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An exploration of social procurement intrapreneurship in the Australian construction industry using bricolage theory – a public procurement policy perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report the results of research which used bricolage theory to investigate the process of social procurement intrapreneurship in the Australian construction industry. The aim is to inform improved public procurement policymaking in this area to maximise the significant untapped social value which can be created by effectively implementing social procurement into this major industry.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reports a thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with thirty social procurement intrapreneurs who were purposefully sampled from a national community of practice and who have the responsibility to implement social procurement policies into the Australian construction industry.

Findings – Findings highlight the significant untapped social value which can be leveraged through implementing social procurement in the construction industry. They also highlight the severe resource constraints under which construction social procurement professionals work and the various intrapreneurial bricolage strategies used to overcome these resource constraints. The findings raise important new policy questions about the need to ensure that social procurement targets are realistic in relation to the construction industry's capacity to respond. Furthermore, it is found that social procurement policies need to provide the necessary incentives, resources, monitoring and enforcement regimes to support effective policy implementation.

Social implications – The effective implementation of social procurement into the construction industry has significant social implications given the relatively large size of the industry and its major economic multiplier affect into the wider economy.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the paucity of social intrapreneurship and social innovation research by providing new insights into the implementation of social procurement policies into the construction industry. The results contribute new theoretical and practical insights into the types of resource

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constraints which can undermine intrapreneurial efforts to implement social procurement into the construction industry, what causes them and how they can be overcome.

Keywords Social procurement, Social innovation, Social intrapreneurship, Social value, Bricolage, Social procurement policy, Social procurement practice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In simple terms, social procurement involves procurers of construction goods and services (public and private) requiring their supply chains to leave a positive social legacy in the communities in which they build, by creating public social value beyond the function of the built asset produced (Raiden *et al.*, 2019; CIOB, 2023). These social legacy requirements can take many forms but typically involve creating business, employment and training opportunities for structurally disadvantaged groups in the labour market such as people with a disability, Indigenous people, refugees and migrants, ex-offenders and disengaged youth (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020).

In most countries, governments are by far the biggest procurer of construction goods and services [about 13% of Gross Domestic Product across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)]. This creates significant potential to use social procurement as a strategic tool to leverage public construction spending to help achieve social policy objectives (Barraket *et al.*, 2016; OECD, 2020, 2023). A recent UK study of 500 construction projects estimated that there is 23.6% untapped social value (in the form of improved mental and physical health, improved housing security, reduced crime etc.) to be leveraged by using social procurement in this sector (Social Value Portal, 2023). Global construction activity is forecast to grow by 3.4% in 2026 to US$9.8tn which translates to US$2.31tn of potential untapped social value through the international use of social procurement in construction (Oxford Economics, 2025). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has led to a recent proliferation of international government social procurement policies, frameworks and guidelines which target major industries like construction (Denny-Smith *et al.*, 2021).

The embryonic body of research on social procurement in the construction industry highlights deeply embedded institutional barriers to social procurement adoption and a high degree of "ontological anxiety" (Meehan and Bryde, 2011) caused by to the disruptions it causes to deeply imbedded supply chain relationships, recruitment practices and organisational norms (Murphy and Eadie, 2019; Loosemore *et al.*, 2021; Troje and Andersson, 2020; Nawaz and Guribie, 2022). Troje and Andersson (2020) conceptualise social procurement in construction as a "proto-institution" (an institution in the making) and show that the "institutional work" involved in implementing social procurement into construction is being undertaken by a small but growing group of social procurement professionals who suffer significant role ambiguity and conflict in performing their emerging new roles. Subsequent research by Loosemore *et al.* (2021, 2022a, 2022b), Troje and Gluch (2020) and Troje (2021, 2022) show that these professionals also tend to be severely under-resourced and disempowered compared to incumbent construction project actors associated with the delivery of more traditional construction project goals relating to time, cost, quality, safety and environmental outcomes. Loosemore *et al.* (2020) refer to these emerging professionals as "social intrapreneurs" because their lack of formal identity, authority and resources requires them to be self-motivated, innovative, proactive and action-oriented in implementing social procurement into their organisations, using any means at their disposal.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the nascent body of research by exploring how this emerging group of social intrapreneurs implement social procurement into the

