

Fostering social innovation in construction ecosystem: the role of public procurement in sustainable practices

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates how public procurement practices in Nigeria’s construction sector address worker welfare and social value creation. It aims to identify institutional barriers and recommend strategies for embedding social outcomes into procurement processes in higher education institutions (HEIs).

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative approach grounded in institutional theory, the study draws on interviews with 19 professionals involved in public tertiary institution construction projects. Reflexive thematic analysis is applied to explore how health and safety, ethical labour practices and welfare measures are implemented in practice in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Findings – The findings reveal significant gaps between formal procurement requirements and site-level implementation. While regulations mandate worker protections, compliance is often undermined by weak enforcement, low contractor commitment and cultural assumptions about casual labour. Institutional misalignments across the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars result in the limited integration of social value in procurement practice in HEIs.

Research limitations/implications – To enhance social value in public construction, procurement agencies should strengthen enforcement mechanisms, incorporate clear social criteria in tendering processes and build normative support for ethical labour standards. Institutional reform is needed to move beyond cost efficiency towards inclusive and responsible procurement that highlights responses from entrepreneurs.

Practical implications – To enhance social value in public construction, procurement agencies should strengthen enforcement mechanisms, incorporate clear social criteria in tendering processes and build normative support for ethical labour standards. Institutional reform is needed to move beyond cost efficiency towards inclusive and responsible procurement.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the literature by offering empirical insights from a developing country context, highlighting how institutional factors constrain the social function of procurement. It presents practical recommendations to embed social value in construction procurement and improve worker well-being through normative and cultural shifts.

Keywords Institutional theory, Nigeria, Public procurement, Social value, Worker welfare, HEIs, SDGs

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Social innovation offers new ways to tackle complex social problems. It involves introducing ideas, models, and practices that better meet unmet social needs than existing solutions (Murray *et al.*, 2010; Vola *et al.*, 2023). Unlike traditional innovation, which emphasises technology or economic growth, social innovation aims to strengthen social inclusion, fairness, and community well-being (Nicholls and Edmiston, 2018; Adams and Hess, 2010). In the construction sector, this means moving beyond profit-led goals to practices that promote labour rights, community benefit, and ethical engagement (Ruparathna and Hewage, 2015; Dobson *et al.*, 2020).

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Public procurement has increasingly been recognised as a strategic tool for institutionalising social innovation. Governments worldwide are leveraging procurement policies not only for efficiency but also to advance social and environmental goals (McCrudden, 2004; Arrowsmith, 2010). Examples include the UK's Social Value Act 2012 (Young, 2015) and the United States' Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation (Dobson *et al.*, 2020; Nicholls and Edmiston, 2018). By embedding social value considerations into procurement frameworks, public institutions can support improved working conditions, local employment, and community development (Brandenburg *et al.*, 2014). Yet, integration of social value into procurement remains uneven, especially in developing economies where institutional, regulatory, and socio-economic constraints are more pronounced (Turner, 2014; Vasin *et al.*, 2017). Weak enforcement, limited stakeholder engagement, and the marginalisation of vulnerable groups, including informal sector workers, continue to hinder socially responsive procurement practices (Girling, 2013; Silva-Flores and Murillo, 2022; Vilarinho *et al.*, 2018).

Nigeria exemplifies these challenges. As one of Africa's largest economies, with a rapidly expanding construction sector, the country relies heavily on public procurement for infrastructure delivery (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2020). However, procurement has historically prioritised cost-efficiency over social value, with limited consideration for workers' welfare. This is especially evident in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where informal labour is widespread (Jimoh, 2012; Okoye, 2016). Workers frequently face long hours, unsafe conditions, low wages, and minimal access to health protections, while procurement planning rarely addresses these issues (Ogunsemi and Aje, 2006; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2025). The Nigerian Public Procurement Act of 2007 aimed to reform inefficiencies and improve transparency, but scholars note that it has not adequately embedded sustainability or social criteria into contracting (Manu *et al.*, 2019). Critiques highlight its narrow focus on cost minimisation, weak institutional oversight, and failure to align with global sustainability standards such as the Sustainable Development Goals (Ogbonna, 2022; Gambo, 2024).

Universities, as part of the higher education institutions (HEIs), provide an important setting for examining these issues. In Nigeria, HEIs account for significant construction activity, much of it financed by the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), which manages billions of naira annually for campus infrastructure projects (Sulaiman *et al.*, 2025). Despite the scale of investment, little research has explored how procurement in HEIs addresses the social dimension of sustainability, either in Nigeria or in comparable developing economies (Dickson and Achanya, 2021). This gap is important because universities serve as centres of knowledge and social progress, yet their construction projects often reproduce the same cost-driven, labour-exploitative practices observed across the wider construction industry (Ezeabasili *et al.*, 2021).

Against this background, this study explores how public procurement can embed social innovation in Nigeria's construction industry, with a specific focus on HEIs projects. Grounded in institutional theory, it investigates the barriers, opportunities, and policy mechanisms that influence the integration of social factors into procurement through normative and cultural change. By doing so, it provides insights into how procurement in HEIs can move beyond treating labour as a production factor and instead generates social value that advances workers' welfare, and consequently community well-being, and sustainable development.

Literature review

Public procurement and its expanding role in Nigeria

Public procurement is no longer limited to purchasing goods and services as it is increasingly deployed as a tool to advance wider social and environmental goals (McCrudden, 2004). In the construction sector, procurement can promote social innovation by embedding values such as labour rights, equity, and community benefits into contractual arrangements

(Watermeyer, 2000). This shift reflects global efforts to deliver not only physical infrastructure but also inclusive and sustainable development (Watts, 2024). Progress is visible in developed contexts such as Europe and Australia, where procurement has been linked to sustainability outcomes (Marshall *et al.*, 2015; Varsei *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, many countries in the Global South continue to struggle with weak institutions, fragile regulatory frameworks, and entrenched inequalities, which limit procurement's contribution to social goals (Gupta and Wang, 2004; Brown and Knudsen, 2015).

