been considered in the design of the Agenda, subsequent reports by the United Nations give little importance to the role of public procurement, which contrasts with that expressed by civil society.

Keywords: 2030 Agenda; Sustainable Development Goals; sustainable public procurement; public purchase; sustainable production and consumption.



SUMMARY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public administrations play a central role in development processes by influencing them in different ways, ranging from the regulation of activities to their direct role as an economic and social agent. Its importance is becoming even more evident in situations such as that generated by COVID-19. In this paper, we focus on the procurement of goods and services by public administrations, as a tool to work towards development and sustainability objectives.

Public procurement is quantitatively significant; in the EU, for example, it accounts for 14% of GDP (European Commission, 2017). In addition, it can be a driving force, both directly and indirectly, for different sectors in order to promote important changes.

Although the idea of framing public procurement with social or environmental criteria is not new, a growing interest is being seen from academia and institutions. From an approach focused on the environment (green procurement), it has moved progressively towards broader approaches, which encompass other types of social and environmental objectives as well as concepts such as Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP).

The 2030 Agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have become a key reference in guiding a range of entities (public and private) in their search for better levels of development on a global scale, encompassing social, economic and environmental aspects.

The 2030 Agenda, and the broad objectives set, represent an ambitious plan. However, they remain part of an incomplete model, in which desirable goals are set without proper consideration as to where responsibility lies or how these goals can be achieved. The 17 goals, encompassing 169 targets, include so-called means of implementation, which represent a critical issue in the advance towards achieving the objectives.

There is some reference made towards public purchase and contracting among the SDGs. Specifically, Goal 12 (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns) includes Target 12.7, which explicitly mentions the following issue: promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities.

The inclusion of public procurement issues could be crucial to making progress within the framework of the 2030 Agenda and towards its broad objectives. To achieve them, in addition to the involvement of a large number of social agents, a correct alignment of public policies is required in what is referred to as Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development. The Agenda proposes structural behavioural changes, for which instruments such as public procurement are necessary, to really make progress worthy of the title of the UN declaration (Transforming our world).

Within this framework, the paper reviews the debates related to public procurement, which have evolved in recent decades, and its potential contribution to development goals. The aim of the paper is based on the following question: What is the role and potentiality that international organisations and civil society give to public procurement as a tool within the framework of the Agenda and the SDGs?

Public procurement is still an underused instrument, despite its relevance. This paper contributes to a better understanding of its potential in development processes. The global approach and the comparison between institutional visions (United Nations, Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and civil society) is also a novel contribution.

The paper continues by explaining the methodology in Section 2. Section 3 studies the concept and relevance of public procurement and the initiatives that are being promoted in this regard. Section 4 looks at the 2030 Agenda, analysing the danger of an approach with generally accurate diagnosis and objectives being diluted if it does not anticipate how to promote the necessary changes. Section 5 studies the role that public procurement can play in achieving the internationally recorded objectives, and the paper ends with conclusions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper begins with a review of the academic bibliography and of documents issued by international organisations and agents of reference. This enables us to evaluate the concept of sustainable public procurement and identify its potential as a tool for tackling the serious global challenges ahead.

After analysing the issues related to the 2030 Agenda and its implementation, we complete an in-depth study of the monitoring reports on the 2030 Agenda published annually (since 2016) by the main institutions of reference (Table 1 summarizes the documentation consulted in this process):

- United Nations, as key agent and promoter of the 2030 Agenda.
- The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) which, as an international network, collates contributions from different sources to help solve practical problems of sustainable development.
- **The Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives:** a joint and interdisciplinary initiative of civil society institutions worldwide, such as Social Watch, Third World Network, Global Policy Forum, among others.

Table 1. Description of the sample

Year	Source	Documents	Content
2015	United Nations https://www.un-ilibrary.org/	Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for	2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals

Year	Source	Documents	Content
		Sustainable Development	
2016-2021	United Nations https://www.un-ilibrary.org/	The Sustainable Development Goals Report	Overview of the Agenda's implementation efforts around the world, highlighting areas of progress and those that need strengthening.
2016-2021	Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) https://www.sdgindex.org/reports/	SDG Index and Dashboards—Global Report	Complement official SDG indicators and voluntary country-led review processes, by using publicly available data (World Bank, WHO, ILO, others) to assess global and country progress on SDG
2016-2021	Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development https://www.2030spotlight.org/en	Spotlight on Sustainable Development	Monitoring and review by civil society organisations of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its structural obstacles and challenges.