construction industry. Specifically focussing on data collected from people who are performing these new intrapreneurial roles this paper uses theories of bricolage developed in cultural anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), organisational behaviour (Weick, 2001) and organisational entrepreneurship (Papazu, 2021) to offer a new conceptualisation of how this is done in an Australian construction industry context. Australia was selected as the geographical context to undertake this research because it is implementing a wide variety of ambitious social procurement policies at federal, state, local and government agency levels (Barraket, 2019; Roy *et al.*, 2024).

Specifically, two research questions are explored:

RQ1. What is the nature and cause of any resource constraints that social procurement intrapreneurs in the Australian construction industry face in meeting their social procurement objectives?

RQ2. How do social procurement intrapreneurs in the Australian construction industry secure the resources they need to achieve social procurement objectives?

Social procurement is under-theorised, both within and outside the field of construction (Troje, 2021; Barraket *et al.*, 2016, 2019, Loosemore *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b) and while a small number of researchers have explored the theoretical concept of bricolage in construction (see Garud and Karnøe, 2003; Stewart and Fenn, 2006; Samppa *et al.*, 2022), and in mainstream business organisations (see for example Papazu, 2021; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2021), this research represents its first application in a social procurement context as far as we can ascertain.

To this end, this article proceeds with an examination of Bricolage Theory highlighting its value in relation to social procurement implementation in construction. Next, the interpretive and abductive research methodology and method is outlined, and findings are reported, distilled and discussed to address the above research questions.

Background

Social procurement transforms the traditional view of procurement as a mechanistic and transactional process into a strategic one (Barraket *et al.*, 2016). It does this by leveraging purchasing power to incentivise supply chains to create social value beyond goods or services provided (Varga and Hayday, 2023; Razmdoost and Alinaghian, 2024). With a long history which can be traced back to the industrial revolution, social procurement's contemporary re-emergence is a response to the emergence of "New Public Governance", a paradigm in public administration that emphasises collaboration across different sectors (government, private and civil society) to address increasingly intransigent societal challenges which traditional government interventions seem unable to resolve alone (McCrudden, 2004; Barraket *et al.*, 2016; Head, 2022). As Teasdale *et al.* (2021) and Aitken (2022) note, cross sector collaboration provides opportunities for a multiplicity of perspectives to be mobilised around a social problem, enabling innovative solutions to seemingly intractable wicked problems.

The growing importance of construction social procurement as a field of research is reflected in the steady growth of research publications in this area which illustrate the many social benefits which it can produce for the communities in which the public sector builds (see Lou *et al.*, 2023; Natoli *et al.*, 2023). This can be traced back to the formative work of Petersen and Kadefors (2016) and Loosemore (2016) who first explored the role of public social procurement in construction to solve societal unemployment issues, raising many new questions relating to procedures regarding social criteria in procurement processes and new challenges relating to management systems and changing professional roles. Further early

research was highly optimistic, highlighting the many potential benefits that social procurement in construction could bring to the communities in which the industry builds. For example, Murphy and Eadie (2019) showed how it can produce employment benefits for local communities in Ireland. Loosemore *et al.* (2021) argued that it can reduce homeless in the UK. Troje and Kadefors (2018) reported how it can help to address unemployment in Sweden, Denny-Smith *et al.* (2021) showed that it can help address Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. Hurt-Suwan and Mahler (2021) showed how it can reduce precarious employment for Māori and Pasifika workers. Loosemore *et al.* (2020) argued that it can help reduce recidivism in Australia, Meltzer *et al.* (2024) claimed that it can reduce youth unemployment in Australia and Suchowerska *et al.* (2024) showed how employment-focused social procurement in construction can reduce health inequities in Australia by positively impacting social determinants of health.