Nigeria presents a critical but underexplored case. The construction sector contributes about 3.5% to national GDP and is heavily dependent on public investment (CBN, 2020). However, procurement remains narrowly focused on cost-efficiency, with limited attention to workers' welfare, community engagement, or social responsibility (Ogunsemi and Aje, 2006). The Public Procurement Act (PPA) (2007) and the establishment of the Bureau of Public Procurement (BPP) were intended to address corruption and inefficiency. Yet, scholars argue that the Act is overly cost-oriented, with weak enforcement and little emphasis on sustainability (Manu *et al.*, 2019). Construction workers, particularly those employed informally, face unsafe conditions, low pay, and lack of contracts or protections (Jimoh, 2012; Okoye, 2016). These outcomes reflect procurement systems that treat labour as a cost rather than as a source of social value. As Brandenburg *et al.* (2014) contend, when procurement aligns with social objectives, workers' welfare becomes a core deliverable, not a secondary by-product. In Nigeria, however, procurement continues to prioritise cost savings, undermining its potential as a driver of inclusive development (Ameyaw *et al.*, 2012; Aduwo *et al.*, 2020).

Social sustainability and labour as social value

Sustainability is typically conceptualised through three interdependent pillars: economic, environmental, and social (Sustainable Development Commission, 2016). The social pillar is particularly people-oriented, encompassing safety, inclusion, equity, and human well-being. Of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 12 align most closely with social objectives (Assefa and Frostell, 2007), underscoring the centrality of improving people's lives. Despite this, construction sustainability discourse has often privileged environmental performance over social concerns (Mangialardo *et al.*, 2019). As Elkington (2012) notes, social impacts are harder to quantify and therefore frequently overlooked. This neglect produces negative consequences, with unsafe labour conditions and inadequate remuneration persisting in many construction contexts (OSHA, 2016).

Recent scholarship urges a reframing of sustainability to place worker welfare and labour rights at its centre (Loosemore *et al.*, 2019; Kordi *et al.*, 2021; Hidayat *et al.*, 2020). Researchers have identified sector-specific indicators, such as health and safety, fair wages, skills development, and inclusivity, that make social sustainability more tangible for construction projects (Karji *et al.*, 2019; Xiahou *et al.*, 2018). These "social factors" translate broad ideals into measurable elements of social value that can be integrated into procurement. Unlike the traditional business perspective that regards labour as a production factor or cost, the social dimension of sustainability perspective sees labour as a contributor to long-term value creation for workers, communities, and society. This reframing is particularly relevant for public procurement, where projects financed by public funds should enhance both infrastructure and social outcomes (Murtagh and Brooks, 2019).

Social factors as sector-specific indicators of sustainability

While the social pillar broadly reflects human-centred outcomes, social factors in construction offer a more actionable approach by translating these ideals into sector-specific indicators. These factors are uniquely positioned to address areas that remain underdeveloped in conventional sustainability assessments such as labour conditions, workforce development, and community engagement (Elkington, 2012). Unlike the framing of the social pillar, social factors are grounded in practical metrics that can guide project delivery and policy decisions.

Their nature makes them more relevant in contexts where social value creation is required, such as public procurement. Moreover, the alignment of social factors with 14 out of the 17 SDGs demonstrates their relevance to global sustainability targets, reinforcing their utility beyond construction practice (Mangyvat, 2025). This alignment is further evidenced by a thematic mapping of social factors to the SDGs, as illustrated in Table 1. The mapping reveals notable intersections, for example, between SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 4 (quality education) with skills training initiatives that support community development and enhance human capital (Dobson *et al.*, 2020). These findings suggest that social factors offer a more robust and inclusive pathway to sustainable development than considering the social pillar in isolation. Therefore, they should be a key focus in both research and policy for sustainable construction.

As shown in Table 1, many of these social factors closely match the SDGs thus implying that improving worker welfare is not only important locally but also supports global goals (Dobson *et al.*, 2020). This paper therefore focuses on worker welfare as a form of social innovation. By making workers’ rights, safety, and dignity a central concern, public procurement in construction can create lasting social value.

Table 1. Relationships between social factors and SDG

SDG no.	Social factor	Literature
SDG 9	Engage more local people in employment	Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020)
SDG 12	Promote ethical procurement by curtailing child/forced labour	Andrecka (2017)
SDG 8 and 9	More opportunities for disadvantaged people and stability of employment	Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Hendiani and Bagherpour (2019), Murtagh and Brooks (2019)
SDG 1 and 4	Improve training/support for local workers skills development	Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Popovic <i>et al.</i> (2018), UNEP (2016)
SDG 8	Consistency in wages payment/earned overtime within statutory timelines	Popovic <i>et al.</i> (2018), Andrecka (2017)
SDG 2 and 3	Other benefits to workers: maternity rest/sick leave, holidays, bonus, bus service, health insurance, lunch, etc	Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Andrecka (2017), Hill and Bowen (1996), Karji <i>et al.</i> (2019)
SDG 5 and 10	Workforce culture that equitably reflects gender, religion, and other diversities in the local community	Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Hill and Bowen (1996)
SDG 17 and 9	Appoint the host community as a stakeholder Employ younger individuals	Mulholland <i>et al.</i> (2020), Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Woodcraft <i>et al.</i> (2011), Valdes-Vasquez and Klotz (2013)
SDG 17	Consider other needs of local community and support them	Hendiani and Bagherpour (2019), Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Xiahou <i>et al.</i> (2018)
SDG 8 and 9	Creating social value by buying from minority owned businesses	Gurmu <i>et al.</i> (2022), Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Loosemore (2016)
SDG 16	Meet legal requirements, social security, insurance, pension, etc	Hill and Bowen (1996)
SDG 3	Personal Protective Equipment (hard hat, high-viz vest, gloves, goggles, aprons, masks, boots etc.)	Gurmu <i>et al.</i> (2022), Popovic <i>et al.</i> (2018)
SDG 3	Provide first aid	Hill and Bowen (1996)
SDG 15	Reduce climate impacts	Rostamnezhad and Thaheem (2022), Gurmu <i>et al.</i> (2022), Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020)
SDG 13 and 6	Reduce pollution Better places to live	Shooshtarian <i>et al.</i> (2020), Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Dobson <i>et al.</i> (2020), Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017)
Source(s): Authors’ own work		