Source: compiled by the authors

To identify how these organisations report the role of public procurement, we defined keywords (“public”, “government”, “purchase”, “procurement”) and searched for them in the 18 reports. Each mention was examined in context, and included in a table that enabled us to answer the main question of the paper, related to how public procurement is thought to contribute to the SDGs, according to the different actors.

3. SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT: ITS RELEVANCE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Public administration plays a fundamental role in achieving development goals and its role is further emphasised in the current United Nations agenda, in contrast to previous proposals. Its role as legislator and regulator, and its contribution to setting the frames of reference for economic and social activities (moving beyond merely a market mind set), add to its own capacity as a vital economic agent.

To these effects must be added others, which arise from the influence of public administration on the behaviour of other agents. Among them is the ability to promote innovation in firms and markets, advocating eco-friendly technologies (Testa et al., 2016; Ghisetti, 2017), and the opportunity to lead by example, raising consumer awareness of the environmental and social implications associated with the kind of purchases made, thus promoting changes in behaviours (Roos, 2012, Andabaka and Sertić, 2020). The administration can also serve as an example of state responsibility, acting as a model for its economic and social partners (El Haddadi et al., 2021)

Whilst acknowledging the public administration’s capacity for normative intervention and guidance in various economic and social spheres, in this paper we focus more on its incidence as an entity that acquires goods and services.

Although the public administration’s involvement varies depending on individual situations, the European Commission (2017) estimates that public bodies spend more than 1.9 trillion euros annually on public procurement (14% of EU GDP). If the spending by utility companies is included, the expenditure would amount to 2.3 trillion euros (19% of EU GDP). According to OECD estimates (2021), public procurement in member countries increased

from 11.8% to 12.6% of GDP between 2008 and 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic led to a spike in these figures in 2020. Another study (Djankov et al., 2016) collected data on public procurement in 123 countries, and found that low-income countries in 2015 had the largest share of public procurement (14.5% of GDP). Along the same lines, the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (2017) estimates that the percentage of government expenditures allocated to public procurement is comparatively higher in low- to middle-income countries.

Traditionally, public purchase and contracting has been seen as a fundamentally administrative process, but recent years have shown a demand for greater transparency of its procedures (which would also help avoid cases of corruption) and of its tender process, so that free competition is encouraged and the contract conditions are optimised. Thus, these activities are seen to be more of a crucial tool for serving public policies, with their ability to directly and indirectly promote socially desirable practices.

In fact, as McCrudden (2004) indicates, the use of public procurement to contribute to social purposes dates back to the 19th century in Europe and North America, within the framework of what the author calls "linkage" in these contracts. This included issues related to labour standards and unemployment. Over time, these practices were extended to other geographical areas and topics, including issues such as non-discrimination by gender or social group, employment opportunities for certain groups, or even the promotion of human rights.

3.1 Green Public Procurement

Related to these practices were the "green procurement" policies from the 1990s onwards. They focused on the promotion of sustainable development, in particular to guide public purchasing with environmentally friendly criteria in order to stimulate the production and consumption of sustainable products.

In line with various authors (Testa et al., 2016; Andabaka and Sertić, 2020), we agree with the definition of green public procurement as provided by the European Commission (2008b): "a process whereby public authorities seek to procure goods, services and works with a reduced environmental impact throughout their life cycle when compared to goods, services and works with the same primary function that would otherwise be procured".

The relevance of this trend can be seen in the research related to it. Patarlageanu et al. (2020) collate an extensive bibliometric analysis that starts in 1959 and shows a growing interest in green public procurement.

Regarding the main current topics of interest, LazaroIU et al. (2020) study the references in the period 2017-2020, highlighting the way in which green public procurement can promote the circular economy and its relationship with the objectives of environmental policy, sustainable innovation, or issues related to construction and building materials. Among these issues, green public procurement stands out as an integral component of sustainable development.