However, research also shows that there are many impediments to the effective implementation of social procurement in the construction industry which can undermine these potential benefits. For example, early research by Loosemore and Denny-Smith (2016) highlighted the many barriers which face Indigenous enterprises in Australian from participating in the many new business opportunities potentially offered. Barraket and Loosemore (2018) explored how and why social enterprises and private construction firms collaborate in meeting new social procurement imperatives and the institutional and organisational impediments which undermine these practices. Loosemore and Reid (2019) highlighted the compliance mindset of many major construction contractors in Australia to the new policies. In the Swedish construction industry, Troje and Kadefors (2018) and Troje and Gluch (2019, 2020) showed how social procurement professionals have to mediate between contrasting interests when they create new social procurement roles and practices, how their roles are formed by multiple and reciprocal lines of actions, and how they make sense of who they are and what type of work they engage in. Building on this early research into social procurement professionals, Loosemore *et al.* (2021, 2022a, 2022b) conceptualised social procurement professionals working in the Australian construction industry as intrapreneurs who must be creative in finding ways to performing their new roles in severely resource-constrained environments.

In the UK, Raiden *et al.* (2019) noted that one of the early challenges within the construction sector was that the emergence of social value as a new currency in business transactions, was accompanied by considerable confusion as to what the term meant. Troje and Andersson (2020), Denny-Smith *et al.* (2021) and Nawaz and Guribie (2022) have also found that there are many incumbent institutional logics, practices and cultural norms which can act to undermine the implementation of social procurement into the construction industry. Consequently, Loosemore *et al.* (2019, 2020) and Kuruneri and Zivanai (2024) report that social procurement is seen as a risk rather than an opportunity by most people in the Australian construction industry. Furthermore, when imposed by public policymakers on an unprepared and unwilling supply chain, social procurement policies can lead to gaming and commodification of already vulnerable job-seekers which can do them more harm than good. Problematically, such practices are unlikely to be detected because of poor monitoring and enforcement of social procurement policies by governments (Loosemore *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b).

In the same policy-theme, Bandiera *et al.* (2009), Mupanemunda (2020) and Meltzer *et al.* (2024) find that while social procurement policies can create significant opportunities for jobseekers experiencing disadvantage, certain conditions must be met for such policies to fulfil their full potential. For example, public procurement officials must be given adequate resources, knowledge and skills training to effectively carry out strategic public

procurement, employers must be supported to provide the support infrastructure to manage these complex and vulnerable job seekers back into employment and jobseekers who take up opportunities must be adequately supported to transition into longer-term employment post procurement contract.

There are also potential downsides of social procurement which are seldom acknowledged in an overly optimistic research literature. For example, social procurement can dislodge incumbent suppliers (and the people they employ) by giving preference to third sector and other types of minority organisations (Esteves and Barclay, 2011; Loosemore *et al.*, 2020). Critics also argue that poorly designed policies can encourage perverse market behaviour which may produce adverse social consequences. For example, in the Australian construction industry, Denny-Smith and Loosemore (2017) warn about the practice of "black cladding" where scam Indigenous construction companies are setup to lucrative government contracts "set aside" for Indigenous businesses. Roy *et al.* (2024) argue that social procurement-type initiatives may also hamper the innovative capacity of social sector organisations as they become delivery agents for programs developed by government officials. This may cause idealistic socially motivated volunteers and donors to withdraw their crucial support. Competition between social sector organisations could also potentially hinder the collaboration needed to access large procurement opportunities (Aitken, 2022). More recently, Carreras (2024) presents empirical evidence from Spain regarding the potentially negative impact of social procurement on inter-firm competition, corruption and contract costs.