Social value and entrepreneurship

The capacity of the construction sector for social innovation is often shaped by entrepreneurial actions. These have been shown to respond to changing demands that contribute to innovation which support sustainability (Duong *et al.*, 2021). Also, social procurement has been highlighted to create and deliver social value by offering ethical labour models, welfare-support services, and community-focused solutions through entrepreneurial firms (Troje and Gluch, 2020). According to Uyarra *et al.* (2020), an entrepreneur occupies a strategic position that enables him conform to a changing policy situation that gives priority to the needs of society. This can lead to the development of solutions that are innovative enough to meet the ever-changing expectations of society (Uyarra *et al.*, 2020). Hence, this calls for the need to recognise the importance of entrepreneurs as potential partners in advancing social outcomes in public-sector construction projects and not only as suppliers.

Public procurement in higher education institutions (HEIs)

Universities and other HEIs offer a unique setting for examining how procurement intersects with the pillars of sustainability. Across the globe, HEIs are major clients of construction projects, investing in buildings, student housing, and research facilities. In countries such as the UK, procurement reforms have required universities to demonstrate social value in public contracts, including commitments to local employment, apprenticeships, and community engagement (Young, 2015; Murtagh and Brooks, 2019). Similar initiatives are evident in parts of Europe and Australia, where universities have adopted sustainability frameworks that integrate environmental and social objectives in campus projects (Marshall *et al.*, 2015; Varsei *et al.*, 2014).

In Nigeria, HEIs face significant infrastructure deficits, and agencies such as the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) provide critical financing for campus development (Anachuna *et al.*, 2024). This makes HEIs significant recipients of government construction investments. Between 2011 and 2021, the TETFund facilitated the implementation of over 152,838 infrastructure-related projects. These include lecture theatres, laboratories, hostels, and administrative buildings across HEIs in Nigeria (Voice of Nigeria, 2021).

Procurement in the construction sector not only shapes the quality of physical learning environments but also directly affects site workers' welfare, local employment opportunities, and community engagement around campuses (Dobson *et al.*, 2020). However, procurement in this sector has been characterised by inefficiencies, delays, and limited attention to labour rights or community benefits (Okeke and Nnaemeka-Okeke, 2021). This creates a paradox where universities, as centres of knowledge and social progress, often reproduce the same cost-driven, labour-exploitative procurement practices found in the wider construction industry. Yet, because of their scale, visibility, and public funding, HEIs offer a unique opportunity to embed social innovation into procurement and to link construction projects with the broader social mission of education. Despite this potential, research on procurement in Nigerian HEIs remains scarce, particularly concerning the social aspects of sustainability. This gap highlights the importance of examining how HEI procurement can be leveraged to improve workers' welfare and generate social value.

By recognising HEIs as agencies that can advance the SDGs through procurement, and not just as centres of learning, HEIs can promote the attainment of sustainability. For instance in terms of decent work (SDG 8), support safety and inclusion (SDG 11), and ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12). These indicate how procurement decisions can set social criteria for the entrepreneurial contractors and translate commitments to sustainability into social value within the construction ecosystem (Dobson *et al.*, 2020; Marshall *et al.*, 2015).

Theoretical perspective

The application of theory strengthens research by clarifying purpose and situating findings within wider debates (Koskela, 2008; Collins and Stockton, 2018). Yet, studies on sustainable

procurement often lack theoretical grounding, making them descriptive rather than explanatory (Walker *et al.*, 2012; Hoejmose and Adrien-Kirby, 2012). This study applies Institutional Theory to examine how procurement practices in Nigerian HEIs shape, and are shaped by, rules, norms, and cultural expectations.

Institutional Theory is particularly suitable because it emphasises the regulative, normative, and cultural cognitive pillars that structure organisational behaviour (Scott, 2013). These align closely with procurement processes where: the regulative pillar reflects laws and formal rules, such as the PPA (2007); the normative pillar reflects professional ethics and values guiding procurement officers; and the cultural pillar reflects ingrained practices and informal norms that influence procurement behaviour (Thai, 2001; Abdullahi *et al.*, 2019; Dickson and Achanya, 2021). Unlike other competing theories like stakeholder theory or resource-based perspectives, which prioritise economic efficiency (Boyd and Schweber, 2012; Liang *et al.*, 2017), Institutional Theory allows a focus on social structures and the institutional gaps that constrain the integration of social factors into procurement. This makes it a useful lens for exploring how Nigerian HEIs can transform procurement into a vehicle for social innovation (Scott, 2013).

Method

This study adopted a qualitative research design guided by an inductive approach to explore how public procurement contributes to fostering social innovation in Nigeria's construction ecosystem. The approach was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the research and the limited existing empirical literature in this context. Rather than testing pre-existing theories, the study developed patterns and themes from participants lived experiences and perspectives (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2012; Creswell, 2014). The research follows an interpretive paradigm rooted in institutional theory, which seeks to understand how actors interpret and navigate institutional norms in public procurement settings (Doherty *et al.*, 2014). By employing an inductive approach, the study focused on uncovering how construction professionals experienced and interpreted the integration of social value within procurement systems, thereby producing context-sensitive insights (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Ethical approval for this research has been granted by the Faculty of Science and Engineering Research Ethics committee of the institution of the lead author.