Along with academic interest, institutions have also been promoting these practices for some time. The European Commission plays an important role in this respect. In the 2004 Directive (European Parliament, 2004), the framework of the procedures for awarding public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts, explains how adjudicators can contribute to the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development, while ensuring that they obtain the best quality/price ratio for their contracts. Similarly, the European Commission (2008a) also intervenes, advocating priority be given to products with a lower environmental impact during their life cycle compared to

others with similar functions. These legislative and operational interventions have also been taking place in other countries and contexts such as the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, Japan, among others (Testa et al., 2016).

Concern for the environment and promotion of sustainable development has undoubtedly been key to including new criteria in public procurement. Thus, the European Commission (2008a), in its *Sustainable consumption and production and sustainable industrial policy action plan*, responds to the fact that current modes of production and consumption contribute to global warming, pollution, use of materials and depletion of natural resources, and the detrimental impact of EU consumerism at a worldwide level. This framework sets out to promote green public procurement, for which mandatory standards are proposed together with advice and tools for public authorities. The common criteria for green public procurement are based on benchmarks on environmental performance and relevant labelling, and a separate communication on green public procurement detailing these measures.

Other bodies, such as the United Nations, have endeavoured to promote the use of public procurement as an instrument to contribute to sustainable development. A notable case is the Marrakech Process, which set out to give continuity to the plans of the UN Summit on sustainable development held in Johannesburg in 2002. The Marrakech Task Force on sustainable lifestyles, created in 2005 under the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), has a specific work area to look at sustainable public procurement. The initiative was taken up by countries from different geographical regions and income levels, and included the development of pilot tests and a commitment to promoting these practices. Along these lines, the One Planet network brings together different agents (from governments, business, civil society, academia and international organisations) within the United Nations 10-Year Framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production. This network, with more than 700 organisations, includes specific channels for sustainable public procurement.

Through SPP, governments are expected to drive key policy objectives in the environmental, social and economic fields. The different domains include environmental issues such as reducing greenhouse gases, improving energy efficiency, water use and support for recycling. Reference is also made to possible social benefits of the SPP, related to the fight against poverty, equity or respect for labour standards.

Within the framework of the OECD, these issues have also been addressed and almost all its members have developed strategies to support green public procurement, as well as its monitoring and measurement. The OECD approach is based on the idea that these practices can be used to boost innovation, giving the industry incentives to develop environmentally friendly products. In addition, it anticipates that they can lead to public savings to the extent that the full costs of the product life cycle are taken into account. Finally, it is hoped that this will help governments face environmental challenges and turn towards a circular economy.

In a report that brings together practices from more than 20 countries (OECD, 2015), examples of legal frameworks, monitoring, awareness, etc. are shown. More recently, the OECD is working on the strategic use of public procurement (OECD, 2019).

In short, it is clear that concern for the environment and a need for sustainable development have provided impetus for the introduction of new criteria in public procurement, which has been translated into international initiatives over recent years.

3.2. Sustainable Public Procurement: beyond the green vision

In practice, there is some confluence between concerns for the environment and for other social criteria that could be addressed when referring to public procurement and its potential. In fact, several studies show that sustainable public procurement is a useful instrument in the deployment of public policies that include social concerns of different types (Jaehrling, 2015; Martin and Methven, 2019).

The change in approach itself means that the terminology used for these practices has also changed, depending on the emphasis given to the various aspects. Along with a generic designation of public procurement or contracting, the introduction of social and sustainability criteria has led to references such as green purchasing, socially responsible procurement or environmentally preferable purchasing.

The European Commission distinguishes between green public procurement, which has the lowest comparative impact throughout its life cycle, and sustainable public procurement, which is a concept that offers an adequate balance between the components of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental). Smith et al. (2016), in a similar vein, indicate that green public procurement focuses only on environmental areas, while sustainable public procurement broadens the focus to other objectives.

We observe, therefore, that the use of public procurement as an instrument to promote sustainable development is already underway. Along with initiatives of ecological public purchase are those which extend the remit to developing procedures of public procurement and purchase that apply not only environmental but also social and economic criteria. All these initiatives, closely related to the requirements of the international social context, aim to promote more ethical or responsible behaviours in consumption and production.

