

Understanding and manoeuvring knotted tensions in the transition towards sustainable procurement

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines how sustainability tensions unfold as interrelated rather than isolated phenomena in the transition towards sustainable procurement, and how such tensions are navigated in procurement practice. We develop the concept of knotted procurement sustainability tensions (KPST) to capture how multiple and interdependent tensions co-occur and become intertwined across organisational and supply network contexts. We further conceptualise manoeuvring as an ongoing process through which procurement professionals construct and maintain manoeuvring space when navigating these knots.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a qualitative research design in the energy sector. An exploratory pre-study was conducted with procurement and sustainability professionals in large energy companies, followed by an in-depth single case study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, workshops, steering group meetings and document analysis.

Findings – Three categories of tension knots were identified: cost-related, supplier market-related and people and functional tensions. Within and across these categories, tensions were found to be interdependent rather than isolated, shaping and reconfiguring one another across organisational levels and supply networks. We conceptualise KPST as multi-level and interwoven tension configurations and introduce manoeuvring as a continuous and adaptive process enacted through situated practices by which procurement professionals construct and sustain manoeuvring space.

Research limitations/implications – The study provides in-depth but context-specific insights based on a single sector and a procurement-centred perspective. Future research could extend this work by further theorising the nature and multi-layered interdependencies of KPST, as well as examining how manoeuvring processes and manoeuvring space emerge, evolve and are sustained across different organisational and supply network contexts.

Practical implications – The study highlights the importance for procurement professionals and organisations of recognising sustainability tensions as interconnected rather than isolated and of adopting adaptive and staged manoeuvring approaches that balance short-term constraints with longer-term sustainability ambitions.

Originality/value – By conceptualising sustainability tensions as knotted and empirically demonstrating how procurement professionals navigate them through manoeuvring practices, this study advances tension-based perspectives in sustainable procurement and extends prior research on procurement sustainability tensions by showing how they become persistent, interdependent and multi-level tension configurations.

Keywords Procurement, Sustainability, Tensions, Knotted, Manoeuvring practices, Manoeuvring space

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

It is tough discussions. I think procurement is a little in the middle between sustainability and business, you could say maybe more as a facilitator. I think everyone has their own interest and it is not always easy to align. Head of Procurement, Energy sector

Procurement functions play a central role in shaping organisations' sustainability footprints (Ageron *et al.*, 2012). However, integrating environmental and social concerns alongside



economic imperatives introduces complexity, generating both intra- and inter-organisational tensions (Fayezi *et al.*, 2018; Villena, 2019). These tensions manifest across individual, functional and organisational levels, making them difficult to navigate and manage (Löfstål and Jontoft, 2017).

Organisational research has long examined such competing demands through concepts such as dilemmas, trade-offs, dualities, dialectics and paradoxes (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Löfstål and Jontoft, 2017). Within supply chain management (SCM) and procurement research, paradox theory has increasingly been adopted to explain how persistent and interdependent tensions emerge and evolve (Kocabasoglu-Hillmer *et al.*, 2023a, b; Fayezi *et al.*, 2018; Fayezi, 2022). Recent reviews further highlight the importance of understanding and navigating paradoxical sustainability tensions in both sustainable procurement and supply chains (Asante, 2025; Cichosz *et al.*, 2025). Prior studies have examined tensions between collaboration and competition in supplier networks (Wilhelm and Sydow, 2018), paradoxical responses to sustainability tensions within buying firms (Xiao *et al.*, 2019), tensions in global sourcing (Sandberg, 2017) and tensions in packaging logistics (Pålsson and Sandberg, 2020). More recently, paradox theory has been applied to sustainable supply chains, revealing tensions between triple-bottom-line sustainability goals (Brix-Asala *et al.*, 2018; Zehendner *et al.*, 2021), between social welfare and commercial logics (Longoni *et al.*, 2019) and between capabilities for sustainability and resilience (Warmbier *et al.*, 2022).

We explicitly acknowledge this growing body of paradox and tension-based studies in SCM and procurement. However, we identify a more specific and under-explored gap: how procurement professionals navigate multiple and interrelated sustainability tensions unfolding simultaneously across organisational and systemic contexts. While existing studies have provided important insights into individual or dyadic tensions, they have paid more limited attention to how such tensions become interwoven, mutually reinforcing and difficult to disentangle in practice (Sheep *et al.*, 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Hahn *et al.*, 2015; Fayezi *et al.*, 2018). Understanding how tensions manifest in procurement has been identified as a prerequisite for managing them effectively (Fayezi *et al.*, 2018), yet recent work increasingly calls for moving beyond isolated tensions to examine multiple, interconnected tensions that amplify or attenuate one another over time (Sheep *et al.*, 2017).

In this paper, we argue that this issue is particularly relevant for procurement functions engaged in sustainability transitions. Procurement professionals often operate “in the middle” of competing organisational priorities and external pressures, facing intertwined tensions related to cost, supplier markets, capabilities, skills and functional mandates (Schneider and Wallenburg, 2012; Wilhelm and Sydow, 2018; Fayezi *et al.*, 2018; Longoni *et al.*, 2019). We refer to these configurations as “*tension knots*” to emphasise how sustainability tensions become interdependent, entangled and mutually interact across organisational and supply network context. Our aim is to unpack the complexity of managing such knots by showing how procurement professionals interpret and navigate them in practice. Accordingly, we address the following research questions:

- RQ1. What sustainability tensions do procurement professionals experience and how are these tensions interrelated?
- RQ2. How can procurement navigate these interrelated tensions in the transition towards sustainable procurement?

To answer these questions, we draw on the literature on tensions across procurement, sustainability and organisational studies to analyse how tensions become interconnected and how professionals manoeuvre them in practice (Filstad *et al.*, 2021). Empirically, we focus on the energy sector, where procurement faces strong stakeholder pressure to adopt sustainability practices. Data were collected through interviews with procurement and sustainability professionals in five multinational companies, followed by in-depth interviews and workshops

in a focal case company. This context provides a fertile ground for examining how procurement experiences and manages multiple, intersecting sustainability tensions.

By focusing on procurement as a key organisational function in sustainability transitions, this study responds directly to calls for moving beyond isolated tensions to examine how multiple and interwoven tensions emerge, become knotted and are navigated in practice (Sheep *et al.*, 2017). In doing so, we extend existing discussions to a context where tensions are particularly relevant yet remain underexplored.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on procurement sustainability tensions (PSTs) and manoeuvring. Section 3 describes the research approach, empirical context, data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, organised around clusters of knotted sustainability tensions. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to existing theory, highlighting knotted procurement sustainability tensions (KPSTs), manoeuvring practices and the construction of manoeuvring space. Section 6 concludes with theoretical and practical contributions and directions for future research.

2. Tensions and procurement literature

Organisational research has long examined how competing demands create dilemmas, dualities and paradoxes and how organisations respond to them (Smith and Lewis, 2011). More recent studies emphasise that tensions rarely occur in isolation; instead, multiple interrelated tensions can entangle, amplify or mitigate one another, captured by the concept of knotted tensions (Sheep *et al.*, 2017). In procurement, sustainability tensions emerge from the interplay of diverse stakeholders, institutional pressures and multiple sustainability dimensions (Fayezi *et al.*, 2018). While existing frameworks often focus on discrete strategies for addressing tensions, empirical work increasingly shows that managing sustainability tensions is a dynamic and processual activity. Building on this view, the following sections review research on multiple tensions, PSTs and approaches to navigating them through manoeuvring.

2.1 Tensions and multiple tensions

Early research has shown that tensions arise from competing demands within organisations, leading to the emergence of different *tension poles* (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). Tension-based organisational research has since extensively examined different forms of tensions, commonly referred to as dilemmas, trade-offs, dualities, dialectics and paradoxes (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Löfstäl and Jontoft, 2017). This literature has also advanced understanding of tension management by categorising strategies for addressing different types of tensions (e.g. Poole and Van de Ven, 1989).

More recent research has pointed to the need to examine *multiple interrelated tensions* simultaneously, as opposed to studying individual tensions in isolation. Sheep *et al.* (2017) argue that focusing on isolated tensions obscures how multiple paradoxical tensions simultaneously emerge, interrelate and are managed in complex organisational contexts. They introduce the concept of knotted tensions, in which multiple tensions mutually influence one another, either amplifying (prismatic) or mitigating (anti-prismatic) their effects.

2.2 Procurement sustainability tensions

Within procurement research, Fayezi *et al.* (2018) introduce the concept of “*procurement sustainability tensions*”. While the literature more commonly refers to “*sustainable procurement*” (e.g. Johnsen *et al.*, 2017), we adopt the term PSTs to emphasise tensions emerging within and around the procurement function as organisations engage with sustainability objectives. This actor-centric perspective draws on the literature on procurement sustainability (e.g. Johnsen *et al.*, 2017) and organisational tensions (e.g. Hahn *et al.*, 2015; Hahn *et al.*, 2014; Hargrave and van de Ven, 2017) and foregrounds procurement

as the organisational function where sustainability-related demands are interpreted and enacted in practice.