Case selection

A single-case study strategy was used to investigate procurement practices within a federal university in North-Central Nigeria based on typicality (Yin, 2009). It reflects common features of institutions funded by the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), which supports construction in public universities (Anachuna *et al.*, 2024). Although TETFund has helped reduce infrastructure gaps, projects often face delays and lack focus on social outcomes (Okeke and Nnaemeka-Okeke, 2021). This makes it a useful setting to explore how social value, such as labour rights and community benefits, can be included in procurement.

The case was chosen purposively, not randomly, to ensure it matched the study's aims (Flick, 2007; Gerring, 2007). Access was gained through the researchers' network and informal discussions with senior staff. This allowed access to documents and staff involved in construction projects. The institution met both practical and research-based criteria (Swanborn, 2010). It had many TETFund projects, a clear interest in sustainable construction, active procurement processes, and available construction professionals. It also agreed to take part and provide the needed data. This made the case both relevant and informative for studying how public procurement can support social innovation in Nigeria's construction sector.

Participant selection and data collection

The study employed purposive sampling to identify key informants from the case institution with extensive professional experience in procurement, construction supervision, and project delivery (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Nineteen participants were selected across two phases based on their roles, expertise, and experience (ranging from 6 to over 30 years). The interviews were conducted in two phases to deepen thematic insights and allow for iterative refinement of the research focus. Phase One engaged six high-level decision-makers involved in procurement strategy and policy interpretation, while Phase Two consisted of thirteen participants involved in project supervision and delivery. Their depth of knowledge provided robust and nuanced accounts of institutional procedures, community engagement efforts, and challenges faced in embedding social value (Ruslin *et al.*, 2022; Gambo, 2024).

Participants represented the core professional groups central to public construction projects. These include architects, engineers, builders, and quantity surveyors, thereby capturing a diversity of disciplinary perspectives. While the sample is not statistically representative of all construction professionals in Nigeria, it reflects the professional diversity, and roles typically present in public tertiary construction projects. As such, the findings provide analytical generalisability to similar institutional and project contexts within Nigeria's public sector. Participants were senior construction professionals, including directors, deputy directors, and departmental heads, working in physical facilities, procurement units, and project implementation teams. Their practical experience and strategic roles justified their selection as they offered firsthand insights into how procurement practices shape social outcomes in construction (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Table 2 provides attributes and identifiers of interviewed participants.

Data was collected through in-person, semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both consistency and flexibility across conversations. This method facilitated open-ended dialogue, enabling participants to describe their experiences and perspectives in depth while allowing the researcher to develop themes (Kvale, 2008). Each interview, lasting 50–70 min, took place in the participants' offices, was audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed. Transcripts were returned for participant validation to ensure credibility and uphold ethical standards.

Reflexivity and researcher positionality

In alignment with best practices in qualitative research (Trainor and Bundon, 2021; Hill and Dao, 2020), the researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout the study. The primary investigator has a professional background in construction management with expertise in procurement, contract documentation, and project delivery. While this background informed the development of relevant questions and enhanced contextual sensitivity, the researcher remained aware of potential biases and actively reflected on how their assumptions and values could influence data interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This conscious effort ensured that personal perspectives enhanced rather than biased the exploration of public procurement as a driver of social value in Nigeria's tertiary construction sector. Reflexivity was therefore not a one-time activity but an ongoing process that shaped interactions with participants, the development and interpretation of themes, and the presentation of findings. This approach strengthened the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research.

Data analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This approach was chosen for its flexibility and its emphasis on researcher subjectivity and reflexivity, which are essential in exploring complex social phenomena (Braun and Clarke, 2022). RTA is well-suited for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across participants' narratives (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001). Interview

Table 2. Attributes and identifiers of interviewed participants

Participants	Role in institution	Unit of operation	Experience (Years)	Professional affiliation
P01	Director	Physical Facilities	21 and above	Nigerian Institute of Architects
P02	Senior Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	21 and above	Nigerian Institute of Estate Surveyors and Valuers
P03	Senior Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	11–15	Nigerian Institute of Architects
P04	Director	Procurement Unit	11–15	Institute of Supply Chain and Procurement
P05	Deputy Director	Procurement Unit	6–10	Nigerian Institute of Builders
P06	Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	21 and above	Nigerian Institute of Estate Surveyors and Valuers
P07	Senior Professional	Physical Facilities	16–20	Nigerian Society of Engineers
P08	Intermediate Professional	Teaching Hospital Campus	6–10	Nigerian Institute of Quantity Surveyors
P09	Deputy Director	Teaching Hospital Campus	16–20	Nigerian Institute of Builders
P10	Senior Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	21 and above	Nigerian Institute of Builders
P11	Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	11–15	Nigerian Institute of Builders
P12	Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	11–15	Nigerian Institute of Builders
P13	Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	16–20	Nigerian Institute of Builders
P14	Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	21 and above	Nigerian Institute of Quantity Surveyors
P15	Head of Department	Physical Facilities	21 and above	Nigerian Society of Engineers
P16	Senior Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	21 and above	Nigerian Institute of Builders
P17	Director	College of Education campus	21 and above	Nigerian Institute of Architects
P18	Deputy Director	Physical Facilities	6–10	Nigerian Institute of Quantity Surveyors
P19	Senior Professional	Physical Facilities	6–10	Nigerian Institute of Architects

Source(s): Authors' own work

transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 to assist with data management, coding, and theme development. NVivo supported a transparent and systematic process by helping to organise large volumes of qualitative data, identify patterns, and link codes to theoretical constructs (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). It was especially helpful in streamlining Phases 2 and 5 of the reflexive thematic analysis' systematic coding and theme refinement (Silver and Lewins, 2014).

The coding of interview transcripts was undertaken by the first author, who was responsible for the analytic process. To minimise bias associated with single-coder analysis, multiple rounds of familiarisation with the data, iterative refinement of codes, and systematic comparison of themes with the raw transcripts were conducted. An audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency, and coding decisions were cross-checked with existing literature to strengthen consistency. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions with academic colleagues provided external feedback on generating themes, which enhanced the credibility of the findings. The coding process supports the reflexive and interpretative analysis. Given the reflexive nature of the analysis, interrater reliability was not calculated. This is in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) stance that reliability measures are less applicable in reflexive approaches, where researcher subjectivity is acknowledged as a resource rather than a threat.

