

Developing together: the Finnish way of promoting sustainable public procurement

Sustainable
public
procurement

Annukka Berg, Katriina Alhola, Juha Peltomaa and Satu Tietari
Finnish Environment Institute, Helsinki, Finland

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Abstract

Purpose – Public procurement is a major driving force that can be used to advance societal goals such as sustainability. The lack of strategic management and top-level commitment have been found to be major hindrances to the promotion of sustainable public procurement (SPP). This study aims to examine the functioning of a successful Finnish SPP development programme, the KEINO Academy (2019–2020), that tackled these challenges in a holistic way.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is mainly based on qualitative analysis of interviews with 24 municipal representatives.

Findings – The KEINO Academy advanced SPP management through the following functions: legitimising SPP development work, structuring SPP development work, offering expert support and facilitating peer support. The functions were mainly able to meet the key challenges experienced by the participating municipalities. However, some challenges cannot be directly solved by an intermediary such as the KEINO Academy. These challenges include, for example, a lack of resources.

Social implications – On the basis of the study, SPP development programmes should: build a holistic working model; respect the versatility of the participating organisations; involve all the key people in the organisations, including the directors; and sustain change.

Originality/value – The main theoretical contribution is the combination of two streams of literature, those of SPP management and intermediary functions. Further, the article makes an empirical contribution by studying the KEINO Academy as a pioneering SPP development case.

Keywords Sustainable public procurement (SPP), Public procurement, Sustainability, Intermediary organisations, Strategic management, Legitimacy, Expert support, Peer support, Finland, Procurement, Environmental sustainability and governance, Strategic procurement

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The possibilities of public procurement promoting sustainable development have been widely recognised (United Nations, 2015: target 12.7). Representing around 14% of the

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European Union (EU) gross domestic product (GDP), public procurement is a major driving force that can be used in a strategic manner, not only to obtain better value for money (European Commission, 2017) but also to address sustainability concerns and to contribute to a more innovative and competitive economy (European Commission, 2015; European Commission, 2020; United Nations, 2015).

Sustainable public procurement (SPP) has been defined as a process by which public authorities seek to achieve the appropriate balance between the economic, social and environmental aspects when procuring goods, services and works. SPP is closely related to green public procurement, which refers to the public purchase of goods, services and works with a reduced environmental impact throughout their life cycle when compared with goods, services and works with the same primary function which would otherwise be procured (European Commission, 2021). Further, it is related to socially responsible public procurement, which pays attention to achieving positive social outcomes from public contracts (Tepper *et al.*, 2020). In our paper, we consider SPP in its broad context, that is to say, we include aspects of environmental, social and economic responsibility.

In Finland, the total volume of public procurement amounts to €47bn annually. Of this amount, the share of public procurement over the national and EU threshold values is €31bn (Merisalo *et al.*, 2021). Due to the huge national volume, public procurement has been seen as an important means for accelerating various sustainability objectives. Since the mid-2000s, there has been an increase in training, advice and research in the field of SPP in Finland (Nissinen *et al.*, 2017; Alhola, 2012). The first comprehensive environmental guide for public procurement was published in 2004 (Nissinen, 2004) and distributed widely to Finnish public procurement organisations. In general, Finnish public procurement has become greener: a major number of public organisations have set some kind of sustainability goals for their procurement, and there has been an increase in using sustainability criteria in calls for tenders in recent years (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017; KEINO Competence Centre, 2018, 2020a; Nissinen *et al.*, 2009).

While there has been clear progress towards SPP in Finland, the potential for public procurement to promote sustainability objectives has not been fully exploited (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017). The lack of strategic management and top-level commitment to SPP in public organisations, traditional organisational procurement cultures, using the lowest price as the dominant award criterion, short-term budgetary planning and a lack of market dialogue have been considered as major hindrances for more sustainable procurement among Finnish municipalities (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017). Similar barriers have also been widely identified in the international SPP literature (Brammer and Walker, 2011; Grandia and Kruyen, 2020; Kristensen *et al.*, 2021; Sönnichsen and Clement, 2020; Testa *et al.*, 2016). For example, Liu *et al.* (2021) suggested that local governments should strengthen both the management of and organisational learning related to SPP, formulating stricter local SPP policies or assigning this issue as an important task to the top managers of the public sector. There have been some national initiatives to resolve these challenges of public procurement, for example, those in Sweden and the Netherlands. These initiatives often operate as intermediaries, translating and transferring skills and knowledge (Frandsen and Johansen, 2015). In parallel to the aforementioned initiatives, the new Competence Centre for Sustainable and Innovative Public Procurement (KEINO) was launched in Finland in 2018 (Finnish Government, 2018). The pre-set key mission for the KEINO Competence Centre was the promotion of SPP and innovative public procurement. KEINO operates as a network-based intermediary (Howells, 2006) that combines the expertise of several organisations,

including expert organisations, research organisations and the Association of Finnish Municipalities. The funding of KEINO is granted by the Ministry of Employment and Economy.

The approach that KEINO chose for promoting SPP can be considered novel in many ways. It includes the traditional informative elements, such as advisory services, guidance and setting criteria for SPP. At the same time, however, the focus of KEINO has been on developing new services, procedures and tools that would promote the strategic leadership and management of SPP in public organisations and accelerate cooperation among procurers and market players. Currently, the palette of services ranges from the coordination of buyer groups to a regional network of change agents ([KEINO Competence Centre, 2021](#)).