A central insight in the study by [Fayezi et al. \(2018\)](#) is that the link between sustainability in procurement and organisational tensions lies in sustainability being replete with and exposed to a *plurality of stakeholders* ([Carter and Rogers, 2008](#); [Meixell and Luoma, 2015](#)) and the multiplicity of institutions ([Busse et al., 2016](#)) in corporate settings. (p. 589). [Schneider and Wallenburg \(2012\)](#) proposed a stakeholder classification scheme for analysing procurement's relationships during sustainable sourcing, encompassing company-internal stakeholders (such as functional management, corporate management and internal customers of procurement), supply chain-internal stakeholders (customers and suppliers) and supply chain external stakeholders (competitors, regulatory authorities, NGOs). In addition, stakeholder theory has increasingly emphasised a network perspective, recognising that stakeholders are interconnected and that their claims interact rather than operate independently ([Freeman, 1984](#); [Rowley, 1997](#)).

Beyond stakeholder plurality, prior research highlights that procurement sustainability tensions manifest across multiple organisational levels. [Aubert et al. \(2015\)](#) show that tensions may require different responses depending on whether they arise at individual, organisational or inter-organisational levels. This is particularly relevant for procurement functions operating in large and complex organisations, where sustainability-related tensions often span functions, hierarchies and organisational boundaries rather than being confined to isolated decision points.

Across the procurement and SCM literature, several recurring sustainability-related tension domains can be identified. These include tensions between cost efficiency and sustainability ambitions, between short-term performance pressures and long-term sustainability goals, between control-oriented governance and collaborative supplier relationships and between supplier market constraints and responsible sourcing requirements ([Schneider and Wallenburg, 2012](#); [Fayezi et al., 2018](#); [Longoni et al., 2019](#)). While these tensions have been examined in different empirical contexts, they have predominantly been analysed in isolation or as dyadic trade-offs, often within a single level of analysis.

Table 1 summarises recurring sustainability-related tension domains identified in the procurement and SCM literature across different levels of analysis. The table is illustrative

Table 1. Sustainability-related tension domains in procurement and SCM literature

Level of analysis	Core tension domain	Illustrative tension	Representative literature
Individual/role	Skills and identity	Buyer efficiency role vs sustainability-oriented role	Löfstål and Jontoft (2017) , Xiao et al. (2019) , Warmbier et al. (2022)
Organisational/ functional	Performance priorities	Cost efficiency vs sustainability ambitions	Schneider and Wallenburg (2012) , Fayezi et al. (2018)
Organisational/ temporal	Time horizons	Short-term targets vs long-term sustainability outcomes	Brix-Asala et al. (2018) , Zehendner et al. (2021)
Inter-organisational	Governance approach	Control and compliance vs collaboration and trust	Wilhelm and Sydow (2018) , Longoni et al. (2019)
Inter-organisational/ market	Supplier conditions	Supplier scarcity vs sustainability requirements	Sandberg (2017) , Fayezi et al. (2018)
Systemic/ institutional	Stakeholder and regulatory pressures	Compliance demands vs operational flexibility	Busse et al. (2016) , Kocabasoglu-Hillmer et al. (2023a)

Source(s): Authors' work

rather than exhaustive and serves as a conceptual point of departure for analysing how tensions intersect in procurement practice.

While prior research has examined these tension domains largely in isolation or at single levels of analysis, less is known about how such tensions become interrelated and jointly shape procurement practice.

2.3 *Manoeuvring of tensions*

In complex organisational contexts, procurement functions often face challenges in managing sustainability-related tensions. Prior research has proposed several strategies for addressing such tensions, typically conceptualised as responses to individual or dyadic tensions. For example, [Govindan et al. \(2021\)](#) identify four strategies: win-win, trade-off, integrative and paradox. Similarly, [Turkcu and Tura \(2023\)](#) suggest three strategies: *acceptance*, *separation* (both structural and temporal) and *synthesis*. In this literature, acceptance refers to acknowledging tensions as persistent and irresolvable in the short term and working within them rather than attempting to eliminate them. Separation involves addressing competing demands by distinguishing them across time, organisational units or decision arenas. Synthesis denotes efforts to integrate competing demands through reframing, hybrid solutions or practices that partially accommodate both sides of a tension. These approaches conceptualise tension management as a matter of selecting among discrete, predefined options.

However, we argue that in practice, particularly within procurement functions operating in complex and dynamic environments, tension management more closely resembles a process of continuous manoeuvring consistent with paradox research emphasising dynamic and practice-based responses to persistent contradictions ([Smith and Lewis, 2011](#); [Jarzabkowski et al., 2013](#)). Procurement professionals often face multiple, overlapping tensions that evolve over time and across organisational levels, making it difficult to apply any single strategy in isolation. Instead, tensions are navigated through combinations and sequences of responses that are adapted as conditions change. Research on sustainability-related tensions has traditionally structured such tensions along economic, environmental and social dimensions ([Hahn et al., 2015](#)). This categorisation has informed studies of sustainable sourcing ([Schneider and Wallenburg, 2012](#)) and procurement sustainability tensions ([Fayezi et al., 2018](#)). While analytically useful, this dimensional separation risks hiding how tensions intersect in practice. For example, when economic pressures shape the feasibility of social or environmental initiatives or when supplier market constraints affect multiple sustainability goals simultaneously.

Building on [Fayezi et al. \(2018\)](#), we therefore conceptualise sustainability-related tensions in procurement as interrelated rather than independent and argue that their management involves continuous manoeuvring rather than one-off resolution. We use the notion of tension knots to capture situations in which multiple sustainability-related tensions become entangled across organisational and inter-organisational levels. Within such knots, procurement professionals may draw on established manoeuvring strategies, such as acceptance, separation and synthesis, but often apply them in combination or sequence rather than as standalone responses. Rather than proposing new categories of strategies, this study focuses on how existing manoeuvring approaches are enacted, combined and adapted in practice when procurement professionals navigate interrelated sustainability tensions. This responds to calls for greater empirical insight into how tension management strategies operate in real organisational settings and under conditions of sustained complexity ([Turkcu and Tura, 2023](#)).

In the following empirical sections, we examine how procurement professionals navigate tension knots in practice, thereby linking abstract manoeuvring strategies to situated organisational action.

2.4 *Research gaps and objectives*

Despite growing interest in tensions and sustainable procurement, several important gaps remain. *Firstly*, organisational tensions research has increasingly recognised that multiple,

interrelated tensions can co-occur, amplify or mitigate one another (Sheep *et al.*, 2017). *Secondly*, while procurement sustainability research highlights the influence of diverse stakeholders and multiple sustainability dimensions (Fayezi *et al.*, 2018; Schneider and Wallenburg, 2012), it has predominantly examined tensions in isolation or as dyadic trade-offs. *Thirdly*, existing approaches to tension management typically conceptualise responses as discrete strategies or categorical choices (Govindan *et al.*, 2021; Turkcu and Tura, 2023).

In response to these gaps, this study investigates how procurement professionals experience, interpret and manoeuvre multiple, interrelated sustainability tensions in the transition toward sustainable procurement. By focusing on procurement as a key organisational site of sustainability-related tension and manoeuvring, the study advances understanding of how tension interdependencies are navigated in practice under conditions of persistent complexity.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, selected for its ability to generate rich and nuanced insights into the research phenomenon (Yin, 2009; Corbin and Strauss, 2014). This approach aligns with the study's focus on procurement sustainability tensions and their management, where contextual understanding is essential for exploring how tensions arise and are navigated in practice.

The research design combines an exploratory pre-study with an in-depth single case study. The pre-study provided an initial overview of sustainability-related challenges in procurement across the energy sector and supported the identification of a suitable case company. The subsequent single case study enabled detailed examination of how multiple, interrelated sustainability tensions unfold and are navigated in practice. A single case design was chosen because of the complexity of the phenomenon and the need to capture interactions across organisational levels and over time (Yin, 2009). This approach allows for analytical depth rather than statistical generalisation and is appropriate for theory development in underexplored areas (Eisenhardt, 1989).

3.2 Empirical context

Our empirical context is the energy sector, which is central to the green transition. The sector faces strong imperatives to decarbonise through investments in renewable energy technologies and low-carbon infrastructure, while simultaneously operating under capital-intensive conditions, long investment cycles and high reliability requirements (Markard *et al.*, 2012; Geels, 2014). These characteristics constrain the pace of change and create tensions between sustainability ambitions and established commercial and operational priorities (Sovacool, 2016).

The energy sector is, therefore, particularly relevant for this study. While energy companies increasingly articulate ambitious sustainability targets, procurement practices often remain anchored in risk-averse sourcing routines and established supplier relationships (Walker and Brammer, 2009; Foerstl *et al.*, 2015). Procurement functions must balance cost efficiency, supply security, regulatory compliance and sustainability expectations in supplier markets that are technologically specialised and, in some cases, characterised by limited supplier availability (Sarkis and Zhu, 2018).

In addition, the energy sector is subject to diverse and often competing stakeholder pressures (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Geels, 2014), including regulators, investors, customers and civil society actors. These pressures intersect across organisational and inter-organisational levels, positioning procurement as a key function where sustainability-related tensions are experienced and negotiated. Therefore, the sector provides a well-suited context undergoing sustainability transitions (Markard *et al.*, 2012), where procurement professionals frequently encounter and must navigate multiple, interrelated tensions during sustainability transitions.