The analysis therefore followed the six structured phases of data familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes were developed inductively from participants' accounts rather than being pre-determined (Braun and Clarke, 2022). To enhance the credibility of findings, multiple sources of information were referenced, including the Public Procurement Act (2007), relevant literature, and interview data. Member checking was conducted through participant transcript reviews, and a transparent audit trail was maintained throughout the process using NVivo. Researcher reflexivity was actively practised to acknowledge and manage potential bias and positionality. This qualitative, inductive, and interpretive methodology enabled an in-depth exploration of how public procurement intersects with efforts to foster social innovation in the Nigerian construction ecosystem. The perspectives of experienced professionals provided rich empirical insights for understanding and improving socially responsible procurement practices.

Findings

This section presents the qualitative findings from interviews with 19 built environment professionals. The analysis, guided by Institutional Theory, shows how formal rules (regulative pillar), professional norms (normative pillar), and informal practices (cultural-cognitive pillar) shape the integration of social considerations in procurement. Coding in NVivo generated multiple categories, which were grouped into sub-themes and then three overarching themes, namely Health and Safety Measures, Ethical Labour Practices, and Socially Responsible Practices. Together, these reflect systemic gaps in embedding worker welfare into public procurement in Nigeria's higher education construction sector. Figure 1 is a

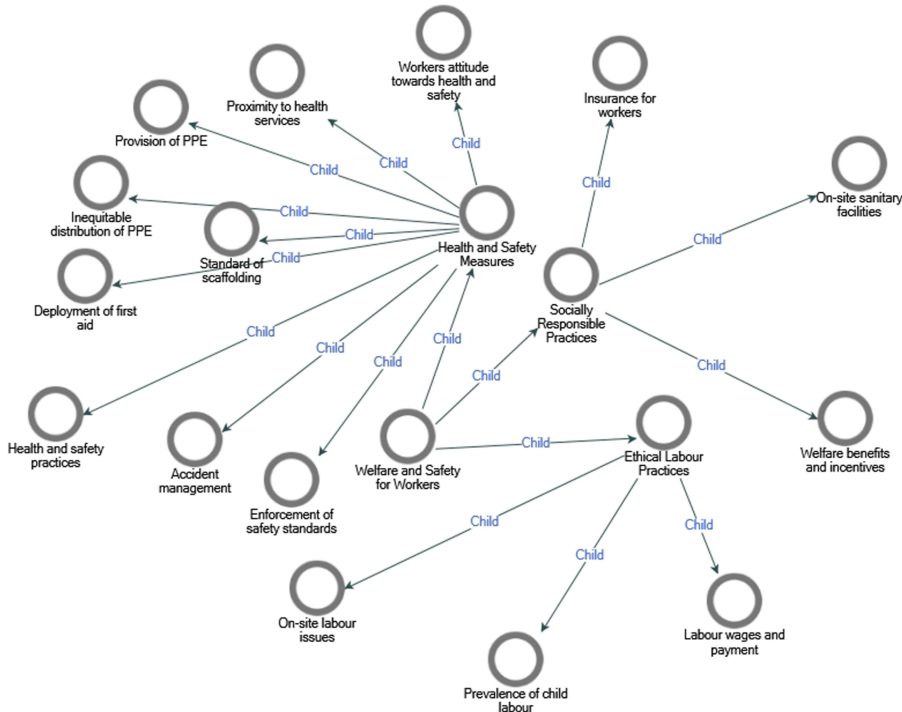


Figure 1. Example of the thematic mapping. Source: Authors' own work

JEPP

depiction of the thematic map illustrating how individual codes were clustered into sub-themes and synthesised into overarching themes. It presents the thematic map generated from transcript coded data.

The depictions in [Figure 1](#) shows how individual codes were clustered into sub-themes such as *Behavioural Aspects of Safety Culture*, *Labour Rights and Economic Welfare*, and *Social Protection and Welfare*, which were then synthesised into three overarching themes: *Health and Safety Measures*, *Ethical Labour Practices*, and *Socially Responsible Practices*. This visual structure demonstrates the systematic process by which workers’ concerns were organised and highlights the interconnections between safety, fairness, and welfare in public procurement. [Table 3](#) summarises the codes, number of responses, and their corresponding sub-themes and the themes generated.

From [Table 3](#), the issues raised in the interviews regarding worker health, safety, equity, and on-site conditions are highlighted. The thematic findings are supported and exemplified by quotes from the interviewed participants (referencing their attributes and identifiers in [Table 2](#)) as presented in the next subsections.

Theme 1: health and safety measures

This theme covers both structural and behavioural practices designed to prevent workplace injuries and ensure safe environments. It includes enforcement of safety standards, provision

Table 3. Summary of thematic analysis

S/N	Codes	Number of coded responses	Generated themes	
			Sub-themes (categorised)	Theme (naming)
1	Accident management	13	Health and Safety Measures	Health and safety measures
2	Deployment of first aid	13	Health and Safety Measures	
3	Workers attitude towards Health and Safety	16	Behavioural Aspects of Safety Culture	
4	Enforcement of safety standards	29	Health and Safety Measures	
5	Inequitable distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	12	Occupational Health Equity	Ethical labour practices
6	Proximity to health services	8	Access to Healthcare	
7	Standard of scaffolding	2	Site Safety Infrastructure	
8	Health and safety practices	90	Health and Safety Measures	
9	Provision of PPE	30	Health and Safety Measures	Socially responsible practices
10	Labour wages and payment	19	Labour Rights and Economic Welfare	
11	On-site labour issues	40	Working Conditions and Site Management	
12	Prevalence of child labour	5	Ethics in Labour Practices	
13	Insurance for workers	6	Social Protection and Welfare	Socially responsible practices
14	Welfare benefits and incentives	38	Social Protection and Welfare	
15	On-site sanitary facilities	3	Working Conditions on sites	

Source(s): Authors’ own work

of PPE, availability of first aid, scaffolding quality, and access to health services. The most frequently cited codes include health and safety practices (90), provision of PPE (30), and enforcement of safety standards (29), which point to persistent gaps between policy and practice.