Along these lines, new initiatives have continued to emerge in recent years, which complement those related to green purchasing and sustainable purchasing, as is the case of using the public procurement strategically to promote innovation. This approach has been followed by the OECD (2017), and for authors such as Trindade et al. (2018) it is a more radical approach than green public procurement or sustainable public procurement, favouring socio-technical transitions. Other authors (Ghisetti, 2017) consider that innovative public procurement stimulates environmental innovation, contributing to objectives related to climate change. According to this author, innovative public procurement occurs “whenever public institutions invest in products or services that have not yet been developed but could be developed within a reasonable time frame, and that can help satisfy human needs or solve societal problems” (Ghisetti, 2017). Bernal et al. (2019) identify innovative public procurement as a strategic area of improvement, in addition to environmental clauses, reserved contracts, and social impact clauses.

In general, according to the criteria of the United Nations Environment Programme, it is appropriate to refer generically to these practices as sustainable public procurement, understanding this concept as a “process whereby public organisations meet their needs for goods, services, works and utilities in a way that achieves value for money on a whole life-cycle basis in terms of generating benefits not only to the organisation, but also to society and the economy, while significantly reducing negative impacts on the environment” (UNEP, 2012).

This definition, whilst maintaining its focus on preventing negative environmental impacts, also includes a vision of economic and social impacts, in line with the progressive expansion of the concept observed (Chersan et al., 2020; Martin and Methven, 2019; Smith et al., 2016).

In this broadening of vision, the [European Commission \(2011\)](#) itself, which is seen as a key driving agent, proposes a revision of the public procurement framework that contributes to a balanced policy, supporting its demand for goods, services and works that are environmentally friendly, innovative and socially responsible.

The Europe 2020 Strategy ([European Commission, 2010](#)), which promotes smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, also believes that public procurement has a fundamental role to play in achieving its objectives. It views it as an instrument based on market participation, through which sustainable and inclusive growth can be achieved. More recently, the [European Commission \(2014\)](#) highlights its potential to ensure that public administrations make better use of contracting in support of common social objectives, in a variety of strategic areas (water, energy, transportation, various services etc.). This approach also frames the communication on public procurement published in 2017 ([European Commission, 2017](#)).

3.3 Potentiality and limitations of public procurement with sustainability criteria

From all the above, it can be concluded that sustainable public procurement could be an appropriate tool to support development and sustainability objectives ([Melissen and Reinders, 2012](#); [Andabaka and Sertić, 2020](#)). However, the problems that sustainable public procurement faces in practice, and that often hinder its development, cannot be ignored. Issues such as organisational culture, or economic uncertainty, can act as barriers to SPP practices in environments such as Latin America ([Delmonico et al., 2018](#)). Elements such as regulation, training and political commitment must all be reinforced to implement these practices ([El Haddadi et al., 2021](#)).

As the [OECD \(2015\)](#) indicates, there is often a perception that green products can be more expensive, which highlights the need to study the possible conflicts between different objectives. Furthermore, there is often a lack of technical knowledge on the part of the decision makers and those involved in these programmes in relation to the standards to be applied. The need to follow up on the social objectives pursued is also highlighted, monitoring whether sustainable public procurement is the most appropriate tool in each case, or whether taxes, regulations or other forms of intervention should be used.

A fundamental issue, which is complex in practice, is the possible clash between an operation that encourages free competition with the choice of the best price, and the introduction of criteria that go beyond the direct purpose of the contract. In this sense, it is crucial that the regulatory aspects move forward and become more flexible where necessary. This occurs, for example, with the 2014 EU directive ([European Commission, 2014](#)), which expressly covers the fact that social issues and those related to innovation are aspects that should be considered when awarding contracts.

As [Chersan et al. \(2020\)](#) points out, further research is needed on these issues, primarily because research to date targets mainly high-income countries, a view shared by [Adjei-Bamfo et al. \(2019\)](#) or [Tsai \(2017\)](#). Furthermore, the studies are generally designed at a national level and refer to a specific sector, while there lacks a general framework for the public sector, something especially relevant in light of the guidelines set out by the global development agenda. In addition, a more detailed examination is necessary of the mechanisms by which sustainable public procurement could contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

4. THE 2030 AGENDA AND THE SDGS: SCOPE OF VIEW AND IMPLEMENTATION DIFFICULTIES

The 2030 Agenda has as its reference document the declaration Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the declaration itself are listed the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets, which must be met by 2030.