3.3 Data collection

A pre-study was conducted a) to gain knowledge about how large companies in the energy sector work with sustainable procurement and also investigate what challenges they face and b) to identify a suitable case company for in-depth study. Nine professionals who work with procurement and/or sustainability, representing five large multinational energy companies were interviewed. The companies have headquarters in Finland, France, Germany and Sweden. The companies vary in ownership structure, including both privately owned and state-owned entities and operate in multiple utility segments, including wind, nuclear and hydroelectric power generation, as well as energy distribution.

The pre-study interviews focused on how sustainable procurement was organised, governed and operationalised, as well as on perceived challenges and tensions. Across all companies, respondents described sustainability work as still evolving and highlighted persistent challenges related to cost pressures, supplier availability, regulatory demands and internal coordination. One company stood out due to the perceived persistence and interconnection of these challenges, combined with a decentralised procurement structure and expressed interest in participating in a deeper study. These indicators suggested the presence of sustainability-related procurement tensions and informed the selection of the focal case company. Details of the pre-study interviews are presented in [Table 2](#), which is organised chronologically according to interview dates.

The chosen case company is a Swedish state-owned energy company, headquartered in Stockholm, with international operations and subsidiaries across five operational segments, primarily in Europe. Although operations differ across segments, the company works towards a shared corporate goal: to be fossil-free within one generation. The company employs approximately 20,000 people and is decentralised, with subsidiaries mandated to run their own businesses. A group sustainability function (approximately 20 people) operates alongside a group procurement function. Approximately 300 employees work with procurement across the company.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source in the case study. A total of 15 interviews were conducted between January and September 2023 with procurement managers, category managers, sustainability specialists and senior executives. Respondents were selected based on their involvement in procurement and/or sustainability-related decision-making. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were primarily conducted via Microsoft Teams. The interview protocol followed an abductive logic and focused on procurement practices rather than predefined theoretical constructs. Core themes included organisational context, sustainability ambitions and governance, procurement decision-making, supplier relations, capability development and cross-functional coordination. Open-ended questions and adaptive probing were used to explore experienced tensions and how they

Table 2. Details of pre-study interviews

Respondent	Company	Role	Date
R8	5.HQ Sweden	Chief Procurement Officer (CPO)	January 31, 2023
R9	5.HQ Sweden	Director Sustainable Supply Chain Management	February 2, 2023
R4	2.HQ Germany	Purchasing Manager, Sweden	March 16, 2023
R1	1.HQ Germany	Sustainability Manager, Sweden	March 24, 2023
R5	2.HQ Germany	Global Category Manager, responsible sustainable procurement Nordics	March 24, 2023
R7	4.HQ France	Coordinator Sustainable Procurement Nordics	March 24, 2023
R6	3.HQ Finland	Sustainability Manager	March 27, 2023
R2	1.HQ Germany	Procurement Manager division Energy	March 30, 2023
R3	1.HQ Germany	Sustainable Procurement Manager Energy, Sweden	March 30, 2023
Source(s): Authors' work			

were navigated in practice. An overview of the interview protocol is provided in [Appendix](#). Details of the case study interviews are presented in [Table 3](#).

In addition to the interviews, three workshops were held with procurement and sustainability professionals from the case company. The workshops took place between May 2023 and February 2024 at the company headquarters and involved 8–14 participants. Participants included interviewees as well as one or two additional employees working with sustainability-related procurement tasks who were not interviewed. Holding three workshops over an extended period enabled the researchers to follow and discuss tensions and how they evolved over time with largely the same participants. The workshops were designed as interactive forums for collaborative reflection and were conducted in a hybrid format (in person and via Microsoft Teams), each lasting approximately three hours. The first workshop (May 3, 2023) focused on integrating sustainability into procurement strategies, organising related tasks and tracking sustainability performance across the supply chain. The second workshop (October 2, 2023) focused on experienced challenges and tensions, including how professionals managed tensions emerging during the sustainability transformation of procurement practices. The third workshop (February 1, 2024) addressed how professionals navigate and manoeuvre “knotted tensions” by considering short-, medium- and long-term time horizons. The workshops also served as opportunities to validate and refine preliminary interpretations through iterative discussion with practitioners.

The data collection followed an iterative and sequential logic in which insights from earlier stages informed the design and focus of subsequent ones. Findings from the pre-study and initial case interviews were used to identify recurring challenges and tensions, which then shaped the agenda and discussion prompts for the workshops. In turn, the workshops enabled collective reflection on preliminary insights, helped clarify how tensions were perceived as interrelated and informed subsequent interviews and analytical refinement. Steering group meetings provided additional points of sensemaking and validation by allowing emerging interpretations to be discussed with senior decision-makers over time.

Four steering group meetings were held with the Chief Procurement Officer and the Director of Sustainable Supply Chain Management between February and December 2023, followed by a final validation meeting in May 2024. These meetings provided opportunities for sensemaking, discussion of preliminary findings and longitudinal insight into how tensions evolved over time. Details of the steering group meetings are presented in [Table 4](#).

Table 3. Details of case study interviews

Respondent	Company	Role	Date
R8	5.HQ Sweden	Chief Procurement Officer (CPO)	January 31, 2023
R9	5.HQ Sweden	Director Sustainable Supply Chain Management	February 2, 2023
R10	5.HQ Sweden	Head of Procurement Business Area	May 25, 2023
R11	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Category Manager	May 26, 2023
R12	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Director	June 13, 2023
R13	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Category Manager	June 13, 2023
R14	5.HQ Sweden	Senior Sustainability Specialist	June 16, 2023
R15	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Manager	June 19, 2023
R16	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Development Manager	June 19, 2023
R17	5.HQ Sweden	Head of Procurement Business Area	June 21, 2023
R18	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Category Manager	June 27, 2023
R19	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Category Manager	August 23, 2023
R20	5.HQ Sweden	Head of Sustainability	August 25, 2023
R21	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Director	September 1, 2023
R22	5.HQ Sweden	Procurement Project Manager	September 11, 2023

Source(s): Authors' work

Table 4. Details of steering group meetings to discuss project status and findings over time

Steering group meetings	Participants	Date
1	Chief Procurement Officer (CPO), Director Sustainable Supply Chain Management, three researchers	February 9, 2023
2	Chief Procurement Officer (CPO), Director Sustainable Supply Chain Management, three researchers	May 23, 2023
3	Chief Procurement Officer (CPO), Director Sustainable Supply Chain Management, three researchers	September 21, 2023
4	Chief Procurement Officer (CPO), Director Sustainable Supply Chain Management, three researchers	December 8, 2023

Source(s): Authors' work

To support triangulation and contextual understanding, secondary data were reviewed, including sustainability reports, annual reports, corporate websites and internal policy documents. Reviewing these materials prior to and alongside interviews provided background on operations and sustainability strategies. By combining semi-structured interviews, workshops, steering group meetings and document analysis, the study builds a comprehensive and credible account of how procurement professionals perceive, navigate and respond to sustainability-related tensions (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Bell *et al.*, 2022). Figure 1 provides an overview of the research design, illustrating how interviews, workshops, steering group meetings, analysis and theory engagement were interconnected through an iterative abductive process.

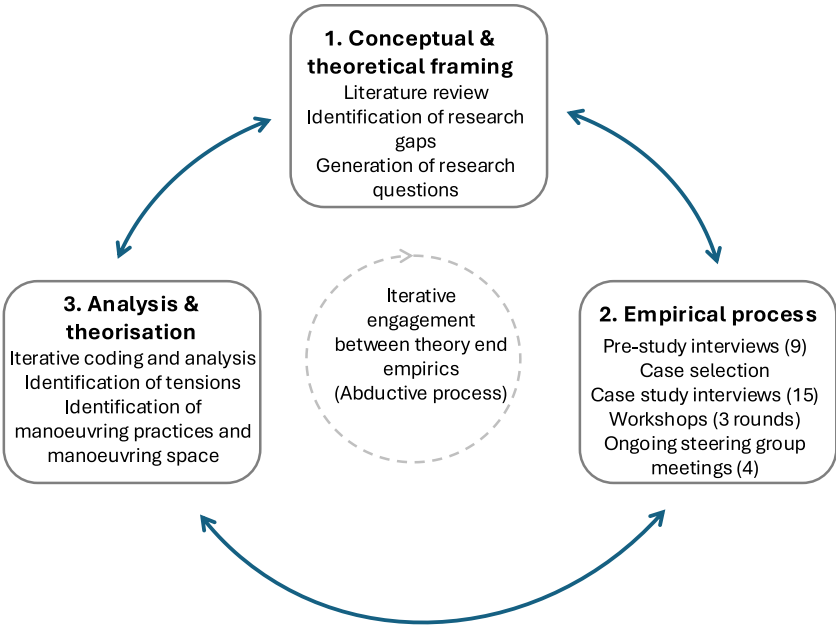


Figure 1. Overview of the iterative research design, data collection and analysis process. Source: Authors' work

3.4 Data analysis

Building on the iterative data collection process illustrated in [Figure 1](#), the analysis proceeded through cycles of coding, comparison and theoretical engagement. We followed a systematic combining approach ([Dubois and Gadde, 2002](#)), in which theory and empirical material inform each other through an iterative and abductive process, allowing existing concepts to guide analysis while remaining open to data-driven insights. Interview transcripts formed the primary analytical material, complemented by workshop notes to enrich and triangulate interpretations.