A senior deputy director responsible for physical facilities, with over a decade of professional experience and a registered member of the Nigerian Institute of Architects, highlighted the persistent neglect of safety standards on construction sites:

The contractor would usually provide the first aid box. But when it comes to the safety equipment like the safety boots, the safety helmets, and the reflective jackets . . . the workers also want to maximise profit, they sell PPEs given to them and work without the safety equipment. (Participant 03)

This concern was further reinforced by another participant, who drew attention to the disregard for basic site safety practices and the complicity of supervisors under project delivery pressures:

Sometimes you see them working on scaffolding without harnesses. The supervisors just look away because they are under pressure to deliver the project cheaply and quickly. (Participant 11)

These findings highlight both contractor negligence and worker complacency, revealing how cost pressure undermines safety culture. Prior studies confirm that weak enforcement of health and safety standards is a chronic issue in Nigeria's construction sector (Okoye, 2016; Ogunsemi and Aje, 2006). From an institutional perspective, this reflects a decoupling between the normative pillar (professional expectations of safety) and the cultural pillar (informal practices that tolerate shortcuts), which ultimately subvert sustainable procurement goals (Scott, 2008). Figure 2 shows the distribution of coded responses highlighting the most frequent worker welfare concerns raised in the interviews.

The findings from Figure 2 shows that *health and safety practices* (90 references) overwhelmingly dominated participants' concerns, followed by *provision of PPE* (30) and *enforcement of safety standards* (29). Less frequently mentioned, but still significant, were issues such as *workers' attitudes to safety* (16), *deployment of first aid* (13), and *accident management* (13). Together, these patterns reveal persistent gaps between formal safety policies and their actual implementation on sites. This supports participants' accounts of neglected safety measures and cost-driven shortcuts, confirming that institutional pressures undermine effective health and safety management.

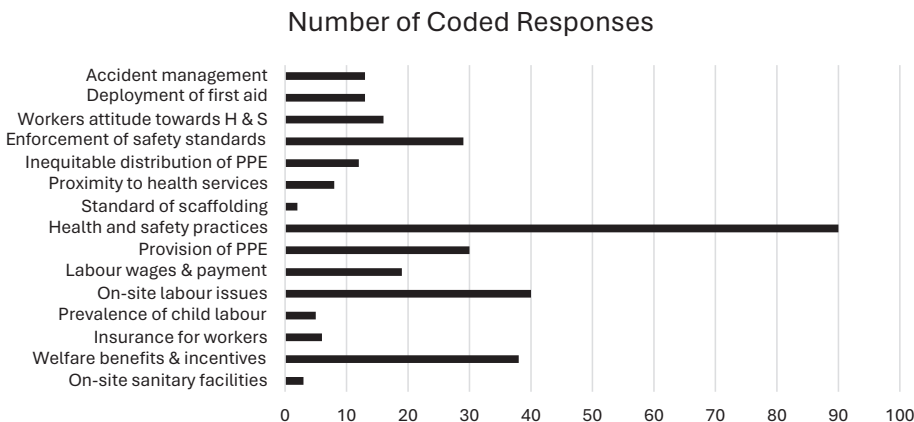


Figure 2. Frequency of coded responses on worker welfare. Source: Authors' own work

Theme 2: ethical labour practices

This theme relates to fairness, justice, and decency in employment. Issues included delayed or unpaid wages, exploitative casualisation, lack of job security, and weak enforcement of labour rights. [Table 3](#) shows that the prominent codes generated were on-site labour issues (40) and labour wages and payment (19).

Another senior deputy director overseeing physical facilities, with over two decades of professional experience and a registered member of the Nigerian Institute of Estate Surveyors and Valuers, underscored how contractors exploit gaps in monitoring:

The workers' interest can best be protected by the university engaging the contractor. But as I said, are we ready to pay the extra? . . . one junk contractor was telling me how he was going to register his company with PENCOM (Pension Commission), but I know it's going to cost him some money. (Participant 02)

Such gaps in protection of workers interest were further emphasised by another senior professional, who highlighted the absence of pension provisions and the prevalence of irregular or delayed payments to workers:

There is nothing like pension or long-term benefits. Most are paid daily, and sometimes they are not paid at all if the project funding delays. (Participant 14)

These accounts show how the regulative pillar (laws such as pension registration) exists in principle but is often bypassed in practice. Contractors prioritise cost-cutting, while clients lack incentives or capacity to enforce compliance. This dynamic reflects what [Khanna and Palepu \(2010\)](#) call an *institutional void*, where formal structures are not supported by enforcement. The result is systemic vulnerability for site workers, echoing findings by [Loosemore et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Hidayat et al. \(2020\)](#) that procurement processes often reproduce exploitative labour conditions when cost efficiency dominates decision-making.

Theme 3: socially responsible practices

This theme captures welfare measures beyond immediate occupational safety, such as insurance, welfare benefits, and on-site amenities. Codes included welfare benefits and incentives (38) and insurance for workers (6), pointing to limited access to social protection.