It is also recognised that poorly drafted social procurement policies or ineffective policy implementation by governments may impede behaviours that are beneficial to social value creation. For example, in her report entitled (the promise of social procurement), Mupanemunda (2020) notes the potential unintended consequences in Australia of having many overlapping social procurement policies which can overload, confuse and financially burden already stretched industry stakeholders. The potentially negative impact of poor social procurement policy design and implementation has also been reported in Scotland where Roy *et al.* (2024) reveal the uneven nature of "value accrual" across different parts of the social procurement ecosystem. Similar effects have been noted by various construction researchers who have noted the tendency of actors to pass the risk of social procurement down to the smallest contractors in the supply chain who are least able to manage the risk (Barraket and Loosemore, 2018; Troje and Andersson, 2020; Lou *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, arguments about the many benefits of social procurement are undermined by a lack of empirical research and theorisation about the determinants of success social procurement policies over traditional government interventions (Suchowerska *et al.*, 2024; Roy and Teasdale, 2022). In addressing this gap and in particular, the lack of research into the emerging group of professionals who are being tasked to implement social procurement into the construction industry (Troje and Kadefors, 2018; Troje and Gluch, 2019, 2020; Loosemore *et al.*, 2021, 2022a, 2022b), the following sections outline the theoretical framework of Bricolage to explore the research questions posed in the introduction. As noted in the introduction, the link between bricolage and intrapreneurship lies in how individuals within established organisations can creatively use available resources to pursue innovative projects despite resource constraints (Burgers *et al.*, 2013).

Theory

The theoretical concept of "bricolage" can be traced back to the anthropological work of Lévi-Strauss (1966) who described how societies borrow and adapt resources and ideas from other societies and cultures for their own purposes. At its core, Bricolage theory describes

how individuals or groups create solutions, systems or identities by piecing together whatever resources, ideas or practices are available to them, often in creative and improvised ways. A person who practises bricolage is called a "bricoleur" and was described by Lévi-Strauss (1966) and Weick (2001) as a "jack-of-all-trades" who improvises with the tools and resources they have at-hand, to perform a given task or construct new artefacts with novel applications. Underpinning the concept of bricolage is the core concept of "making do" with limited resources by using them in new ways (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Davidsson *et al.* (2017) define bricolage as the process of finding workable solutions to new challenges by combining existing and often under-used resources to accomplish new challenges that the original resources were not necessarily intended for. The value of Bricolage theory in the context of social procurement in construction is its ability to help conceptualise how creativity emerges from recombination rather than invention in the types of uncertain or resource-poor environments in which social procurement professionals must operate. In this context, the theory argues that creativity often comes less from inventing something entirely new and more from recombining existing elements in innovative ways. This requires three main attributes:

- Resourcefulness – Using what is at hand rather than seeking new or ideal resources.
- Improvisation – Adapting existing resources for new purposes.
- Recombination – Reworking old materials or ideas to create novel outcomes.

To better understand the concept of bricolage numerous authors have conceptualised different types of bricolage activity. For example, Baker *et al.* (2003: 269) introduced the notion of "network bricolage" which they described as a collaborative practice which depends on the synergistic sharing of resources between organisations from multiple sectors. We know this is relevant to the construction industry because of prior research pointing to the importance of cross-sector collaboration in implementing social procurement into the sector (Loosemore *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). Baker and Nelson (2005) conceived bricolage as a socially constructed and creative "resource construction" process and identified two additional types of bricolage activity: *parallel bricolage*; and *selective bricolage*. People who use *parallel bricolage* often lack formal education/qualifications in their operational field and tend to apply self-taught scavenging skills to access diverse resources from multiple fields to develop creative solutions to new challenges. They do this within the bounds of what they can safely "get away with". In contrast, *selective bricolage* tends to be used on a more ad-hoc basis around specific unorthodox initiatives (such as implementing social procurement into a construction project). Selective bricolage is often initiated by supervisors requesting that one or more employees take on new challenges without extra resources, as is often the case in the implementation of social procurement into the construction industry (see Troje and Gluch, 2020). However, because formal authority is generally quite limited for social procurement professionals working in the construction industry, they must rely on other tactics to acquire necessary resources, which can often be frustrating, stressful and time-consuming (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

A fourth type of bricolage is the concept of "place-based" bricolage (Anderson and Gaddefors, 2016) which is relevant to understanding social procurement in the construction industry due to its project-based culture which requires social procurement professionals to continually adapt to the changing social landscape and community networks in which they are building. Related to this is a fifth type of bricolage called "spatial bricolage" (Korsgaard *et al.* 2021) which involves bricoleurs leveraging local community resources in search of workable and accessible resources. Of relevance here is Le Page *et al.* (2020) critique of

social procurement in the Canadian construction industry, which presents an especially strong focus on the importance of engaging with local communities.