The concept and operations of the KEINO Competence Centre were evaluated in 2020 ([Ruokonen et al., 2021](#)). One of the services provided by KEINO is the KEINO Academy, which was named as one of the most successful services of KEINO in the evaluation ([Ruokonen et al., 2021](#)). The KEINO Academy is a special development programme that brings together public procurement leaders and experts to learn and develop. It focuses on developing the participating organisations' strategic management and top-level commitment to SPP and innovative public procurement. The methods used comprise traditional lectures but also organisation-specific development tasks, expert spurring and working with small peer groups

In this article, we seek to find out in more detail how the first KEINO Academy functioned, how it gained results within a relatively short period of time and what were its pitfalls. We focus on the functions of the KEINO Academy that have had catalytic power for change in the participating organisations. In addition, we contrast the operation mode of the KEINO Academy to more traditional means of promoting SPP. In this way, we also seek to fill the research gap related to the SPP intermediaries that have been introduced for example in other European countries. We will mainly base our examination on interviews with KEINO Academy participants. In addition, we draw on the action research approach ([Kemmis et al., 2014](#)) as we reflect on our experiences that were gained by closely following the KEINO Academy's preparation and operation phases. On this basis, we suggest ways in which the model of the KEINO Academy could be developed further. The research questions of this article are as follows:

- RQ1.* What were the key managerial challenges regarding SPP in the organisations participating in the KEINO Academy?
- RQ2.* What was the role of the KEINO Academy in helping procure organisations to overcome the recognised challenges? In other words, how did the KEINO Academy function as an intermediary in promoting the change towards SPP?
- RQ3.* How could the intermediation of managerial support towards SPP be further developed?

We will analyse these questions by, firstly, digging into the theory on the promotion of SPP, its challenges and the intermediating actors in Section 2. In Section 3, we describe the concept of the KEINO Academy and the materials and methods used in this article. Then, in Sections 4 and 5, we analyse the materials and discuss the results in the light of the previous theories. In Section 6, we draw conclusions.

2. Theory: promoting better sustainable public procurement management through intermediation

To capture the state of the art of the relevant literature, we conducted a literature review with a special focus on SPP and intermediation. We used ScienceDirect (sciencedirect.com) as the database for mapping the relevant papers. More specifically, we used key words such as “sustainable public procurement”, “intermediation” and “intermediary” to find the relevant articles. Because of an increasing number of research papers on the area of SPP, we focused on those papers that were related to the European context. The reason for this is that EU procurement directives and the EU policy setting provide the public sector with certain preconditions, which may further impact on the challenges, intermediation and means of SPP promotion. Among those papers, we especially focused on SPP challenges, the strategic management of public procurement and intermediating in or promoting SPP.

In the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, SPP was recognised as an important means of promoting sustainable development (see Goal 12 and Target 7 of the SDGs). Indeed, many cities, municipalities and other public organisations are committed to ambitious climate and circular economy goals (Rashidi and Patt, 2018). National and local action plans and strategies have been set accordingly, encouraging public procurers to support the transition to climate neutrality and resource efficiency (Nesterova *et al.*, 2020). Further, public procurement can also have a role in the creation of new markets to achieve specific missions and have a role in creating market pressure on firms to green their operations (Ma *et al.*, 2021; Mazzucato, 2020).

Despite the significance of SPP in regard to promoting sustainable development, it has been criticised for neither fulfilling its potential in the transition towards sustainable cities (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017) nor becoming an established practice (Harland *et al.*, 2019). For many years, there has been a debate over the effectiveness of public procurement in steering development towards climate targets and other sustainability targets due to, for example, its resource-intensive nature (Andersson *et al.*, 2020; Halonen, 2021; Lundberg and Marklund, 2013; Sönnichsen and Clement, 2020). On the other hand, there is also evidence from practical examples that public procurement can lead to successful and cost-effective emission reductions when it is used among other steering methods (Kalimo *et al.*, 2021). In general, sustainable procurement practices and their drivers may vary between sectors (Etse *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.* (2021)).

Legislation has sometimes been claimed to be an obstacle for SPP (Alhola *et al.*, 2017). However, the current European directive on public procurement (European Commission, 2014) allows for many possibilities to consider sustainability aspects in the public procurement process, namely, they are considered in the selection of suppliers, defined in the technical specifications and featured among award criteria or in the contract clauses. It is already highlighted in the objectives of the directive that the integration of environmental, social and labour requirements into public procurement procedures is of particular importance in the member states. In addition, market dialogue (i.e. preliminary market consultation) prior to starting the formal tendering process is recognised in the directive (European Commission, 2014: Article 40) as a means of obtaining information from the market before launching the procedure for the awarding of a contract. With these procedures, contracting authorities may seek information on, for example, sustainable solutions in the market. Public procurement directives (European Commission, 2014) were implemented into the national legislation in Finland at the beginning of 2017. The current Finnish public procurement law sets the framework for the process of public procurement, offering many possibilities for sustainable and innovative approaches (Kalimo *et al.*, 2021).