Since then, and given the high degree of consensus raised, the Agenda has become a key document in helping to guide or align the policies of local, regional and national governments, as well as the actions of all types of entities (companies, civil society, universities ...), which are equally challenged given the breadth of the objectives set.

The UN declaration represents a breakthrough in terms of diagnosing problems, and certainly calls for profound transformations in production and consumption models, as well as changes in global governance and the care of common goods. However, the Agenda does not distribute responsibilities or tasks explicitly. As the statement itself indicates, the goals express worldwide aspirations but it is each government that must set its national goals, and decide how to incorporate the globally set goals into its national planning processes.

Our paper points to a significant gap between, on the one hand, the UN Declaration, the SDGs and their goals, and on the other hand, the means provided for their implementation and achievement.

Of the two types of targets, quantitative and means of implementation, the latter appears to have received less attention than the former. In most cases the means of implementation lack substance and are insufficient.

Even before COVID-19, the Spotlight on sustainable development 2019 report, prepared by civil society, indicated that most governments were not applying the transformative vision proclaimed in the 2030 Agenda, and showed a lack of coherence at a national level along with inadequate policies of multilateral actors.

The most recent reports on the monitoring of the SDGs (United Nations, 2020, 2021) show there have been improvements in some areas, but also give an overview of problems and setbacks which will, in many cases, be further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Extreme poverty and hunger have increased for the first time in decades, problems such as the population in marginal neighbourhoods (slums) are notably increasing, and the number of people fleeing from war, persecution and conflict reached an all-time high in 2019. Issues related to sustainability show setbacks or insufficient progress, although the effect of COVID-19 may influence certain trends in 2020. In relation to SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production patterns) the 2021 report shows that the global material footprint increased by 70% between 2000 and 2017, and highlights problems with electronic waste, or the inconsistency of policies that subsidize fossil fuels. The reports are very clear in calling for a much deeper, faster and more ambitious global response if the objectives are to be met.

5. THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT IN THE 2030 AGENDA AND THE SDGS

5.1 The role envisaged by the United Nations

The 2030 Agenda attributes a significant role to the public sector. As indicated by Bouckaert et al. (2016), public administration occupies a more prominent place in the SDGs

than in the Millennium Development Goals, and having an adequate public administration system is itself highlighted as a development objective.

Firstly, among its various roles, the state is considered a key funder, contributing its own resources as well as channelling other sources of financing. Secondly, it has an important role in legislative development, which facilitates the fulfilment of the commitments covered by Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Thirdly, the state is designated as being primarily responsible for carrying out at local, national and global levels, the monitoring and review of progress achieved in the fulfilment of the goals and targets. With regards to contracting, the public sector is expected to behave as an exemplary consumer which promotes changes in the behaviour of others agents of society (El Haddadi et al., 2021).

An overview of the goals and targets defined in the Agenda reaffirms the necessary participation of the public sector across all the goals. In addition to its impact on regulating, providing financing and accountability, the public sector also acts as an agent that participates in the market as a contractor and, as such, its presence is implied in various targets. Some examples include the increase of investments in rural infrastructure (Target 2a); the construction and adaptation of educational facilities that take into account the needs of people with disabilities (Target 4a); the achievement of universal health coverage (Target 3.8); increases in public expenditure on research and development (Target 9.5); and the expansion of public transport (Target 11.2). In these, and many other cases, the combination of state intervention and public procurement is clearly seen as a necessary tool.

Sustainable public procurement is explicitly included in the framework of Goal 12 of the United Nations declaration (ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns). This is a key objective since, as indicated by the United Nations (2018), the way in which each society uses its natural resources has a direct effect on the quality of life. The 2030 Agenda tries to separate economic growth from resource consumption and environmental degradation, promoting the necessary introduction of sustainable consumption and production policies. As the United Nations report 2018 (United Nations, 2018) indicates, 71 countries, along with the EU, presented macroeconomic policies or tools that drove changes in this direction, and a total of 108 countries have national policies in this field. In its 2020 report, United Nations (2020) shows that, between 2017 and 2019, 79 countries and the EU reported the introduction of at least one policy to promote these practices, thus contributing to the 10 Year Framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns, promoted by UNDESA.