The above critique portrays the bricoleur as a heroic, imaginative, networked, resourceful, multiskilled, politically savvy individual who orchestrates the efforts of others in a planned and coordinated fashion. However, Papazu (2021) cautions that bricolage can also be seen as an undesirable. For example, the apparent ability of bricoleurs to magically create new resources and ideas out of "thin air" can impede the development of properly resourced organisational strategies that might support building of longer-term organisational capabilities, solutions and support. Furthermore, Papazu (2021) also warns that bricoleurs can become exhausted by constantly coaxing unwilling actors to engage in their ideas and in trying to get additional service out of worn, failing or obsolete resources. This resonates with the findings of Troje and Gluch (2020) and Troje and Andersson (2020) who have studied the practices of social procurement professionals working in the Swedish and Australian construction industries.

Table 2 isolates the key elements of bricolage that are relevant to the investigation of the implementation of social procurement in a construction context. These represented the analytical and conceptual framework which guided our coding and methodological design, as described below.

Methodology and method

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with social procurement professionals in the Australian construction industry. We used semi-structured interviews because they are widely recognised as an effective way for researchers and participants to jointly make sense of emerging and largely unexplored practices such as social procurement implementation in construction where there is a lack of established theory to direct pre-determined structured questions and testable hypotheses (Keene *et al.*, 2016).

Following strict ethics protocols and after gaining informed consent, interviews were conducted face-to-face and online over a twelve-month period in 2022 / 2023 at the preference of each participant. Interviews typically lasted one hour and guided by our research questions and informed by our analytical framework in Table 1, interviewers explored the resource constraints (if any) participants faced in meeting their social procurement objectives, the causes of these constraints and how they overcame them.

Our sampling approach was purposeful and based on inclusion criteria which were designed to capture a representative sample of construction professionals working in the private sector who had responsibility for implementing government social procurement policies into the Australian construction industry. Given that there is no formal register of such roles due to the newness of social procurement in the construction industry and that

Table 1. Represents the key differences between bricolage and more planned/structured approaches to decision-making like engineering or design thinking

Bricolage	Planned/structured approaches to decision-making
Improvisation and tinkering	Systematic planning
Using what is at hand	Purpose-built resources
Resourcefulness under constraint	Optimisation and efficiency
Emergent and adaptive outcomes	Predictable designed outcomes
Bottom-up creativity	Top-down processes

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 2. Analytical framework

Core elements of bricolage	Core references
"Jack-of-all-trades" – use of tools and resources at-hand that may otherwise go to waste or be used for other purposes, for novel applications	Lévi-Strauss (1966)
"Making do" with limited and existing resources by using them in new ways beyond their intended purpose	Korsgaard *et al.* (2021)
Improvisation in using whatever resources come to hand to perform a given task	Weick (2001)
Socially constructed and creative "resource construction" process which involves creating something from nothing by using with existing resources which would otherwise go to waste	Baker and Nelson (2005)
Parallel bricolage: self-taught "scavenging" skills; deviating from established practices and norms; leveraging diverse networks; building communities of practice	Baker and Nelson (2005)
Selective bricolage: reliance on persuasion, patience, determination and resilience; political savvy, creativity and cross-sector collaboration	Troje (2021), Troje and Gluch (2019), Loosemore *et al.* (2021), Baker and Nelson (2005)
Risk taking, courage to challenge norms and practices; working outside the rules, discretionary effort; strategic alliances with influential people	Troje (2021), Troje and Gluch (2019), Loosemore *et al.* (2021), Baker and Nelson (2005)
Entrepreneurial process of "resource adaptation and combination"	Gundry *et al.* (2011)
Resourcefulness	Aarti and Bart (2013) and Davidsson *et al.* (2017)
Creating new tools, practices, norms and routines	Troje and Gluch (2020), Troje (2021)
Championing social procurement using a range of strategies drawing on hard facts and figures, laws and regulations and emotional stories	Troje and Andersson (2020)
Network bricolage: leveraging relationships to enable the synergistic sharing of resources	Baker *et al.* (2003) Barraket *et al.* (2016), McNeill (2017),Troje and Andersson (2020)
Place-based bricolage: an understanding of the economic, social, political and cultural context ("situatedness" and "local context")	Anderson and Gaddefors (2016)
Spatial bricolage: Leveraging local community connections, capital and resources through community involvement in decision-making	Korsgaard *et al.* (2021), Le Page *et al.* (2020)