The director overseeing physical facilities in the entire institution, with more than two decades of professional experience and a registered member of the Nigerian Institute of Architects, expressed frustration that insurance requirements were rarely enforced:

Even the issue of insurance for the workers that the contractor is compelled by law to carry out . . . they hardly ever do that. It is a tug of war for them to submit the policy document that all their workers on site have been insured against accidents. (Participant 01)

This concern was complemented by the views of a senior deputy director, also a member of the Nigerian Institute of Architects with over a decade of experience, who drew attention to the lack of welfare mechanisms for casual workers:

As for casual workers, there is nothing like sick leave, there is nothing like pension, that is the naked truth because their belief is that because of the nature of our projects. (Participant 03)

To address these gaps, the same participant suggested remedies such as earmarking a share of contract value specifically for worker welfare:

Maybe a 1% of the contract value should be given to those that are working, and it should be applied and properly supervised by the client. (Participant 03)

These findings reveal systemic gaps in the regulative pillar (laws stipulating insurance and welfare), which are weakened by poor oversight. They also illustrate failures in the normative pillar, where professional practice neglects basic welfare standards, and in the cultural pillar,

where casualisation is normalised. Similar patterns have been reported in developing country construction sectors, where social protection is rarely prioritised (Elkington, 2012). Figure 3 relays the institutional gaps in procurement practices, showing how weaknesses align with the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars of Institutional Theory.

Figure 3 illustrates how the findings map onto the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars of Institutional Theory. While regulative provisions such as insurance and pension requirements exist in procurement law, weak enforcement undermines their effectiveness. Normative expectations, such as professional safety standards, are often disregarded under cost pressures, while cultural practices such as casualisation and tolerance of unsafe behaviours normalise non-compliance. This alignment clarifies how institutional gaps contribute to the systemic neglect of worker welfare in construction procurement as it relates to the higher educational institution studied.

Synthesis of findings

The findings across all three themes point to a systemic neglect of workers' welfare in Nigerian higher education construction projects. Although procurement frameworks formally stipulate compliance with safety, insurance, and pension requirements, weak institutional enforcement and entrenched cultural practices create significant gaps (see Figure 3). Consequently, workers are conceptualised in procurement practices primarily as a cost variable rather than as contributors to social value. These findings underscore the need for procurement reform that embeds social sustainability into contracting processes, echoing global evidence that labour rights and welfare are central to achieving sustainable construction (Loosemore *et al.*, 2019; Karji *et al.*, 2019; Xiahou *et al.*, 2018). Figure 4 shows a summation of the relative weight of each the three themes (expressed as percentages of the whole) across the coded responses presented in Table 3.

As illustrated in Figure 4, Health and Safety Measures accounted for almost two-thirds of all references, making it the dominant concern among participants. Ethical Labour Practices represented just under one-fifth, while Socially Responsible Practices takes the smallest share. This distribution highlights the centrality of safety in the lived experiences of construction workers, while simultaneously revealing how issues of fair labour practices and welfare provision, though persistent, remain less visible and less frequently addressed.

Discussion

This study explores how social factors are integrated into public procurement processes in Nigeria's construction sector, with a focus on worker well-being. Drawing on institutional theory, the findings reveal how formal regulations (regulative pillars), professional norms (normative pillars), and shared beliefs (cultural-cognitive pillars) interact to shape, constrain, or undermine socially responsive procurement practices.

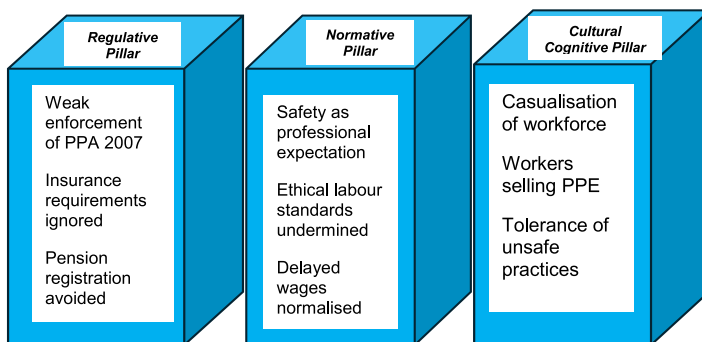


Figure 3. Institutional gaps in procurement across three pillars. Source: Authors' own work

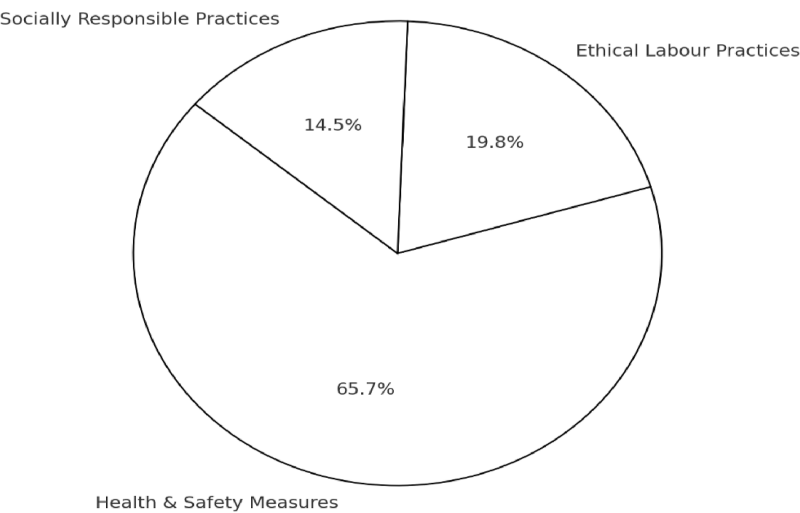


Figure 4. Pie chart of theme proportions. Source: Authors’ own work

Institutional gaps in worker protection

The most salient theme, *Health and Safety Measures*, exposes a persistent gap between procurement law and on-site practice. While Nigeria’s Public Procurement Act (PPA, 2007) mandates safe working environments, participants reported widespread non-compliance and weak enforcement mechanisms. High-frequency codes, such as “health and safety practices” (90) and “provision of PPE” (30), indicate that safety is perceived as a procedural requirement rather than a deeply embedded workplace culture. For example, the misuse or resale of personal protective equipment (PPE) by site workers illustrates a decoupling between normative expectations and site-level behaviour. Contractors’ reluctance to enforce safety protocols and workers’ willingness to compromise safety for short-term gains reflect what Scott (2008) describes as a conflict between normative and cultural-cognitive logics. Safety obligations are codified but not internalised. This echoes findings in related research on implementation failures in developing contexts (Okeke and Nnaemeka-Okeke, 2021). The mismatch points to a fragile institutional environment, where formal structures are inadequately reinforced by normative alignment or cultural buy-in.