Prior literature on sustainability-related tensions sensitised the initial coding and guided attention to potential tension domains, while emerging empirical patterns prompted further engagement with organisational tension and paradox literature. This iterative movement between theory and data continued across interview rounds, workshops and analytical stages.

The coding process began by coding sentences and phrases into first-order categories. To maintain analytical focus, we concentrated on empirical material directly related to sustainability-related procurement tensions and how they were navigated in practice. [Table 5](#) presents the initial coding stage, including illustrative quotes supporting the development of first-order categories. Next, a second-order analysis examined whether the tensions in the first-order categories were primarily situated at intra-organisational or inter-organisational levels. This distinction supported the development of second-order themes and facilitated a more nuanced understanding of where tensions arise and how they are managed. Through this process, three overarching themes emerged, corresponding to the three categories of knotted procurement sustainability tensions (KPST1, KPST2 and KPST3) presented in [Section 4](#).

4. Empirical findings

The focal company is a large, state-owned energy provider operating across multiple energy segments in Europe, with a corporate ambition to enable fossil-free living within one generation. Sustainability is therefore a central strategic priority, driven by regulatory requirements, public ownership expectations and long-term climate targets, including substantial reductions in Scope 3 emissions. At the same time, the company operates in capital-intensive and reliability-critical environments, where cost control, supply security and project delivery remain dominant performance criteria.

Procurement plays a key role in translating these sustainability ambitions into operational practice. With approximately 300 procurement professionals distributed across business areas and subsidiaries, procurement is organised in a decentralised manner, balancing group-level sustainability goals with business-unit autonomy. Buyers and category managers are responsible for sourcing decisions in supplier markets characterised by technological specificity, limited availability of sustainable inputs and strong cost pressures. Sustainability initiatives in procurement include supplier assessments, sustainability criteria in tenders and efforts to engage suppliers in emissions reduction and responsible sourcing practices. However, respondents consistently described challenges in aligning these initiatives with existing cost targets, supplier market realities and unclear ownership of sustainability responsibilities across functions. As a result, procurement professionals frequently find themselves positioned between sustainability ambitions and business imperatives, navigating tensions that are persistent, interconnected and difficult to resolve through linear decision-making.

The empirical analysis reveals three distinct categories of “*knotted tensions*” that procurement functions encounter in sustainability transitions: (1) *cost-related knotted tensions*, (2) *supplier market knotted tensions* and (3) *people and functional knotted tensions*. Each of these categories captures a different set of interdependencies and dynamics. While they are separated here for clarity, they all represent complex, multi-actor constellations that involve both internal and external stakeholders. Together, they constitute three categories

Table 5. Data coding and illustrative quotations

Overarching dimension	Second-order themes	First-order categories Identified tensions	Type of tensions	Illustrative quotes from interviews
KPST1 – Cost-related tensions (entangled with supplier, company and buyer cost tensions)	Inter-organisational tensions	Supplier cost tension	Tension between supplier cost and the willingness of procurement to pay a premium for sustainability	R21, Procurement Director, Business Area Procurement: “To achieve our 50% emission target, we must address the issue of green steel. And this comes at a substantial cost premium. So, solving the green steel supply and cost issue is key to solving the entire problem.” R12, Procurement Director, Business Area Procurement: “How much are we willing to pay for a sustainable supply chain, and that is a very difficult question to answer . . . but at the same time, we still have a business to run.”
		Company cost tension	Tension between business metrics and procurement sustainability goals	R21, Procurement Director, Business Area Procurement: “ And if the business is making decisions around sustainability and it is a cost issue, then they are likely to choose the least costly option.” R2, Head of Procurement, Business Area Procurement: “The price should be 80% and sustainability accounts for 20%. We cannot govern in that way and then we have to put almost 100% environment or climate, and it can cost just about anything, and it doesn’t work” R20, Head of Sustainability, Group Sustainability: “Procurement needs to show how it becomes profitable and better over the life cycle. They need to point to the business value of doing so. I think you find more conflicts than there really are.”
	Intra-organisational tensions	Buyer cost tension	Tension between the individual buyer cost targets and procurement sustainability goals	R22, Procurement Project Manager, Business Area Procurement: “I believe that for most people, sustainability is seen as an added cost or responsibility on top of their existing workload. They view sustainability as a burden rather than an opportunity. I think this view is mainly due to a lack of knowledge.” R20, Head of Sustainability, Group Sustainability: “The procurement organisation is governed by other parameters, so therefore you have no experience and find it difficult, you don’t really know how to break it down and calculate the cost over a longer period of time.”

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

Overarching dimension	Second-order themes	First-order categories Identified tensions	Type of tensions	Illustrative quotes from interviews
KPST2 – Supplier market tensions (entangled with supplier scarcity, customer attractiveness and sustainability ownership tensions)	Inter-organisational tensions	Supplier scarcity tensions	Tension between procurement sustainability demands and the ability of suppliers to deliver these	R10, Head of Procurement, Business Area Procurement: “The market is simply not there. Of course, you have the big, big players who have sort of a carbon neutral supply, but these are the top maybe 100 suppliers. And then we still have another 19,000 suppliers that are really not there.” R17, Head of Procurement, Business Area Procurement: “Huge scarcity in the market. We only have a limited number of ships available and they are sailing all over the world. We are struggling to get capacity at the moment for all of our different scopes.”
		Customer attractiveness tensions	Tension between procurement and suppliers to be the customer of choice	R22, Procurement Project Manager, Business Area Procurement: “We are in a market where it is really difficult to find good suppliers, so we need to make sure that we are the customer of choice and not make it more difficult or costly to work with us. So, that is always a bit of tension.”
	Intra-organisational tensions	Sustainability ownership tensions	Tension between sustainability ownership and procurement sustainability goals	R1, Head of Sustainability, Business Area Sustainability: “The sustainability functions are there as a support, but it is in the line where the ownership is. Getting them to understand that this is not my goal, but theirs. If we do not get that, we will never be able to release enough resources to drive the change.”
		Skills and mindset tensions	Tension between buyer capabilities and sustainability knowledge due to change of mindset and skills	R9, Sustainability Director, Group Sustainability: “They are very skilled engineers, absolutely, but they really like rules and structures. They want to be told what to do and they see things as very black and white.” R22, Procurement Project Manager, Business Area Procurement: “They view sustainability as a burden rather than an opportunity. I think this view is mainly due to a lack of knowledge.” R16, Procurement Development Manager, Group Procurement: “Buyers and category managers will see that their profile is going to change. So instead of having people who focus on savings and are masters of negotiations, all of a sudden they become protectors of human rights and climate activists, and that is not always easy for a buyer to do.”
KPST3 – People and functional tensions (entangled with skills, mindset and functional tensions)	Intra-organisational tensions			

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

Overarching dimension	Second-order themes	First-order categories Identified tensions	Type of tensions	Illustrative quotes from interviews
		Functional tensions	Tension between procurement, business and sustainability functions due to procurement new role and ambiguity	<i>R10, Head of Procurement, Business Area Procurement: “It is tough discussions. I think procurement is a little in the middle there between sustainability and the business, you could say maybe more as a facilitator. I think everyone has their own interest and it is not always easy to align.”</i> <i>R5, Procurement Category Manager, Business Area Procurement: “I hear procurement directors say, but the business needs to call for sustainability and ask us to look into it, but are procurement just a tender machine, or actually run category management . . . much responsibility lays on procurement?”</i> <i>R1, Head of Sustainability, Business Area Sustainability: “We have a lot of scope 3 emissions, and it ends up on X, who is the buyer. But it is not X who decides what, the business must understand how they can make another order for the buyer”</i>

Source(s): Authors’ work

of what we term *Knotted Procurement Sustainability Tensions (KPST)*, multi-level and interdependent tension knots that are difficult to disentangle and resistant to linear solutions.

These categories reflect the organisational struggles and conflicts that arise when procurement is positioned at the intersection of sustainability and business imperatives. In line with [Sheep et al. \(2017\)](#), our findings also show that tensions within each KPST may be perceived or managed in either prismatic (amplifying) or anti-prismatic (mitigating) ways, depending on context and actor perspectives.

The findings are presented in three sections, corresponding to the categories outlined above. Each section describes the nature of the tensions and illustrates how they manifest and interact across organisational levels. [Figures 2, 3 and 4](#) provide visual overviews of how these three categories of tensions become knotted across buyer, company and supplier levels.

4.1 Cost-related knotted procurement sustainability tensions

Cost-efficiency-related tensions emerged as a central and persistent challenge in aligning procurement practices with sustainability objectives. These tensions manifested on three interrelated levels: *supplier, company and individual buyer*, forming a dense network of interdependent and mutually reinforcing tensions.

At the inter-organisational level, suppliers’ premium pricing for sustainable goods created significant tension. Procurement functions struggled to meet sustainability targets while operating under strict financial constraints. For instance, R21 (Procurement Director) illustrated the dilemma: *“To achieve our 50% emission target, we must address the issue of green steel, and this comes at a substantial cost premium. So, solving the green steel supply and cost problem is the key to solving the whole problem.”* This example underscores how supplier cost tensions are not only financial but strategic, determining the feasibility of broader sustainability commitments.