Source(s): Created by authors

many are informal in nature and often combined with other existing roles, participants were initially recruited from a national social procurement community-of-practice (CoP) of over 175 social procurement professionals working in a range of contracting, consulting, third-sector and government organisations across the Australian construction industry. Snowball sampling was also used to expand the sample. This involved asking each interviewee to nominate people in similar roles in other organisations outside the CoP who fitted our selection criteria.

In collecting our data we used an abductive approach which involved moving repeatedly between data collection and analysis. This method, originating from the work of Charles Peirce and widely used in public administration research (van Hulst and Visser, 2025), involves a process of creative inference, where researchers move back and forth between data, analysis and existing theories to identify key themes which provide new insights or refine existing ones. This approach is particularly useful in understanding complex phenomena in new fields of research such as social procurement where there is limited theorisation and a-priori research (Troje, 2021).

Using the concept of "theoretical saturation" (Saunders *et al.* 2018), we continued interviewing participants until the data collection process no longer offered any new insights into the research questions. This was established by two researchers independently analysing and then cross-referencing the data coding process to achieve a high level of inter-rater agreement in the validity of the results reported. This resulted in a total of 30 interviews (see Table 3). There is a lack of guidance in the literature about how to test the adequacy of sample numbers required to reach data saturation in qualitative research. However, Guest *et al.* (2006) found that in studies using purposive sampling 12 interviewees is sufficient to achieve data saturation where the aim is to understand common perceptions and experiences amongst a group of relatively homogenous individuals like our participants. Our sample of 30 is significantly larger than this number which provides us with confidence in the representativeness of our sample.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim* and analysed using thematic analysis following protocols by Guest *et al.* (2012). Our research questions were our analytic starting-point, and the first step involved researchers immersing themselves in the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to obtain a high level of familiarity with the data. Secondly, researchers conducted open (inductive) and directed (deductive) coding, organising and generating an initial list of items/codes (first-order coding) from the data set that had a reoccurring pattern. The analytical categories identified through our literature review were used for deductive coding.

Thirdly, researchers searched for recurring patterns, linkages, categories and subcategories within the first-order codes relating to each research question. Fourthly, researchers examined how codes combined to form over-reaching themes relating to the research questions. In the fifth and final stages, emergent themes were further refined by continued searches for data that supported or refuted the initial themes, allowing further expansion and connections between overlapping themes. This process continued in parallel with data collection until theoretical saturation occurred, and no further themes emerged.

In line with the traditions of thematic research, the results presented below are supported by selected quotes from the interviews under each research question. Given the volume of data, it is not possible to report all the quotes under each theme.

Table 3. Sample structure

Resp	Position	Gender	Organisation description
R1	General Manager-Social impact	Female	International construction contractor specialised in construction, development and investment
R2	Social inclusion manager – infrastructure and major projects	Male	Major international construction and infrastructure contractor
R3	Technical Director - Social outcomes	Female	Major international project management, engineering and consulting services firm
R4	National Lead - Social advisory and research	Female	Consultants, designers, planners, engineers and technical specialists. Revenue:
R5	National industrial relations manager	Male	International construction contractor. Specialised in designing and building commercial, residential, education, health, retail, tourism and leisure and mixed-use. Revenue:
R6	Employee relations manager	Male	International construction contractor which specialises in commercial high-rise buildings
R7	Head of diversity and wellbeing	Male	Engineering and construction company
R8	Senior project manager	Male	National project management consultancy, project manages major projects
R9	Social value lead	Female	Government
R10	Social diversity supply chain manager	Male	Multinational and publicly listed construction, property and infrastructure company
R11	Principal, social value – engagement and change advisory	Female	Consultant, design, engineering, advisory
R12	Workforce development and industry participation manager	Female	An international construction contractor which specialises in commercial high-rise buildings
R13	Associate Director-infrastructure and project solutions	Male	Consultant – business consulting and services
R14	Social programme manager	Female	International construction contractor which specialises in commercial high-rise buildings
R15	Development and services manager	Female	Construction contractor specialising in metro, freight and heavy haul and light rail
R16	Group manager, diversity, indigenous and social inclusion	Female	Construction contractor specialising in design and build infrastructure across all key sectors
R17	Social procurement manager	Female	Major international construction and infrastructure contractor
R18	Senior manager – social procurement and workforce development	Female	Government

