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Balancing competing policy demands: the case of sustainable public sector food procurement

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ABSTRACT

A focus on market-based green growth strategies to pursue sustainability goals neglects the pursuit of understanding how human health is interwoven with the health of eco-systems to deliver sustainability goals. The article argues that clarifying the difference between green and sustainable public sector food procurement, with political continuity that supports and enables policymakers and practitioners to take an incremental approach to change, makes an important contribution to delivering more sustainable food systems and better public health nutrition. Five European case studies demonstrate the reality of devising and implementing innovative approaches to sustainable public sector food procurement and the effects of cultural and political framings. How legislation is enacted at the national level and interpreted at the local level is a key driver for sustainable procurement. Transition is dependent on political will and leadership and an infrastructure that can balance the economic, environmental and social drivers to effect change. The development of systems and indicators to measure change, reforms to EU directives on procurement, and the relationship between green growth strategies and sustainable diets are also discussed. The findings show the need to explore how consistent definitions for green public procurement and sustainable public procurement can be refined and standardized in order to support governments at all levels in reviewing and analyzing their current food procurement strategies and practices to improve sustainability.

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1. Introduction

Recognizing that food purchasing and catering services, including those in hospitals, care homes, schools, prisons and state companies etc., represent a significant part of public sector procurement budgets, the central premise of this article is that there is

a need for clarity about what is meant by 'green' public sector food procurement and 'sustainable' public sector food procurement. The dominant economic paradigm has led to a growing focus on market-based green growth strategies to pursue sustainability goals and, it is argued, an ecological shift is required in order to further understanding of how human health is interwoven with the health of eco-systems, and to enable policymakers and practitioners to move towards creating more sustainable food systems and better public health nutrition.

Public sector procurement, representing all of the goods and services purchased with public money, represents 13–20 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in OECD countries, including 17

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Table 1
Examples of how green and sustainable public procurement are defined and distinguished in the literature.

Evans et al. (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GPP focuses only on environmental areas of concern; SPP potentially encompasses a range of areas, but largely focuses on social and environmental aspects.
EC website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GPP means that public authorities seek to procure goods, services and works with a reduced environmental impact throughout their life-cycle compared to goods, services and works with the same primary function that would otherwise be procured; SPP means that public authorities seek to achieve the appropriate balance between the three pillars of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – when procuring goods, services or works at all stages of the project. <p>Practical differences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many public authorities in the EU are implementing GPP as part of a broader approach to sustainability in their purchasing which also addresses the economic and social aspects.

percent of the EU's GDP (Evans et al., 2010), while in developing countries estimates are much higher and range from 30 to 70 percent of GDP (Perera, 2012). Procurement has been promoted as one means of reaching environmental goals since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Marrakech Task Force (2006–11) developed an approach for implementing sustainable public procurement (SPP) in both developed and developing countries. Since Rio +20 (2012), there has been a renewed focus on SPP as part of green growth strategies. These debates suggest that by purchasing environmentally and socially preferable goods, governments can make significant impacts on green economy transformation as part of sustainable development goals (OECD, 2014; GGBP, 2013). However, some argue that transformation to a green economy – defined as one that results in 'improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities' (UNEP, 2012) – could pose major challenges for governance mechanisms if it is to move the economy in a direction that benefits society as a whole and particularly the poor and vulnerable (Benson, 2014). Others (Garnett, 2014) point out that definitions of sustainability vary, stakeholders can have different priorities within the three 'pillars' of sustainable development and distinctions between 'green' and 'sustainable' can be amorphous.

The article draws on case study research conducted as part of the *Foodlinks*¹ project that aimed to 'revalue' public sector food procurement. It analyses five European case studies where innovative public procurement policies and practices have been successfully implemented and provides an overview of what change is happening across Europe. More explicitly, it analyses how complex relationships and synergies between economic, environmental and social concerns, as determinants of SPP, were balanced, and how the dynamic between policy and practice supported change. The five case studies can be seen as microcosms of change for wider systems of implementation, and the article more broadly examines the relationship between green growth strategies and the emerging discourse on sustainable diets that takes the debate beyond 'green' initiatives to the social and equity impacts of healthy food systems and better public health nutrition.

The article begins by reviewing current definitions of 'green' and 'sustainable' public procurement and discusses how environmental, economic and social impacts are interpreted, 'measured' and integrated within current public sector food procurement practice. It then briefly charts the multi-level policy response. The methods section is followed by the case study findings and the discussion looks beyond 'green' to include recent change in procurement regulations. Wider systems of implementation are considered and the relationship between green growth strategies and the emerging discourse on sustainable diets is explored. Key areas for future research are identified, and concluding remarks are made about future trajectories of green growth strategies and

sustainable diets, and on the significance of the findings for more sustainable public sector food procurement at all levels of government.

1.1. Green and sustainable public procurement

Although there are numerous definitions for green and sustainable procurement, the examples used in Table 1 that provides examples of how green and sustainable public procurement are defined and distinguished, typifies a lack of clarity between the two concepts. Green public procurement (GPP) definitions focus on environmental impacts whilst those used for SPP are at best 'fuzzy' and at worst, confusing. The EU website example illustrates this by including explanatory text on 'Practical differences' between GPP and SPP. This suggests that most EU public authorities prioritize GPP but see this as situated within the broader context of SPP.²

Moreover, as Ahi and Searcy (2013) note, the terms 'green' and 'sustainable' are often used interchangeably. This could present an illusion of progress towards more sustainable procurement practices or even an implicit assumption that green procurement will inevitably result in a shift towards more sustainable procurement. It is argued that failing to address these inconsistencies could lead to future confusion in the development of theory and practice (Bratt et al., 2013; Preuss, 2007). In addition, Akenji (2013) suggests that GPP by governments and public institutions is more akin to green consumerism (GC) – namely, the production, promotion and preferential consumption of goods and services on the basis of their pro-environment claims (such as eco-labelling schemes, eco-efficient production standards etc.) rather than the promotion of sustainable consumption (SC) where change in consumption behaviour needs to be accompanied by change in infrastructures (social and physical).

1.2. Environmental priorities

One explanation for why there has been less integration and implementation of social and economic impacts in public procurement tenders and contracts is that the development of methods and techniques to measure environmental impacts is more advanced and they are quantifiable. In a recent review of GPP/SPP in nine EU member states plus Norway, Evans et al. (2010) found that all case study countries cite the use of environmental life cycle assessment (LCA) (where available) as part of their public procurement strategies but social criteria were not that well established. In his review article on green consumerism, Akenji (2013: 13) also suggests that the economic growth dogma that dominates government and market promoted GC is 'carefully calibrated to not slow down the economy but to operate as a peripheral activity that safeguards only against the most damaging and immediate environmental problems.'

¹ <http://www.foodlinkscommunity.net/1132.html> (accessed 18 August 2014).

² http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/versus_en.htm accessed 8 September 2014.

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