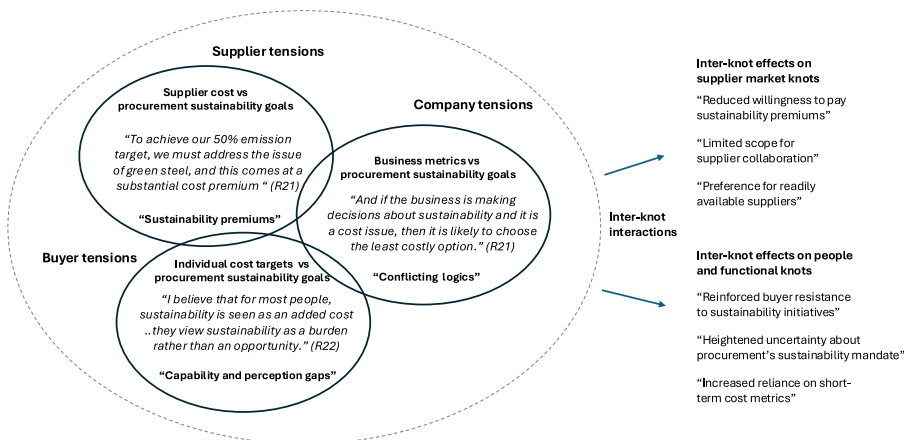


Figure 2. Cost-related knotted tensions. Source: Authors' work

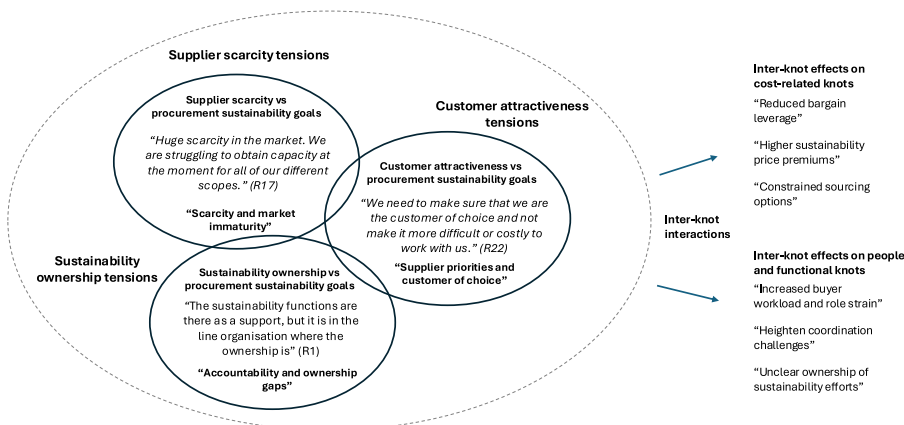


Figure 3. Supplier market knotted tensions. Source: Authors' work

At the company level, tensions arose between the procurement function and business units, driven by conflicting priorities around cost-efficiency and sustainability. R21 (Procurement Director) expressed the dilemma in a concise way: "And if the business is making decisions about sustainability and it is a cost issue, then it is likely to choose the least costly option."

Similarly, R2 (Head of Procurement) highlighted the unrealistic weighting of competing priorities: "The price should be 80% and sustainability accounts for 20%. We cannot govern in that way . . . then we have to put almost 100% on the environment or the climate, and it can cost just about anything, and it does not work." These findings show how tensions often originate from incompatible performance metrics and decision-making logics.

At the individual buyer level, procurement professionals experienced tensions related to cost targets. Sustainability was often viewed as an additional cost burden without adequate resources or incentives. R22, a Procurement Project Manager noted: "I believe that for most people, sustainability is seen as an added cost or responsibility in addition to their existing workload. They view sustainability as a burden rather than an opportunity." Furthermore, R20, Head of Sustainability, emphasised the lack of tools and skills for assessing long-term

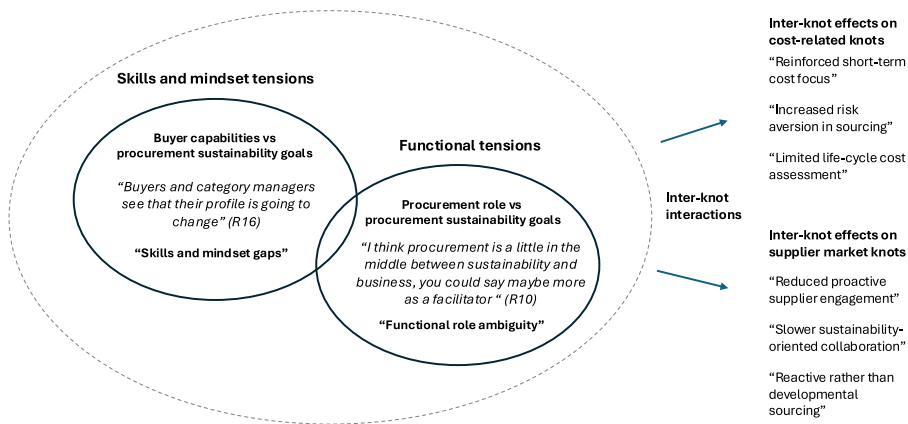


Figure 4. People and functional knotted tensions. Source: Authors' work

value: “The procurement organisation is governed by other parameters . . . you have no experience and find it difficult; you do not really know how to break it down and calculate the cost over a longer period of time.” These individual tensions further complicated efforts to align buyers’ cost target with sustainability goals.

The interactions between supplier-, company- and buyer-level cost tensions created prismatic intra-knot dynamics, where efforts to address one aspect often amplified tensions elsewhere within the cost-related KPST. For example, decisions to source more sustainable (but expensive) materials increased internal budgetary pressures, which in turn reinforced individual buyer resistance. As R21, a Procurement Director, explained: “We want to do it. But can we afford to do it? Each project has to bear the cost of what it buys. So, if the project is making decisions around sustainability and it is a cost issue, then they are likely to choose the least costly option. What we are working on now is to try to make the options as transparent as possible and maybe even escalate it to decide that we might actually pay more for this product because it has a significant sustainability impact.”

Figure 2 illustrates how supplier-, company- and buyer-level cost tensions are internally entangled and mutually reinforcing. The overlaps indicate intra-knot dynamics within the cost-related KPST, while the outward arrows represent inter-knot interactions through which cost-related tensions constrain and reconfigure the wider supplier market and people/functional tension knots.

4.2 Supplier market knotted procurement sustainability tensions

Supplier market-related tensions emerged as a second recurring theme among respondents, underscoring the complexities of balancing sustainability ambitions with supplier market realities and organisational strategies. These tensions manifested in three interrelated forms: supplier scarcity tensions, customer attractiveness tensions and sustainability ownership tensions, together forming a dense knot of interdependent tensions that required continuous and careful navigation.

At the inter-organisational level, *supplier scarcity tensions* originated from the limited availability of sustainable input materials and the shortage of suppliers capable of meeting stringent sustainability requirements. The respondents described the tension between setting ambitious sustainability targets and the market’s inability to deliver. As R10 (Head of Procurement) explained: “The market is simply not there. Of course, there are big, big players who are having sort of a carbon neutral supply, but these are maybe the top 100 suppliers. And then we still have another 19,000 suppliers that are really not there.” Similarly, logistics

capacity was also observed as a constraint, as R17 (Head of Procurement) highlighted: *“Huge scarcity in the market. We only have a limited number of vessels available, and they are sailing all over the world. We are struggling to obtain capacity at the moment for all of our different scopes.”* These accounts reveal not only market immaturity but also structural bottlenecks that constrain sustainability transitions across global supply networks.

At the buyer–supplier interface, *customer attractiveness tensions* arise from scarcity, compounded by the challenge of maintaining attractive buyer status in a competitive landscape while simultaneously raising sustainability expectations. As R22 (Procurement Project Manager) observed: *“We are in a market where it is very difficult to find good suppliers, so we need to make sure that we are the customer of choice and not make it more difficult or costly to work with us. So, that is always a bit of tension.”* Thus, procurement professionals were caught in a balancing act: strengthening supplier relationships while increasing demands for compliance with sustainability standards, which suppliers could perceive as burdensome.

At the intra-organisational level, *sustainability ownership tensions* surfaced due to unclear responsibilities, competing objectives and misalignment between different units. Respondents frequently noted challenges in assigning ownership of sustainability outcomes and reconciling environmental ambitions with business realities. R1 (Head of Sustainability) stressed the issue of accountability: *“The sustainability functions are there as a support, but it is in the line where ownership is. Getting them to understand that this is not my goal, but theirs. If we do not get that, we will never be able to release enough resources to drive the change.”* These accounts point to persistent tensions surrounding coordination, accountability and ownership of sustainability targets.

The interplay among supplier scarcity, customer attractiveness and sustainability ownership tensions was primarily experienced as anti-prismatic within the supplier market KPST. Rather than amplifying conflict, these intra-knot dynamics often encouraged alignment, adaptation and integration across procurement, sustainability and operational priorities. In this sense, the supplier market knot acted less as a destructive clash and more as a catalyst for convergence and joint problem-solving. As R13 (Procurement Manager) reflected: *“We have a lot of ambitions as an organisation and we also set a goal to reduce our CO2 emissions by 50% in 2030 but we need a good supply chain for that. And the supply chain is not there yet. Many suppliers do not have this vision. If we send this questionnaire, the suppliers really do not understand what this is all about. They do not have the data.”*

Figure 3 illustrates how supplier scarcity, customer attractiveness and sustainability ownership tensions are internally entangled and mutually reinforcing. The overlaps indicate intra-knot dynamics within the supplier market KPST, while the outward arrows represent inter-knot interactions through which supplier market tensions constrain and reconfigure cost-related and people and functional tension knots.