(*continued*)

Table 3. Continued

Resp	Position	Gender	Organisation description
R19	Stakeholder engagement manager and training project officer	Female	Multinational and publicly listed construction, property and infrastructure company
R20	People and engagement director	Male	International construction, tunnelling, rail, building and services provider
R21	Executive director; innovation and services	Female	Social consultant
R22	Design, evaluation and learning lead		Social foundation
R23	Pre-Contracts manager	Male	Construction contractor-infrastructure
R24	General manager	Female	Major international building construction, infrastructure, investment and development company
R25	Founder and managing director	Female	Business consulting and services specialised in sustainability, ESG, impact and business advisory
R26	Managing director	Male	Major subcontractor specialising in electrical contracting,
R27	Technical director – social performance	Female	Consultant specialised in sustainability solutions
R28	Head of sustainability	Male	Major international building construction, infrastructure, investment and development company
R29	Consultant	Female	Social procurement consultant
R30	Director, communication and stakeholder engagement	Female	Engineering, management, design, planning, project management, consulting and advisory company

Source(s): Created by authors

Results

RQ1. *What is the nature and cause of any resource constraints that social procurement intrapreneurs in the Australian construction industry face in meeting their social procurement objectives?*

In response to RQ1, our data analysis yielded six main themes which can be broadly clustered under the following headings.

Theme 1.1: Resource restrictions are context dependent and normal on most construction projects. Resources to effectively implement social procurement were widely seen as inadequate, limited to government projects with mandated social procurement requirements and dependent on a project director's discretion:

> There is a commitment made to have a resource on that project but there is no budget assigned to that individual…. they don't have the ability to do anything other than tapping into the resources of those other partners – R5.

Despite widespread frustrations about lack of resources, participants were largely fatalistic and recognised that every construction professional worked in a resource constrained environment and had to use principles of bricolage to get things done:

> Over time constraints become the norm […] working with limited resources is just how we do work . but not just in social procurement or social value […] in the whole industry – R15.

However, social procurement professionals were described as facing even greater resourcing challenges due to a lack of credibility in the value created by their roles. The construction industry was widely described as being highly performative which meant that resource availability depended on being able to demonstrate one's value in relation to project goals.

> The answer is no.in general the resources haven't been there in the past. it's a bit of a chicken and egg type situation […] we know we need it but we can't expect more resources until we have proven ourselves – R3.

Theme 1.2: Not all resources are the same value. Participants agreed that not all resources were of the same value. Surprisingly, financial resources were widely seen as the least important resource:

> The last thing you need are financial resources . the main resources are good will and discretionary effort of people across the business – R4.

In contrast, participants widely agreed that by far the most important resource were relationships with like-minded people (with a social conscience) and with social benefit organisations which specialised in delivering social value (like social enterprises). There was general consensus that if these relational resources existed, then other resources would tend to follow. However, participants also noted that these relationships required a lot of time to nurture and maintain (often outside normal working hours). Too often, the networks and connections required to facilitate them was not available in the industry due to the newness of social procurement:

> What they don't appreciate is the depth of relationships that need to be developed in the community and the amount of time that it takes to build the trust that you need to build the credibility to build those partnerships […] R8.

Technology was also widely seen as an important resource in storing, organising and disseminating what participants described as a disconnected field of practice:

> You need data bases, tools […] you need to find them (social businesses), how big they are, who they service. [Intermediary] have a data base, [Intermediary] have one and [Intermediary] have one but they weren't connected . so we had to create our own – R16.