Within Goal 12, 11 targets are included, 3 of them referring to means of implementation. Specifically, Target 12.7 is formulated as follows: "Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities". In order to follow up on this target, a single indicator is envisaged: the number of countries that apply sustainable policies and action plans for public procurement.

The only evaluation of this, within the framework of the basic documentation of the 2030 Agenda, is to see if, in 2030, there has been an increase in the number of countries applying these types of plans.

If we extend the analysis to the annual reports of the UN in relation to compliance with the Agenda and the SDGs, we find that from 2016 to 2020 (United Nations, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020) these do not report on Target 12.7, and focus on other aspects of Goal 12. In the 2021 report, however, the advance regarding the public procurement policies is mentioned. According to the report (United Nations, 2021), by the end of 2020, 40 countries had reported on sustainable public procurement policies or action plans, in order to encourage more socially responsible purchasing practices and sustainable supply chains.

There is another reference to public procurement in the 2017 report, within the framework of Goal 16, which refers to bribery issues in these processes and their impact on different regions.

Table 2 summarises the mentions found.

5.2 The role envisaged by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) emerges within the framework of the United Nations, but goes further by collaborating with multilateral financial institutions, the private sector and civil society. SDSN seeks to mobilise global scientific and technological expertise to promote practical solutions for sustainable development. Its reports seek to identify priorities for action, study implementation challenges and identify gaps that need to be closed to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

The reports of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (Sachs et al., 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), meanwhile, try to measure progress made towards meeting the objectives at a global level, and disaggregating it by country. In this case, we see that, among the selection of targets and indicators that are monitored in the framework of Goal 12, the target related to public procurement is not included, but others related to materials, emissions and consumption are included.

However, there is a mention of it in the 2018 report, within the framework of the strategic possibilities it offers, referring to the aforementioned Target 12.7. Along the same lines, in 2020 the strategic use of public practices and procedures to work towards the objectives is mentioned again. This includes coordination mechanisms, budgets, procurement, audits etc.

The 2021 report shows for the first time a decline in the Progress on the SDG Index calculated, this being due to the pandemic. In measuring progress by SDG from 2015 to 2021, it can be seen that SDGs 12 and 15 are the only ones that have regressed over the entire period.

5.3 The role envisaged by Civil Society

Reports from civil society start from a somewhat different, more practical approach and with a vision of proposing policies and ways of implementation and effecting change. In this case, as Table 2 shows, there are explicit references to public procurement in five reports from 2016 to 2021. The 2020 report focuses on the situation generated by COVID-19, emphasising the need for a “build back better” plan, but does not elaborate on ways of implementing this nor does it expressly mention public purchase or procurement.

Table 2. References to Public Procurement in documentation related to the 2030 Agenda

Documents	Public Procurement Approach	Explicit references to Public procurement and SDGs
UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)	Within the scope of responsible consumption and production	Goal 12 (Target 12.7): Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities
Sustainable Development Goals Reports (2016-21)	Within the scope of responsible consumption and production (implicitly)	Marginal reference in 2017, in relation to problems with bribes in these processes (Goal 16) Reference in 2021 to the number of countries that had reported on sustainable public procurement policies or action plans (Goal 12)

Documents	Public Procurement Approach	Explicit references to Public procurement and SDGs
Sustainable Development Solutions Network Reports (2016-21)	Within the scope of responsible consumption and production	Reference in 2018 and 2020: possible strategies of public procurement, within the framework of Target 12.7
Spotlight on Sustainable Development Reports (2016-21)	Broad and transversal approach, with the possibility of impact on different goals	Reference in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021: potential for contributing to the goals 2 (Zero Hunger), 5 (Gender Equality), 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Source: compiled by the authors

In relation to Goal 12, the 2016 Spotlight report indicates that the proposed goals and means are clearly insufficient to overcome the obstacles that currently exist.