4.3 People and functional knotted procurement sustainability tensions

The third category of knotted tensions identified by respondents was concerned with the human and organisational dimensions of the evolving role of procurement in sustainability. These tensions manifested at two interconnected levels: *individual buyer and functional*. They frequently overlapped, reflecting the challenges of aligning buyer capabilities with organisational structures and goals. Their entangled nature created a knot of capability gaps, identity tensions and unclear mandates that procurement professionals needed to navigate.

At the individual buyer level, skills and mindset tensions arose from the shifting expectations placed on procurement professionals. Traditionally focused on cost savings, efficiency and negotiation, buyers were increasingly expected to embrace new roles as advocates for sustainability. This transition demanded new competencies and broader perspectives, generating friction between legacy practices and emerging sustainability demands. As R16, Procurement Development Manager, explained: *“Buyers and category*

managers see that their profile is going to change. So instead of having people who focus on savings and are masters of negotiations, all of a sudden, they become protectors of human rights, and climate activists, and that is not always easy for a buyer to do.” The quote highlights both the psychological and professional adjustments required of procurement staff, where sustainability was often experienced as an additional burden and as misaligned with established professional identities and skillsets.

At the organisational level, tensions emerged from divergent logics and agendas across functional units. Procurement professionals frequently found themselves in a bridging position between business units, sustainability teams and operational functions, often without clear mandates or sufficient resources. R10, Head of Procurement, articulated the challenge: “It is tough discussions. I think procurement is a little in the middle between sustainability and business, you could say maybe more as a facilitator. I think everyone has their own interest and it is not always easy to align.” Similarly, R5, Procurement Category Manager, questioned procurement’s mandate: “I hear procurement directors say, but the business needs to call for sustainability and ask us to look into it ... but are procurement just a tender machine, or actually run category management? Much responsibility lays on procurement.” These reflections illustrate how unclear responsibilities and competing functional priorities generated both structural and strategic tensions across functional boundaries, undermining coherent action.

The interplay between individual buyer tensions and functional tensions at the organisational level was primarily experienced as anti-prismatic within the people and functional KPST. Rather than amplifying conflict, these intra-knot dynamics encouraged greater coherence through capability-building, cultural alignment and collaborative coordination across functions. As R6, a Sustainability Manager, emphasised: “The sustainability and procurement teams are working really closely, really with a good attitude together ... we have such informal and regular interaction and buyers know who to reach out to ... We try to always build a robust process and not just like to work here and there a little bit.”

Figure 4 illustrates how skills and mindset tensions at the individual buyer level are internally entangled with functional tensions related to roles, mandates and coordination. The overlaps indicate intra-knot dynamics within the people and functional KPST, while the outward arrows represent inter-knot interactions through which people and functional tensions constrain and reconfigure cost-related and supplier market tension knots.

4.4 Navigating knotted procurement sustainability tensions in practice

While procurement professionals rarely described sustainability tensions as fully resolvable, the empirical material reveals how they actively navigated knotted tensions in practice. Rather than applying isolated solutions to individual tensions, respondents described navigation as an ongoing process of manoeuvring through which procurement professionals actively construct and maintain manoeuvring space.

One recurring navigation practice involved *reframing* cost-related tensions as strategic trade-offs rather than purely operational constraints. Procurement managers emphasised the need to make sustainability-related cost implications explicit and discuss them in relation to broader business priorities. As one procurement director explained, “How much are we willing to pay for a sustainable supply chain ... but at the same time, we still have a business to run” (R12). Another respondent stressed that navigating these tensions required shifting the conversation from price to value, arguing that “procurement needs to show how it becomes profitable and better over the life cycle” (R20). Through such reframing, procurement sought to construct manoeuvring space within dominant cost logics, even if short-term financial pressures remained strong.

A second navigation practice concerned *sequencing* and selective engagement in supplier markets characterised by scarcity. Rather than uniformly imposing sustainability

requirements, procurement professionals adjusted the timing and scope of their demands based on supplier capabilities and strategic importance. As one head of procurement noted, “*The market is simply not there ... we have maybe the top 100 suppliers, but another 19,000 suppliers that are really not there*” (R10). At the same time, procurement had to remain attractive as a customer, as reflected in the concern that “*we need to make sure that we are the customer of choice and not make it more difficult or costly to work with us*” (R22). This resulted in manoeuvring practices that combined acceptance of current market limitations with longer-term ambitions to influence supplier development.

A third navigation practice involved *repositioning* procurement’s role as a facilitator across organisational boundaries. Faced with shifting sustainability expectations and unclear mandates, procurement professionals described navigating tensions by coordinating between business units, sustainability functions and suppliers. One respondent captured this intermediary role by stating, “*procurement is a little in the middle ... maybe more as a facilitator*” (R10). At the same time, buyers were required to adapt to changing expectations, as illustrated by the observation that “*buyers ... become protectors of human rights and climate activists, and that is not always easy*” (R16). Navigating these tensions thus involved ongoing role negotiation and relational coordination rather than simple capability upgrading.

Importantly, these manoeuvring practices also generated inter-knot interactions across tension knots. Efforts to reframe cost-related tensions influenced supplier market engagement, while role-related navigation practices shaped how cost and sustainability priorities were interpreted and enacted in daily procurement work. Together, these findings suggest that navigating KPST is less about resolving isolated conflicts and more about constructing and maintaining manoeuvring space across interconnected tension configurations.

In summary, these findings show that procurement professionals navigate a complex landscape of KPST, categorised as cost-related, supplier market and people and functional tension knots. While each knot captures distinct tensions, a central insight is that these knots are dynamically interconnected through inter-knot interactions. Cost-related tensions, for example, constrain supplier market tension knots by limiting procurement’s willingness and ability to engage capable suppliers, while simultaneously reinforcing people and functional tension knots by intensifying buyer resistance and uncertainty surrounding sustainability mandates. In turn, supplier market and people and functional tension knots reconfigure cost-related tensions by constraining sourcing flexibility and reinforcing short-term decision logics. As illustrated across [Sections 4.1–4.4](#), procurement professionals navigate these interdependencies through the continuous construction and maintenance of manoeuvring space across interconnected tension knots, underscoring that KPST are persistent, compounded and systemic.

5. Discussion

This study reveals that procurement sustainability tensions are deeply embedded within overlapping intra- and inter-organisational networks, where diverse and often conflicting objectives converge through the procurement function. In line with [Sheep et al.’s \(2017\)](#) conceptualisation of tension interactions as compound and intertwined forces, we define these as *Knotted Procurement Sustainability Tensions (KPST)*. Unlike isolated dilemmas, KPST are nested and interdependent, constraining both short- and long-term procurement efforts and producing organisational “slowness” that can hinder sustainability transitions.

To understand how procurement professionals can act within such contexts, we discuss the findings in relation to existing literature and highlight how procurement constructs *manoeuvring space* ([Filstad et al., 2021](#)) to address cost, supplier market and people/functional tension knots. Whereas the empirical findings describe how these knotted tensions manifest and are navigated in practice ([Sections 4.1–4.4](#)), the discussion interprets these patterns in relation to existing theory on sustainability tensions and manoeuvring.

5.1 Conceptualising knotted procurement sustainability tensions (KPST)

This study conceptualises procurement sustainability tensions as multi-level, interdependent configurations of tensions that are dynamically interconnected across organisational and supply network contexts. Rather than occurring as isolated or dyadic contradictions, these tensions are experienced as knotted configurations in which multiple tensions co-exist, overlap and interact across cost-related, supplier market and people and functional domains. In contrast to prior procurement sustainability tension studies that primarily conceptualise tensions as discrete or competing dualities (e.g. [Fayezi et al., 2018](#)), our findings show how tensions become nested, mutually constraining and dynamically interconnected across organisational and supply network contexts.