2.1 The challenges of sustainable public procurement

Previous literature has quite extensively covered the challenges that relate to attempts to spur development towards better SPP management. These challenges can result from factors exogenous to the procuring organisation, such as public procurement law, public policies and programmes and the mission of public agencies (Rolfstam, 2012). However, much of the literature focuses on the challenges in the structures and capabilities endogenous to the procuring organisations.

These endogenous challenges can vary from factors related to managerial and strategic domains to the more practical and operational levels of SPP. First of all, the *organisational culture and attitudes* might prevent commitment to and new openings for SPP (Hall *et al.*, 2015; Palmujoki *et al.*, 2010; Testa *et al.*, 2012). It might also be that, despite good intentions, there is no clear mandate and *official strategy for SPP*, and thus, the implementation of the intentions is lacking (Brammer and Walker, 2011; Testa *et al.*, 2016). Further, it can be difficult for management to understand how broad societal objectives are concretised in the case of an individual acquisition (Sönnichsen and Clement, 2020). Indeed, sustainability needs to be an organisation-wide effort (Roman, 2017).

However, even if the organisational policies support SPP, it needs sufficient *resources, practices and infrastructures*, which might not be purely financial but also include an understanding of the costs and benefits of SPP (Brammer and Walker, 2011; Testa *et al.*, 2016). Non-commitment to sustainable procurement may also manifest as minor procurement resources that do not allow for any non-compulsory development (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017).

Looking at the challenges from a more operational perspective, the lack of *utilisable toolkits* for both procuring practices (Meehan and Bryde, 2011; Cheng *et al.*, 2018) and for measuring the sustainability impacts of the products or services (Testa *et al.*, 2016) has been noted to be a hindrance. One of the key challenges for tools and practices is that sustainability objectives are relatively long-term targets, while procurement decisions are normally done within the framework of short-term budgetary constraints. Life-cycle cost based pricing is seldom used, which may hinder the visibility of the economic benefits gained through SPP (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017).

Sometimes, there is also a *lack of knowledge* on proper procedures and the *skills* required to utilise the available tools (Zhu *et al.*, 2013; Grandia and Kruijen, 2020). For the procuring personnel to be able to best capitalise the resources, there is a constant need for learning and training as SPP is a highly dynamic and complex target (Bjorklund and Gustafsson, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2016). This is especially the case when aiming to simultaneously advance environmental, social and economic sustainability by public procurement.

Besides the exogenous and endogenous organisational factors, the challenges are also rooted in *individual professionals*. Testa (2016) and Argyris and Schön (1974) stressed the relationship between knowledge and action. The deeper lying norms, values and core beliefs of persons and organisations make the objectives desirable or worthwhile achieving (Visser and Van der Togt, 2016). It is often also inertia and past practices that hinder taking sustainability seriously in procurement processes (Palmujoki *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the success of SPP depends on the interlinkages of these personal and institutional factors and on motivations that can be both endogenous or exogenous. Understanding these linkages is fundamental to capture and overcome the barriers that prevent public procurement from reaching the policy goals in terms of sustainability aspects and innovativeness. In conclusion, developing operational practices and procuring skills in SPP is not sufficient unless the passage of objectives through procurement has managerial support.

The same challenges that have been noted on the international level also apply to Finland (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017; KEINO Competence Centre, 2018). Indeed, a clear mandate to conduct SPP, along with training, needs to come from top-level management and be aligned with the organisation's strategies and objectives to address the challenges related to SPP (Sönnichsen and Clement, 2020).

2.2 The role of intermediaries in supporting sustainable public procurement

As noted above, the challenges in SPP vary and can be realised in various domains within the procuring organisation. Thus, solving them requires collaboration and interaction internally across departments, as well as externally with multiple actors (Kristensen *et al.*, 2021; Witjes and Lozano, 2016; Rainville, 2021). This underlines the fact that traditional information-based guidance may not be sufficient, and a more holistic and co-creative approach is needed.

When the strategic role of public procurement has arisen, competence centres and agencies have been established to, for example, deliver information and provide hands-on guidance on SPP. These agencies have taken many forms and include, for example, PIANOo in The Netherlands, agency-based Upphandlingsmyndigheten in Sweden and network-based KEINO Competence Centre in Finland. What is in common for these different agencies is that they all operate as intermediaries in translating, transferring and creating knowledge and skills between different actors and contexts (Frandsen and Johansen, 2015; Howells, 2006; Moss *et al.*, 2009).

Intermediaries have been found to be crucial in fostering and speeding up the transition towards environmental sustainability within, for example, regional energy efficiency processes, municipal climate work or national cleantech innovation systems (Kanda *et al.*, 2020; Karhinen *et al.*, 2021; Lukkarinen *et al.*, 2018). Depending on the context, intermediary actors can be characterised according to various factors, such as their roles and premises for operation (Kivimaa *et al.*, 2019). What is particular to the KEINO Academy as part of the KEINO Competence Centre is that its mandate comes from a powerful actor, the Ministry of Employment and Economy, and that it aims to initiate a somewhat experimental process without promoting an explicit agenda benefitting the intermediary itself. The KEINO Competence Centre and the KEINO Academy will be described in more detail in the next section.

In the public procurement context, much of the literature on intermediaries is focused on the performance of the procurement process and certain procurement pilots (i.e. the intermediaries to be used when public contracting authorities and units prepare their purchases and perform the procuring process) (Edler and Yeow, 2016; Klingsjö and Sjöholm, 2017; Rainville, 2021). For example, Edler and Yeow (2016) have conceptualised and analysed intermediation between supply and demand, showing that effective intermediation can help overcome some procedural and capability failures in the process of innovative public procurement.