The use of public procurement is within the framework of Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) in the 2016 and 2018 reports as a way of contributing to the transformation of agricultural and food systems, supporting local agro ecological production. The reports highlight the need for a paradigm shift from specialised industrial agriculture towards more diversified agro ecological systems, an issue which Global North countries in particular need to address by changing their practices. Some of the measures promoted to encourage these changes include support for short circuits and alternative retail infrastructures, and the recommendation to use public procurement as a way of ensuring food and agricultural product supplies come from local and agro ecological producers.

There is also particular reference, in the 2018 report, to public procurement in relation to Goal 5 (gender equality). Here, public procurement is seen as a tool for creating a more equitable business environment that combats corruption and offers more information transparency, which can help solve issues that are hindering women's access and participation in these processes. The need to move forward in open contracting is mentioned in this regard, an approach aimed at improving the efficiency of public spending through the dissemination of open and accessible information on procurement.

Another area in which the contribution of public procurement is envisaged is that of Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). In fact, the 2017 report mentions government procurement as a tool (among others) in the frame of industrial policy, the latter being crucial for improving the domestic enterprise sector. As indicated in the 2019 report, governments can promote local development with this goal in mind when making contract decisions. The proposal is to promote democratic and transparent contracting rules that combat corruption and clientelism and, at the same time, allow consideration to go beyond lowest-price purchasing. In support of this proposal, any decisions of procurement should be made with the aim of actively promoting local development and guiding industrial plans.

Likewise, in the 2017 and 2019 reports, public procurement is mentioned as a means of contributing to Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities). This is because local governments and municipalities make up some of the main clients of the construction industry, and can demand respect for social, labour and environmental standards within this framework. Additionally, they can contribute to a comprehensive approach in fighting corruption.

The role of public procurement in the framework of Goal 17 (partnerships for the goals) is also mentioned. In this sense, the reports warn of possible negative effects of Public Private Partnerships in relation to public procurement processes. The 2016 report refers to the threat that free trade agreements may pose to the execution of some policies, including those related

to government procurement. Finally, there is a mention in 2021 of the violation of public procurement rules in Bangladesh, which, among other issues, led to negative effects on initiatives linked to SDG 13 (climate action).

As we can see, and perhaps as a consequence of its more practical and precise approach, proposals from civil society are highlighting situations where public procurement can play an important role in working towards the different goals.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Public procurement can be a powerful tool with important economic and social impacts, and awareness of its relevance is growing. As we have seen, the view of the role of public procurement has been expanding from a focus on economic efficiency and transparency to an awareness of its ability to influence different aspects related to sustainability, inclusion, local development, production practices etc. Thus, the so-called green procurement has encouraged these practices, although the term is, in fact, broader (sustainable public procurement) and refers to various issues beyond those related to the environment.

The 2030 Agenda offers a comprehensive diagnosis and an opportunity to address serious global problems, but its design does not guarantee success; one of its main problems being the weakness of its means of implementation.

Recognising the diversity of the topics included in the agenda and the difficulty of dealing with all of them, the potential role of public procurement in helping to achieve these goals is not given enough importance. Its inclusion in Target 12.7 (in the framework of the promotion of responsible consumption and production) is undoubtedly a step forward but insufficient in terms of its possible contribution to the different goals. The follow-up reports of the United Nations, and those of the SDSN, barely make reference to public purchase, and do not connect it with the fulfilment of objectives beyond target 12.7.

Beyond its contribution to promoting sustainable forms of production and consumption, public procurement could be an important lever for the advancement of other goals. Although this perspective is practically absent in the declaration and subsequent documentation which follow up the goals by the United Nations and SDSN, we find that contributions from civil society do recognise its value in their analysis and proposals.

These proposals acknowledge the potential that public procurement has to promote local agro ecological production (Goal 2), or the possibility of promoting gender equality (Goal 5), by facilitating a more equitable and transparent business environment which encourages participation. Public procurement in areas where it has greater weight, such as industry, infrastructure, or cities (Goals 9 and 11) can promote development with a local and socially responsible vision and, at the same time, promote transparency and fight corruption. These are examples that, although requiring further consideration, definitely offer practical ways of implementing processes to meet the objectives set by the 2030 Agenda. From this broader vision, public procurement is seen as an instrument to advance in different areas and objectives.

Even if further analysis is still required, especially in the case of low- and middle-income countries, a strategic vision of public procurement seems to offer great potential as a tool for working towards the objectives of the 2030 Agenda.

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