[Table 6](#) synthesises the empirical findings into a set of theoretical abstractions, clarifying the nature, interconnections and navigation of knotted procurement sustainability tensions. In doing so, it highlights how KPST are structured through nested intra-knot dynamics and inter-

Table 6. Theoretical synthesis of KPST

Analytical dimension	Empirical findings	Theoretical abstraction	Contribution
Nature and structure of tensions	Multiple tensions (cost-related, supplier market, people/functional) co-occur, overlap and are embedded across organisational and market boundaries	<i>Knotted procurement sustainability tensions (KPST)</i> : multi-level, interdependent tension configurations spanning intra- and inter-organisational levels	Reframes sustainability tensions as <i>entangled and multi-level configurations</i> rather than isolated or dyadic tensions, extending Fayezi et al. (2018) and Sheep et al. (2017)
Interconnections and dynamics of KPST	Each tension category consists of internally nested tensions that interact, while tensions across categories influence and constrain each other over time	<i>Multi-layered interdependence of KPST</i> : • Intra-knot dynamics—prismatic/anti-prismatic interactions within each KPST • Inter-knot interactions—tensions that reconfigure other tension knots	Specifies how <i>knotted tensions interact</i> through intra-knot dynamics and inter-knot interactions across tension knots, extending Fayezi et al. (2018) and Sheep et al. (2017)
Process and manoeuvring of KPST	Navigation occurs as an ongoing process of manoeuvring across interrelated constraints, enacted through reframing cost tensions, sequencing supplier engagement and repositioning procurement roles	<i>Manoeuvring as process</i> : a continuous, adaptive process enacted through situated practices: • Reframing (cognitive) • Sequencing (temporal) • Repositioning (relational)	Reframes tension navigation as a <i>continuous and practice-based manoeuvring process</i> rather than discrete tension-resolution strategies, extending Turkcu and Tura (2023) and Govindan et al. (2021)
Creating manoeuvring space	Procurement professionals continuously construct and maintain manoeuvring space to navigate persistent and interdependent tensions across organisational and supplier contexts	<i>Manoeuvring space</i> : a contingent and dynamic capacity to act within persistent constraints	<i>Conceptualises manoeuvring space</i> as a contingent and dynamic capacity for sustained action within environments characterised by persistent and interdependent tensions, extending Filstad et al. (2021)

Source(s): Authors' work

knot interactions and how procurement professionals navigate these tensions through ongoing manoeuvring practices that continuously construct and maintain manoeuvring space in practice.

5.2 *Interconnections and dynamics of tension knots*

The findings illustrate that KPST are characterised by multi-layered interdependence, where tensions interact both within and across tension knots. As summarised in [Table 6](#), this involves intra-knot dynamics, where tensions within each KPST may be experienced in prismatic (amplifying) or anti-prismatic (mitigating) ways, as well as inter-knot interactions, through which tensions constrain and reconfigure other tension knots over time.

The findings on cost-related tensions illustrate how procurement operates within enduring contradictions between short-term financial pressures and longer-term sustainability ambitions. Prior research conceptualises such tensions as persistent rather than resolvable ([Hahn et al., 2015](#)). Interpreted through tension-handling perspectives ([Govindan et al., 2021](#); [Turkcu and Tura, 2023](#)), procurement's responses reflect a combination of acceptance, temporal separation and selective synthesis. Acceptance is evident in recognising the persistence of cost pressures in project-based decision-making. Temporal separation occurs as procurement differentiated between short-term budget constraints and longer-term life-cycle considerations. Synthesis emerges where cost discussions were reframed to emphasise long-term value creation rather than immediate price effects. In line with [Filstad et al. \(2021\)](#), these manoeuvres illustrate how procurement constructs manoeuvring space by layering responses over time rather than relying on singular, stable strategies. At the same time, cost-related tensions also generate inter-knot interactions by constraining supplier engagement and reinforcing uncertainty around sustainability priorities and procurement roles.

Supplier market tensions highlight how procurement navigates constraints arising from limited supplier capabilities, customer attractiveness concerns and distributed sustainability ownership. Rather than attempting to resolve these tensions directly, procurement engaged in manoeuvres that balanced ambition with feasibility. Using [Turkcu and Tura's \(2023\)](#) framework as an interpretive lens, these manoeuvres can be understood as a dynamic combination of acceptance, separation and synthesis. Acceptance involves recognising current market immaturity and capability gaps. Separation occurs through differentiated sustainability expectations across supplier segments. Synthesis is evident in collaborative orientations toward strategically important suppliers, enabling joint development without destabilising supply continuity. These manoeuvres were not static choices but adaptive responses that evolved with market conditions, illustrating how procurement maintains manoeuvring space across interconnected supplier market dynamics. Supplier market tensions further generate inter-knot interactions by constraining sourcing flexibility, reinforcing cost pressures and influencing the scope for sustainability integration across procurement practices.

People and functional tensions reflect the challenges procurement faces when navigating shifting role expectations, capability demands and competing functional logics. Existing research highlights the political and interpretive nature of such tensions ([Xiao et al., 2019](#); [van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015](#)). Interpreted through a manoeuvring lens, procurement's responses combined acceptance of ongoing role ambiguity with active sensegiving and positioning. Acceptance is reflected in recognising that capability development and role clarity evolve gradually. Separation occurs as procurement differentiated between formal mandates and informal coordination practices. Synthesis emerges through facilitative roles that aligned sustainability, business and operational perspectives. Together, these manoeuvres illustrate how procurement constructs manoeuvring space by shaping interpretations and relationships rather than relying solely on formal authority or structural redesign. In turn, people and functional tensions generate inter-knot interactions by influencing how sustainability priorities are interpreted, enacted and coordinated across supplier market and cost-related tensions.

5.3 *Manoeuvring as a process of navigating knotted tensions*

The findings suggest that managing procurement sustainability tensions cannot be understood as the application of fixed strategies. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic process of manoeuvring that adapts to the complexity and interdependence of KPST. The existing literature identifies a range of tension-handling strategies: Govindan *et al.* (2021) propose win-win, trade-off, integrative and paradox approaches, while Turkcu and Tura (2023) extend this typology to include acceptance, separation, both structural and temporal and synthesis strategies. However, these frameworks often frame tension management as discrete and stable choices.

Our findings indicate that procurement, embedded in dynamic and multilayered organisational contexts, requires a more fluid and responsive approach. In line with Sheep *et al.* (2017), tensions may be experienced or managed in prismatic ways, where interventions amplify tensions, or in anti-prismatic ways, where actions mitigate and moderate tensions within and across KPST. For instance, sourcing more sustainable but costly materials can increase budgetary pressures and buyer resistance, thereby generating inter-knot interactions between cost-related and people/functional tensions. Drawing on Filstad *et al.* (2021), we conceptualise this as the creation of managerial *manoeuvring space*: a contingent capacity to make deliberate and context-sensitive adjustments within persistent tension configurations.

In practice, manoeuvring involves identifying interdependent tensions, aligning responses with their structure and dynamics and mobilising adaptive practices to balance competing demands over time. In the short term, this may involve pragmatically accepting the persistence of certain tensions, such as sustainability-related cost pressures, without attempting immediate resolution. In the medium term, tensions may be moderated through spatial or temporal separation of competing priorities, for example by integrating sustainability into category management while maintaining parallel budgeting or performance systems. At the same time, synthesis-oriented manoeuvres allow procurement professionals to leverage tensions constructively through collaboration, learning and cross-functional coordination. In the longer term, adopting a systems-oriented perspective enables broader alignment across industries, value chains and institutional actors, thereby supporting more transformational sustainability transitions.

Figure 5 summarises the conceptual model emerging from this study. The figure illustrates how knotted procurement sustainability tensions are constituted through intra-knot dynamics and inter-knot interactions across cost-related, supplier market and people and functional tension knots. It further highlights how procurement professionals navigates these interdependencies through ongoing manoeuvring practices that construct and maintain manoeuvring space.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to deepen our understanding of how procurement functions encounter and navigate multiple interrelated tensions in the transition to sustainable procurement. In doing so, it contributes to the growing stream of research that applies tension-orientated perspectives to sustainability challenges in procurement and supply management.

6.1 *Theoretical contributions*

Our study advances theory by rethinking how tensions in sustainable procurement are conceptualised and navigated. Existing research on procurement and supply chain management has long acknowledged competing demands, for example, between cost efficiency and sustainability performance or between short-term operational pressures and long-term strategic goals (Carter and Easton, 2011; Meixell and Luoma, 2015; Xiao *et al.*, 2019). However, such tensions are often treated as isolated dualities or as challenges that can be addressed through compliance mechanisms and decision-making models. Our findings suggest that this view underestimates the complexity of sustainability challenges in

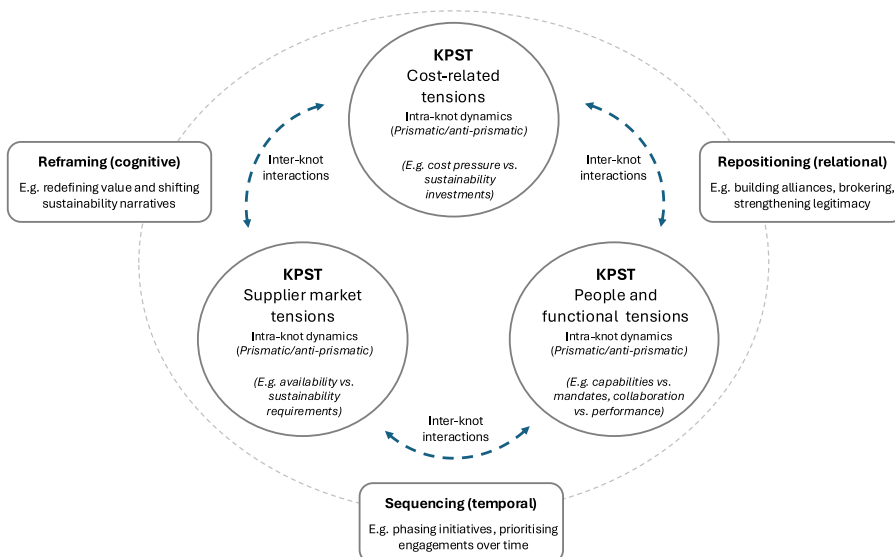


Figure 5. Conceptual model of knotted procurement sustainability tensions (KPST) and three manoeuvring practices. Source: Authors' work

procurement. In practice, procurement professionals face clusters of interrelated contradictions that overlap, reinforce and reshape each other.