Klingsjö and Sjöholm (2017) have taken a more practical perspective and highlighted two types of intermediary in public procurement: an intermediary that takes responsibility and signs contracts with suppliers and a broker that negotiates contract before an agreement is reached between a supplier and the contracting authority. In addition, Rainville (2021) has conducted a study on the dynamics of how intermediation can facilitate public procurement to promote a circular economy in the procurement process. However, not much research has been conducted on the *dynamics of how intermediation could promote the transition to SPP in an organisation as a whole*, mainly by developing its strategic management system. Thus, there is a research gap to which this article seeks to contribute.

When analysing intermediation and intermediary organisations, one useful approach is to study their functions. [Karhinen *et al.* \(2021\)](#) have used this method when analysing a pioneering municipal climate network, HINKU, in Finland. According to [Karhinen *et al.*](#), HINKU has played the following roles in particular for the participating municipalities: structuring climate work in municipalities, providing expert support, offering peer support, triggering concrete climate measures, tracking progress and legitimising local climate work. As the objectives and operating models of the HINKU network resemble those of the KEINO Academy in many ways, we use this categorisation as a basis for our analysis.

3. The material and method

The main empirical material of our study consisted of the interviews described in Subsection 3.2 of this article. Further, we have used documents and some publicly available material about the KEINO Competence Centre and the KEINO Academy to describe our case and the results of the KEINO Academy.

3.1 The KEINO Academy, a development programme promoting better sustainable public procurement management

The KEINO Competence Centre aims to improve the effectiveness and quality of public procurement and public services in Finland. The operating model of the KEINO Competence Centre includes several thematic areas: strategic procurement, competence development, cooperation and networking and international co-operation. Related services that are provided in these areas include, for example, the KEINO Academy, buyers' groups, a help desk, change agents, best practice examples, a website, other informative tools and international cooperation ([KEINO Competence Centre, 2021](#)).

As already discussed, the target of our study is the KEINO Academy. The KEINO Academy is a programme designed for developing the strategic management of SPP and innovative public procurement in a holistic manner. In practice, the programme is aimed at directors and managers as well as experts working with SPP. The first KEINO Academy was organised between October 2019 and August 2020. There were 27 participating organisations, including cities, municipalities and governmental organisations. In the application process, organisations were selected on the basis of their commitment and capability to implement a jointly defined development task.

The idea of the KEINO Academy was that the experts of KEINO, as well as other relevant coaches, shared their knowledge, expertise and experience related to SPP management and best practices during five thematic get-togethers. The themes of the get-togethers were:

- (1) the strategic role of procurement and the maturity of an organisation;
- (2) knowledge-based management in procurement;
- (3) strategy implementation;
- (4) the impact and measurement of procurement; and
- (5) benchmarking ([KEINO Competence Centre, 2020b](#)).

In between these get-togethers, the participants were committed to carrying on their development tasks in their home organisations, applying the lessons learnt and working on some mainly small analysis assignments that were related to the previous or forthcoming sessions.

In addition, the participants were divided into smaller groups in which they jointly solved challenges and discussed progress on their development tasks. These groups also gathered during the get-together sessions, and the discussions were facilitated by the KEINO experts. However, the facilitation styles differed a bit between the experts. For example, some coaches organised organisation-specific meetings to spur on the development process, while others gave extra homework or material for their groups.

3.2 Interviews and their analysis

The main data in this article are semi-structured interviews. A total of 24 public procurement experts, managers and directors were interviewed at the beginning of the year 2021, half a year after the first KEINO Academy had ended. The interviewed persons represented 13 municipal procurement organisations that had participated in the first KEINO Academy. As there were 27 participating organisations in the first KEINO Academy, those interviewed represented approximately half of the participants.

We decided to restrict the interviews to municipal participants as there would have been bigger differences in the operational contexts if, for example, both governmental organisations and municipalities had been interviewed. However, the variety of the participating municipal organisations was broad and ranged from the northern municipality of Pello, which has a few more than 3,000 inhabitants, to two procuring units from the city of Helsinki, the capital of Finland. The variety was also reflected in the maturity of the organisations in regard to their capacity to deal with issues such as SPP. While some had already rather well-developed strategies and implementation and evaluation mechanisms in place, others were struggling to develop their first strategic guidelines for procurement.

Almost all of the interviewed persons had taken part in the KEINO Academy personally, so they had first-hand experience of its provisions and how they affected their development work. However, there were also some experts and directors among the interviewees that had been involved in the process more loosely or that had stepped into their current positions since the previous KEINO Academy. All the interviews were carried out online, and their duration was approximately 60 min each. Seven interviews were conducted individually, and seven were conducted in pairs or in groups of three. Before the interviews, both the interviewers and interviewees familiarised themselves with the reports of the development tasks completed at the KEINO Academy by the participating organisations.