Ethical labour practices and the cost-efficiency trade-off

The second theme, *Ethical Labour Practices*, sheds light on employment insecurity, wage delays, and exploitative site conditions. These issues arise, not from a lack of formal regulation such as pension registration and fair wages, but from limited enforcement and cost-driven contractor selection. Participants highlight that many contractors ignore legal obligations, due to associated financial burdens, while clients often prioritise lowest-cost bids. This reflects an institutional void (Khanna and Palepu, 2010), where the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms renders formal regulations ineffective. Contractors bypass pension registration and wage compliance with few consequences, illustrating a regulatory environment skewed towards price over social value. These findings mirror broader critiques that Nigeria’s procurement system emphasises cost-efficiency at the expense of labour rights (Mbah-Amanze, 2024; Mangvwat et al., 2023). The situation is exacerbated for casual and informal workers, who dominate the sector but remain unprotected by existing safeguards (Jimoh, 2012; Okoye, 2016). These systemic failings limit public procurement’s potential to contribute to decent work (SDG 8) and socially inclusive growth.

Socially responsible practices and institutional decoupling

The final theme, *Socially Responsible Practices*, reveals that welfare benefits and insurance provisions remain symbolic rather than functional. Although procurement contracts may include clauses for worker insurance and welfare incentives, participants confirm that implementation is rare and often unmonitored. This evidences another form of *institutional decoupling* (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), where formal rules exist on paper but are not operationalised in practice. Participants recount how contractors frequently ignore the requirement to provide insurance or adequate site amenities, and clients lack the will or mechanisms to enforce compliance. The absence of basic welfare provisions from sites, such as sanitary facilities, health access, and insurance, reinforces systemic neglect. Cultural-cognitive assumptions that casual workers are “temporary” and thus not entitled to benefits further entrench this neglect. One participant’s recommendation, to allocate 1% of the contract value to a supervised welfare fund, illustrates a practical pathway for embedding social value into procurement policy. It also highlights a need for institutional innovation that goes beyond legal compliance to embed equity and dignity in workplace norms.

Toward a more socially responsive procurement model

These findings affirm international and regional research that public procurement can be a strategic tool for social transformation when embedded with clear social value criteria (McCrudden, 2004; Watts, 2024). In Nigeria’s case, this potential is undermined by fragmented oversight, weak enforcement, and entrenched logics of cost minimisation. To unlock the full potential of procurement, institutional arrangements need to be recalibrated. This begins with strengthening the regulative pillar by reinforcing enforcement mechanisms through independent monitoring, setting clear penalties for non-compliance, and offering incentives to contractors who act responsibly. At the same time, normative change should be promoted by introducing training and awareness campaigns within client organisations, with a focus on labour rights, occupational safety, and the importance of creating social value. In addition, there must be a shift in cultural and cognitive assumptions by recognising all construction workers, whether casual or permanent, as essential contributors to sustainable development. Public institutions must move away from accepting poor site conditions as the norm and instead lead the way in promoting inclusive and fair practices. Agencies like the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) can play a catalytic role by mandating social value indicators in contractor assessments and ensuring transparent tracking of welfare obligations. Aligning procurement practices with Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 8 (Decent Work) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), offers a strategic pathway for institutional reform.

Implications for construction entrepreneurs

Reforms in social procurement can potentially create opportunities for social enterprises and other organisations within the construction ecosystem. These opportunities often centre on services that enhance worker welfare, such as skills development, welfare provision, labour-standards monitoring, and social-value reporting (Loosemore, 2016). Hence, entrepreneurs are positioned to respond to these shifts and frequently drive social innovation by developing solutions that align with policy expectations (Uyarra *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, when public clients, including HEIs, embed social value criteria into tendering processes, there is a tendency to stimulate demand for such services and support more responsible labour practices and community engagements.

Conclusion

This study set out with the aim to explore how public procurement can be used to embed social innovation in Nigeria’s construction industry, specifically focusing on improving the welfare

of site workers. It demonstrates that integrating social factors into public procurement in Nigeria's construction sector remains largely symbolic. This is hindered by weak enforcement, limited awareness, and entrenched cost-driven priorities thus limiting its potential for social innovation in Higher Educational Institutional projects. While regulations exist to support workers' welfare, they are often poorly implemented or entirely overlooked, especially in relation to health and safety, fair labour practices, and basic welfare provisions. By applying institutional theory, the research highlights a misalignment between the regulative (rules), normative (professional norms), and cultural-cognitive (shared beliefs) pillars underpinning procurement practices. Contractors frequently evade social obligations with minimal consequences, and public clients rarely prioritise or monitor compliance. These findings suggest that meaningful progress requires not only stronger enforcement mechanisms, but also normative and cultural shifts across public institutions and the wider construction ecosystem. Public agencies like the HEIs should lead by including clear social goals in their procurement processes and rewarding contractors who follow ethical practices. Independent monitoring can also help to ensure compliance by entrepreneurs in implementing reforms.

This study focuses on qualitative data from a public tertiary institution despite Nigeria's growing economy and a large construction sector. Its scope and small sample size indicates that the findings may not apply to all regions or project types across the country. Future studies should therefore include more participants across different locations and use both qualitative and quantitative data in a mixed methods research approach. As such, the future research could go further to test how stronger enforcement or social value policies impact on outcomes. Hence, a useful next step would be to develop and pilot a practical framework that shows how public procurement can better support worker welfare and community wellbeing. This should show how procurement can innovatively improve worker welfare and community well-being as part of a broader strategy for sustainable construction in line with the UN SDGs.

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