To capture this complexity, we extend [Sheep *et al.*'s \(2017\)](#) notion of tension knots into the procurement domain, introducing KPST. This perspective shifts from linear, binary framings toward an understanding of tensions as embedded within interdependent networks that span organisational, functional and market boundaries. By foregrounding how cost-related, supplier market and people and functional tensions become internally entangled and mutually influential, the concept of KPST extends earlier stakeholder-based accounts of procurement sustainability tensions that primarily emphasise balancing competing actor interests ([Fayezi *et al.*, 2018](#); [Wilhelm and Sydow, 2018](#)). More specifically, our study contributes by showing how sustainability tensions in procurement are not only multiple but dynamically interconnected through intra-knot dynamics and inter-knot interactions across organisational and market boundaries.

Beyond conceptualising tension knots, the study also advances theory on how such tensions are managed in procurement. Prior literature has proposed generic tension-handling strategies, such as trade-offs, integration or paradoxical acceptance ([Smith and Lewis, 2011](#); [Govindan *et al.*, 2021](#)). While analytically useful, these typologies tend to imply relatively stable choices between strategies. Our findings instead demonstrate that procurement professionals rarely resolve tensions once and for all. Rather, they engage in ongoing manoeuvring, applying a sequence of adaptive, context-sensitive practices to construct and maintain temporary manoeuvring space ([Filstad *et al.*, 2021](#)) in the face of evolving constraints and demands.

By linking KPST with the concept of manoeuvring, this study reframes procurement theory in two ways. Firstly, it positions procurement as a central function where sustainability-related contradictions converge and must be navigated rather than as a downstream executor of predefined sustainability policies. Secondly, it extends tension research by emphasising the processual and evolving character of tension navigation, moving beyond static trade-offs towards ongoing practices of reframing, sequencing and repositioning that unfold over time. In

doing so, the study contributes to both sustainable procurement research and the broader literature on organisational tensions by showing how navigation emerges through practice in contexts characterised by persistent and interdependent sustainability tensions.

6.2 Practical contributions

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Beyond its theoretical implications, this study provides actionable insights for procurement professionals and organisations seeking to embed sustainability into practice. A central practical insight is that procurement rarely encounters singular or isolated trade-offs. Instead, sustainability challenges emerge as interrelated and evolving tension knots, where cost considerations, supplier market conditions and internal functional dynamics intersect and mutually shape one another. While prior research highlights procurement's strategic role in sustainability (Ageron *et al.*, 2012; Walker and Brammer, 2009) and identifies the existence of procurement sustainability tensions (Fayezi *et al.*, 2018), our findings show that practitioners must also recognise how such tensions become interconnected, nested and mutually reinforcing in practice. This perspective enables procurement professionals not only to identify individual tensions but also to interpret where tensions become concentrated, how interventions in one area may reconfigure tensions elsewhere, and where manoeuvring space can be constructed and maintained across interconnected tension knots.

Equally important is the need for procurement to adopt a broader and more systemic perspective when navigating these knots. Tensions were experienced differently across organisational levels and actor groups, meaning that attempts to resolve one issue often produced follow-on effects elsewhere. By mapping how tensions interact within and across interconnected tension knots, procurement professionals can make more informed decisions about where to intervene, where to sequence actions over time and where temporary constraints must be accepted (Hahn *et al.*, 2015; van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015). Importantly, our findings suggest that not all tensions require immediate resolution; some are more effectively navigated through staged engagement, selective intervention and ongoing adaptation aligned with evolving organisational and supplier contexts.

Finally, the study highlights that effective tension management in practice is less about selecting a single "best" strategy and more about engaging in continuous manoeuvring. Across the case, procurement professionals relied on small and deliberate practice, such as reframing sustainability discussions, adjusting category management approaches, experimenting with budgeting routines and building coalitions across functions and suppliers, to gradually expand and sustain manoeuvring space (Filstad *et al.*, 2021). This adaptive and collaborative orientation aligns with research emphasising the importance of engaging with, rather than suppressing, tensions (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Reinecke and Ansari, 2015). For practitioners, this implies that the task is not to eliminate sustainability tensions, but to work productively with them over time, positioning procurement as a resilient and forward-looking contributor to sustainability transitions.

6.3 Limitations and future research directions

This study provides novel insights into how procurement professionals experience and navigate interrelated sustainability tensions, yet several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the qualitative design with a limited number of organisational cases enables in-depth exploration but constrains broader generalisability. Future research could examine the transferability of KPST across sectors characterised by different regulatory environments, supply network structures and sustainability pressures.

Secondly, while this study conceptualises KPST as multi-level and interdependent configurations, several theoretical questions regarding their nature and dynamics remain open. Future research could further examine how tension knots emerge, evolve and potentially dissolve over time, as well as whether particular tension knots systematically trigger, amplify or mitigate others. Such work would deepen understanding of the nature, structure and multi-

layered interdependencies of KPST by further theorising the conditions under which intra-knot dynamics and inter-knot interactions develop across organisational and supply network contexts.

Thirdly, this study conceptualises manoeuvring as a continuous and adaptive process through which procurement professionals construct and maintain manoeuvring space under persistent constraints. However, the antecedents, boundaries and consequences of manoeuvring space remain largely unexplored. Future research could therefore investigate how manoeuvring space is created, expanded, constrained and institutionalised across different organisational settings, and how the situated practices of reframing, sequencing and repositioning interact over time. Such research would further develop the processual understanding of procurement sustainability tensions and strengthen the theorisation of manoeuvring and manoeuvring space through which organisations sustain actionability in environments characterised by persistent and interdependent tensions.

Appendix Interview protocol

Interview design

This study is based on semi-structured, exploratory interviews conducted with procurement professionals and closely related actors (e.g. sustainability, business and category management). The interviews were designed to capture how sustainability is understood, operationalised and negotiated in procurement practice.

At the time of data collection, the interviews were not designed to test predefined theoretical constructs. Instead, they followed an abductive research logic, combining open-ended questions with adaptive follow-up probes to surface emerging issues, contradictions and dilemmas in everyday work. As empirical patterns became visible, particular attention was paid to situations involving trade-offs, disagreements and coordination challenges, which later informed the study's focus on sustainability tensions and manoeuvring strategies.

The interview protocol below represents the core themes used across interviews. While not all questions were asked in every interview, the protocol ensured consistent coverage of key topics while allowing flexibility to follow respondents' experiences and examples.

Core themes and guiding questions

(1) *Role and organisational context*

Purpose: To situate the respondent's position, responsibilities and decision authority.

- Can you describe your role and main responsibilities?
- How is procurement organised in your part of the organisation?
- How does your role relate to sustainability issues?
- Who are your main internal and external counterparts?

(2) *Sustainability ambitions and governance*

Purpose: To understand how sustainability is framed and governed.

- How would you describe the organisation's sustainability ambitions?
- What sustainability goals or requirements are most relevant for procurement?
- How are these ambitions translated into procurement processes or requirements?
- How clear or stable are these priorities over time?

(Addressed governance structures, KPIs, codes of conduct and top-down vs bottom-up dynamics.)

(3) *Procurement decision-making and trade-offs*

Purpose: To surface experienced trade-offs and constraints.

- Can you describe situations where sustainability considerations influence procurement decisions?
- What kinds of trade-offs typically arise (e.g. cost, time, risk, performance)?
- How are such trade-offs handled in practice?
- Who has the authority to decide when trade-offs become critical?

(This theme identified cost–sustainability tensions across project, organisational and industry levels)

(4) *Capabilities, knowledge and professional roles*

Purpose: To explore competence requirements and role transformation.

- What skills or knowledge are needed to work with sustainability in procurement today?
- How well equipped do you think procurement professionals are in this respect?
- How has the procurement role changed in recent years?
- Where do you see capability gaps or bottlenecks?

(Addressed training, professional identity and tensions between technical, commercial, and sustainability logics)

(5) *Collaboration and internal dynamics*

Purpose: To understand cross-functional and intra-organisational coordination.

- How does procurement collaborate with sustainability, business units and other functions?
- What works well in these collaborations?
- Where do frictions or misunderstandings arise?
- How are disagreements or misalignments handled?

(This theme captured recurring tensions between procurement, sustainability, business units and staff functions)

(6) *Supplier relations and supply chain scope*

Purpose: To examine sustainability challenges beyond the focal firm.

- How do sustainability requirements affect supplier relationships?
- How far into the supply chain do sustainability considerations extend?
- What challenges arise when suppliers lack capability or capacity?
- How do market conditions influence what is feasible?

(Questions addressed supplier scarcity, first-tier responsibility, audits and customer-of-choice dynamics)

Closing reflection

- (1) What do you see as the most pressing sustainability challenge for procurement going forward?
- (2) Is there anything important we have not discussed?

Across all interviews, probing questions were used to clarify contradictions, explore consequences of decisions and obtain concrete examples. This approach enabled tensions to emerge empirically rather than being imposed *a priori*, supporting the study's abductive approach.

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