The thematic topics of the interviews were as follows:

- the most important drivers and obstacles to developing SPP and its management in the municipality;
- the role and impact of the KEINO Academy as an intermediary for SPP development;
- the connection between strategic management and SPP; and
- suggestions for improving the functioning of the KEINO Academy or similar intermediaries.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed using content analytical methods and the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. The analysis framework was formed by using the themes of the interviews, the literature and by reading through the material (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

In addition to the interviews, we also used material produced by the KEINO network (e.g. inquiries conducted by the Competence Centre and feedback and development reports

gathered from the participants of the KEINO Academy) to support the analysis. Further, the authors of this article, Annukka Berg and Katriina Alhola, have participated in both the planning and implementation of the concept of the KEINO Academy. Thus, we have also drawn on an action research approach in this study by engaging in the collaborative planning, implementation and reflective development of the KEINO Academy and also by critically assessing it during the different iterative phases (cf. [Kemmis et al., 2014](#)). Critical discussions among the authors and rigorous analysis of the interviews and literature have balanced the insider and outsider views during the writing. The following sections introduce the results of the empirical analysis.

4. Results

4.1 *The challenges of developing sustainable public procurement management*

In this subsection, we answer the first research question, which concerns the key development challenges to the management of SPP in the participating municipalities. We first discuss the challenges that are related to the leadership and strategic choices made in an organisation. Then, we dig deeper into challenges found on the more practical and operational levels of SPP.

As regards leadership-level SPP challenges, scarce *resources* and poor *infrastructure* (i.e. the administrative system within which the interviewees operated) were the challenges most often mentioned by the municipal participants. There were only a few municipal participants that did not mention resources as a challenge at all. Thus, in general, the KEINO Academy attendees regretted that the strategic role of procurement was not noticed by the leaders of their organisations. This led to a situation in which they were not able to fully implement the strategic goals of the municipality through procurement. The lack of resources was also seen to reflect the general organisational *culture and attitude*; it can reveal the “real” support for SPP beyond the fancy strategic goals.

Meanwhile, the lack of SPP *strategies and goals* was a challenge only for a few municipal participants. Thus, for many, there exists an official mandate for developing SPP. In practice, however, many noticed a gap between the strategy and its implementation. In part, this can be seen to be a consequence of an ongoing implementation process, but, as mentioned, it can also reflect poor commitment and resources for change.

As regards the expert-level challenges, the lack of *knowledge and skills* was mentioned by many, but it was discussed on a rather general level. Meanwhile, insufficient *practices and tools* were mentioned by almost all municipal participants, and they were also discussed in more depth. Novel practices and tools were particularly called for when planning a procurement, for managing procurement categories, criteria development, cost–benefit analysis, follow-up and measurement at large.

Also, the lack of *encouragement and support* was mentioned by almost half of the municipal participants. This was closely related to the general culture and attitudes in the participating municipal organisations and whether they were supportive towards SPP or not, particularly in departments outside the procurement unit. On the other hand, encouragement was something that could also be met by, for example, peer support outside the home organisation. Further, the interviewees noted that those working with public procurement are not only encouraged or blunted by inter-organisational voices but also by different stakeholders, such as local companies, politicians and the media.

Table 1 summarises the analysis results and the number of municipal participants that had experienced a certain challenge.

4.2 The functions of the KEINO Academy

In this subsection, we analyse the second research question that concerns both the intermediating role of the KEINO Academy in accelerating a change towards SPP in the participating municipal organisations and addressing the challenges recognised in the previous subsection.

In the interviews, some municipal participants mentioned that the KEINO Academy had strongly supported their ideas and provided backing when presenting SPP actions to the top management and other municipal decision makers. Organisations' administration as a whole was more broadly involved in the development task and the KEINO Academy, as well as the KEINO Competence Centre in general, offered communicative benefits. All this provided *legitimacy* for the SPP development work.

In addition, the KEINO Academy offered an outsider view of the participating organisations. It showed where the organisation stands in relation to others and where the field in general is developing. This strengthened the legitimacy of the SPP development work if it showed that the municipal organisation stood as a frontrunner or if it was lagging behind.

Many interviewees mentioned that, for them, it had been important that the KEINO Academy provided a timetable that pushed the participating organisations to take certain steps in a given time. Further, it was important to have a shared bulk of knowledge and tools that also gave a backbone to the work. As completing the development task was required for each of the participating organisations, the KEINO Academy helped participants to *structure* their work in many ways. They were able to apply relevant information directly to their organisation and recognise those tasks that should be done after the active KEINO Academy term.

Almost all participating municipalities mentioned *expert support* as a key element of the KEINO Academy. This referred not only to the lectures and official materials provided by the KEINO Academy but also to the dialogical expert spurring of organisational development tasks and to the use of management tools supporting the work. Further, expertise was not only provided by the KEINO Academy organisers, experts and coaches but also by the participating peers.

When discussing expert knowledge, concreteness and easy applicability seemed to be qualities appreciated by the participating municipalities over, for example, purely theoretical knowledge or merely inspirational examples. Thus, concrete cases and tips provided by peer organisations were given great value. While the materials and tools provided by the KEINO Academy were generally well received, the need for new tools for, for example, setting procurement criteria and evaluating acquisitions became clear. Calls for these types of tools were particularly raised by those municipalities that had made pioneering work in developing SPP.

Table 1.
Challenges for SPP management as experienced by the municipal participants of the first KEINO Academy

Challenges for SPP management	Municipal participants that referred to the challenge
General culture and attitudes	M1, M2, M4, M8, M12, M13
Official strategy and goals	M2, M5, M8
Resources and infrastructure	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M10, M12, M13
Practices and tools	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M9, M10, M11, M13
Knowledge and skills	M1, M2, M3, M5, M6, M8, M10, M11, M13
Encouragement and support	M1, M2, M4, M6, M8, M12, M13

Like expert support, *peer support* was mentioned as a key function of the KEINO Academy by almost all municipal participants. In two interviews only, it was expressed that the peer support provided in the KEINO Academy had not been very useful for them. In one of the cases, the reason was that the grouping of the participants into smaller groups had not been successful, and there was, thus, little common ground for the participants. In another case, a city did not have much to learn from the others as the city had already done so much by itself.

However, for most of the municipal participants, particularly those with less networking experience, an important provision of the KEINO Academy was that it showed that others are also wrestling with the same questions as them. It showed that the whole community seeking to develop SPP was faced with certain common challenges, but that there were also tools and pioneering examples that could be adapted to their own organisation if so desired. Most interviewees cited the open atmosphere and common understanding as the key benefits of working with peers.

Indeed, the KEINO Academy seemed to offer an effective forum for dialogue and the exchange of experiences and best practices among participants. Especially the smaller groups (in which the development tasks of each organisation were focused on) provided the participants with a safe atmosphere for interactive discussions: they felt that they could share challenges, ideas for solutions and feelings. They found it easy to discuss the challenges of their organisation and to support the others in their development work. This was particularly important for some participants who had few colleagues with similar competences and core tasks as they did in their home organisation or for those that needed to cope with an unsupportive social environment.

In certain cases, peer dialogue was experienced to be so beneficial that the participants kept in touch with other KEINO Academy attendees afterwards. However, several interviewees hoped that the KEINO Academy organisers would take up the task of establishing an informal social media channel, such as a LinkedIn group or a Teams channel. In general, many – particularly those with less peer networks – hoped that the KEINO Academy would continue the development support work by organising alumni gatherings.

To sum up, on the basis of the interviews, the KEINO Academy had four main functions:

- (1) It legitimised the SPP development work in the municipalities.
- (2) It provided procuring units with structure for their SPP development work.
- (3) It provided procuring units with expert support for their SPP development work.
- (4) It was an important source of peer support.

Expert support and peer support were most often mentioned by the municipal participants, and expert knowledge and peer support were also what stood out in the answers to a feedback questionnaire (KEINO Competence Centre, 2020c). Table 2 shows the number of municipal participants who referred to each of the functions.

Table 2.
Key functions of the
KEINO Academy as
experienced by
municipal
participants of the
first KEINO
Academy

Functions	Municipal participants that referred to the function
Legitimising the work	M2, M7, M8, M12, M13
Structuring the work	M2, M4, M5, M7, M10, M11, M12, M13
Expert support	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M8, M9, M10, M11, M12, M13
Peer support	M1, M2, M3, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10, M11, M13

In [Figure 1](#), we have sought to show how the different SPP development challenges experienced by the municipal participants were met with different KEINO Academy functions. Further, it illustrates how each of the functions served to meet at least two challenges. The key message of [Figure 1](#) is that the model of the KEINO Academy was able to meet all the major challenges of SPP development, as experienced by the municipal participants, in one way or another. It provided legitimacy and broader backing for SPP development work when the culture and attitudes in the organisation and its operational environment were less supportive. Further, it offered guidance for strategy formation and goal setting, and some structure and infrastructure in the form of joint timetables and shared tools. Thus, it patched the holes in the management strategy and tool sets provided by the organisation.

At the same time, it is clear that some of the challenges experienced in the SPP development work were not and cannot be met by an outsider intermediary such as the KEINO Academy. For example, if resources for SPP are scarce, and this was the experience in most of the participating organisations, an intermediary like the KEINO Academy cannot directly help. Further, the organisations need to play their part in strategy creation and implementation. If that is not done, even the best tools or the most inspiring lectures will not help. However, a development programme, such as the KEINO Academy, can support the experts, managers and directors in understanding the value of SPP and how its development could serve the broader goals of the organisation and municipality at large. The studied model of the KEINO Academy had many pros, but it had also cons that could be taken into account in the future. These development proposals will be discussed in Section 5.

4.3 The holistic model and impact of the KEINO Academy

For the analytical purposes of this article, it was useful to study the intermediary mechanisms of the KEINO Academy by dividing them into four functions. In reality, however, the functions overlap. Networking with peers not only provides possibilities for

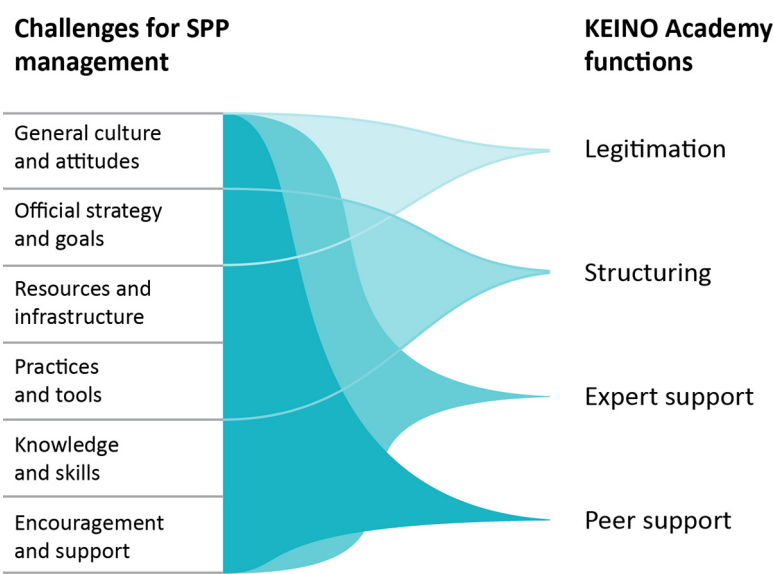


Figure 1.
How KEINO Academy functions met the challenges of developing SPP

interaction but also provides knowledge and concrete tips. Expert knowledge can support the use of the tools provided and in spurring on of the development task. Figure 2 visualises the overlapping nature of the intermediary functions and the holistic model of the KEINO Academy.

Even though the functions of the KEINO Academy met the experienced SPP management challenges of the municipal participants, an important question remains: Did the KEINO Academy manage to have an impact? The answer is a cautious “yes”; it seems that the KEINO Academy was able to contribute to real change. On the basis of an inquiry (KEINO Competence Centre, 2020c) conducted with all the participants of the first KEINO Academy, *almost all the participants had managed to create some type of procurement strategy*. Further, many were able to *recognise the acquisitions with the most potential for sustainability or innovativeness*. Thus, clear steps were taken during the KEINO Academy. Concrete examples included that the procurement strategy, guidelines or roadmap (including sustainability targets) in several participating municipalities had been drafted and approved by the management team or even the city council. In other cases, a procurement analysis was conducted from the sustainability perspective or a procurement assessment tool created for future use.

In practice, however, impacting on SPP will not happen within a year or even two. Reaching for more sustainable options in the market and undertaking, for example, market dialogues takes time. In addition, it may require resources to build procurement experts’ capabilities to conduct SPP-related processes. In some cases, the initial price of a sustainable solution may be higher than the price for the traditional option. Thus, in case there is only a vague mandate from the strategic top-level management, procurement experts may not be able to proceed with SPP.

What can be learnt from the results in a broader sense is that *SPP cannot be developed in a silo* as it depends on the general management of procurement, its practices, resources and infrastructure. There is the need for informal and formal support that can be provided by, for example, a procurement strategy and its implementation. Further, a myriad of tools and practices are often needed to make things work, ranging from developing tailored practices and criteria for different procurement categories to planning an actual acquisition,

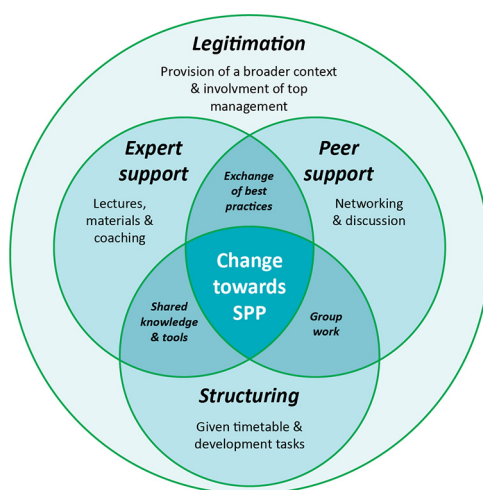


Figure 2.
The holistic model of
the KEINO Academy
as an intermediary
that is advancing SPP

conducting market dialogue prior to setting up procurement criteria, evaluating offers, contracting and – eventually – following up the acquisition and measuring its success. This was also a lesson that was widely learnt by the participating municipalities.

5. Discussion: how can sustainable public procurement development and management programmes be developed?

Our results illustrate how the KEINO Academy has succeeded in promoting SPP and its management in the participating municipal organisations. How then can these kinds of initiatives be advanced, and more importantly, how can the managerial support provided by SPP intermediaries be further developed?

Our study confirms the findings of the previous literature that there are several challenges on the way towards SPP and its better management (Brammer and Walker, 2011; Testa *et al.*, 2016). In this article, we grouped the challenges into six categories: general culture and attitudes; official strategy and goals; resources and infrastructure; practices and tools; knowledge and skills; and encouragement and support. The most important message of this list is that intermediary organisations working with SPP face a myriad of challenges and, thus, should also serve several functions.

As regards the functions, our study further confirmed that the functions drawn from the study on municipal climate network intermediation (Karhinen *et al.*, 2021) also fit our case on municipal SPP intermediation in a slightly modified form. As discussed, the key intermediary functions of the KEINO Academy in advancing better SPP management were: legitimising, structuring the SPP development work, offering expert support and facilitating peer support.

Therefore, the main *theoretical contribution* of this article is that it *combines the discussions on developing SPP and its management with those on intermediary organisations and their functions*. Further, it has made an *empirical contribution by studying the KEINO Academy*, which can be considered as a pioneering case in the field of SPP promotion. Our study also supported the findings of previous SPP studies by recognising the important role of the administrative level in organisational learning (Liu *et al.*, 2021) and the understanding that sustainability needs to be an organisation-wide effort (Roman, 2017).

The palette of functions provided by the KEINO Academy seemed to fit relatively well with the key challenges experienced in the field. However, as Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, for example, the field is diverse, and the experts working with SPP face different realities when it comes to, for example, organisational backing, encouragement and resources. In any case, an intermediary such as the KEINO Academy can have only an indirect impact on many issues that affect SPP and its management. These include, for example, the lack of resources for SPP development, a challenge that was very often mentioned by our interviewees and that has also been broadly noted before (Alhola and Kaljonen, 2017; Testa *et al.*, 2012; Testa *et al.*, 2016).

As regards the future development of intermediaries such as the KEINO Academy, we have four suggestions based on our research: build a holistic model, recognise the versatility, involve all the key people and sustain change. In the following, we discuss these recommendations in more detail.

First, as the four functions of the KEINO Academy seemed to meet some of the key needs in the field, this type of *holistic model* could be retained. In the case of the KEINO Academy, a preferable future direction would be to keep and improve the quality of the existing functions. For example, the quality of expert support and structuring of the work could be improved by having more concrete tools for SPP management.

As regards *recognising the versatility*, the different sizes, starting points, dynamics and available resources of procuring organisations should be the basis when seeking to promote SPP. In the KEINO Academy, this versatility was harnessed by, for example, mixing participants from different regions and different types of organisation when formulating smaller groups. Generally speaking, this was considered as a strength of the KEINO Academy by most of the interviewees as it allowed for a more extensive exchange of experiences and mentoring. Yet, for a few interviewees, the versatility had also made it harder for them to learn from the others. Thus, services such as those provided by the KEINO Competence Centre could be even better tailored for different and changing needs. Tailoring could be supported by, for example, an increased amount of dialogue with the potential participants prior to the service design.

In future efforts, it would also be important to *expand the involvement* of the procuring organisations so that all the key units and their leaders would be part of the change process. In particular, the involvement of the directors would be extremely important to strengthen commitment to SPP and justify the efforts taken by the experts towards SPP. This was already tried out in the KEINO Academy, but the results were somewhat vague. In the future, using the time of the KEINO experts for, for example, facilitating broad interorganisational workshops could provide a way to proceed.

In addition, it would be important that the KEINO Academy or a similar intermediary would *sustain the change* process. The need to contribute to a myriad of issues (e.g. agency and cross-departmental management, people's beliefs and practices) is the essence of SPP development work (Sönnichsen and Clement, 2020). Thus, in many organisations, building better SPP management is a long-term process. Providing new opportunities for development sprints every now and then could boost the process in the long run. Further, keeping the networks of SPP developers alive could offer the needed support between the sprints and help in reaching the potential participants when opportunities for new sprints are available.

6. Conclusions

In 2020, a joint national strategy for public procurement (Finnish Ministry of Finance, 2020) was published for Finland. The strategy is not a legally binding document, but many public procurers are following its guidelines either mainly or fully. The strategy proposes a broad approach to the development work and that, for example, the sustainability of procurement cannot be met if strategic goals and mechanisms for implementation and follow-up are not in place. This is also one of the key findings of this article.

To sum up, this study provides several managerial implications for public procurement directors, managers and practitioners, intermediaries, policymakers and researchers developing SPP. For SPP promotion efforts to be successful, they should provide legitimacy for the work. When doing this, they should refer to goals and structures that support the desired change and that are agreed nationally, in the EU or internationally. They should offer reliable sources of knowledge and argumentation and ensure that the leaders of the organisation are onboard in the development process. They should enable smart strategy creation, implementation and evaluation by developing a broad spectrum of skills, ranging from the use of calculation tools to effective communications. They should structure the work of the participating organisations by providing thematic checkpoints and a feasible timeline for the development work. They should ensure that the right people and organisations get the right kind of support. Last but not least, they should bring peers together and enable longer-term development by offering new opportunities.

This study works as a basis for further studies that could focus on the practical implementation of SPP strategies, roadmaps and other managerial tools that have been formulated during the KEINO Academy or similar development programmes. In addition, further studies could focus on monitoring the long-term development and impacts of the KEINO Academy, the KEINO Competence Centre and other intermediaries promoting SPP. Both these research tasks would be valuable because this study has been limited to the mapping of the SPP challenges, the functions provided by the KEINO Academy and the managerial changes within the target organisations. Thus, the real sustainability impacts in terms of, for example, CO2 reductions are yet to be measured.

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About the authors

Annukka Berg is a Senior Researcher in the Finnish Environment Institute. Berg has studied sustainability transformations and governance innovations particularly in the field of sustainable consumption and production. She has worked as an expert in the national Competence Centre for Sustainable and Innovative Public Procurement (KEINO) in Finland. Annukka Berg is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: annukka.berg@syke.fi

Katriina Alhola works as a Senior Researcher in the Finnish Environment Institute. Her research interests are in low carbon and circular public procurement. She is also an expert in the national Competence Centre for Sustainable and Innovative Public Procurement (KEINO) in Finland.

Juha Peltomaa is a Senior Researcher in the Finnish Environment Institute. He has experience in sustainable governance and policy implementation analysis, especially from the actor-level viewpoint covering various contexts from sustainable natural environment use to mobility and housing.

Satu Tietari is an expert in project management and sustainable development. She has studied the effectiveness of green support activities in working places. Tietari has multifaceted experience in municipal policy, and she has been a member of the European Committee of the Regions and its Commission for Environment, Climate change and Energy (2009–2020).

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