Participants also consistently stressed the importance of resources like government policies and regulations (especially those with clear targets):

> Policies are important resources. You need a policy framework behind you. where there is a policy framework the resources tend to follow – R13.

While contracts were seen as another valuable resource, participants widely agreed that they preferred not to use them to enforce social procurement implementation:

> You also need a contractual regime […] people often won't do something unless they are forced to. It's not their core business […] so you have to make it their core business – R10.

Theme 1.3: Resources are determined by the level of understanding and empathy with social procurement in critical project management roles. Despite social value targets being stipulated in many contracts, most participants described how they were seen as a low priority compared to other project goals:

> We are probably 20th on the list of priorities like on time, on cost, to spec – R2.

This was largely attributed to a poor understanding of social procurement in the construction industry which in-turn resulted in a lack of senior management support, unclear policy targets and a lack of monitoring, enforcement and accountability of social procurement outcomes:

> […] lack of targets from the government […] what gets measured gets done and it gets priced and cost associated with it and then it gets monitored. There were no financial resources behind it or genuine commitment to it from the top – R18.

A defining characteristic of the construction industry is its project-based structure which ensures that an enormous amount of power is vested in the project manager who is ultimately responsible for the delivery of the project on time and on budget. It was widely acknowledged that although some project roles could be enthusiastic about a project delivering social value to the community in which it was being built, access to resources was highly dependent on a sympathetic project manager:

> Unless you get the project manager's buy-in […] you are not going to get the support and resources you need to do your job. The project manager is king in construction and their natural instinct is to prioritise anything than helps deliver the project on time and to budget safely. That's where they will put their money – R24.

Theme 1.4: Poorly designed policies can unintentionally create their own resourcing constraints. Participants described how social procurement policies can unintentionally create their own resourcing constraints. For example, many said that the targets set around using disadvantaged groups were unrealistic and did not consider the construction industry's capacity to deliver. Many argued that this led to gaming and commodification of jobseekers by unscrupulous contractors who would move people from project-to-project to double-count against their contractual targets. It was widely agreed that this practice did more harm than good to the already vulnerable people the policies were meant to help:

> 3% of Aboriginal people is a challenge because it doesn't mean there are 3% of Aboriginal people to do the work […] seeing people moved from project to project to help companies meet targets doesn't help them or anyone and can't make social problems worse – R7.

Government policy-makers were also criticised for providing little support and guidance on policy implementation:

> […] the policy is fantastic […] its forcing the industry to change […] But they provided very little support. they are very poor at saying this is what you need to do and this is how you do it – R10.

While an increasing number of government resources to support social procurement implementation was acknowledged, it was widely described as limited, inaccessible and of little value:

> […] there are so many programs available to help organisations deliver social procurement but it's very all over the place […]. Its disconnected and very hard to find – R6.

Theme 1.5: Social procurement breaks established rules and traditions. A common theme across all interviews was that social procurement was seen as a risk to long established supply chain relationships which were seen as critical to delivering projects on time and budget and safety and to a high quality:

> The industry is high risk and works on trust to deliver on time… Otherwise you could be up for serious LDs (liquidated damages). You are not going to willingly break those relationships which have delivered for you over many years to let some unknown social enterprise or whatnot into your project to put you at risk – R26.

Social procurement was also seen to undermine the basic principles of fair procurement (such as not favouring any one supplier):

> Social procurement breaches every tenant of procurement that was possible . introducing risk by breaking big contracts into small […] you have risky unproven enthusiastic businesses, you are trying to deliver benefit that no one can quantify and cost – R14.

Social procurement was also described by some as unethical because it was perceived to discriminate against traditional construction employees and favour undeserving "outsiders" who had not invested sufficient time to quality to work in the construction industry:

> Look […]. you are not going to get much enthusiasm for something that is seen to discriminate against young kids who have done all the rights things to get a job in the industry […] go to TAFE. get trained… They are going to be much more productive and more deserving that someone that gets an unfair hand-up from a new government policy – R24.

Theme 1.6: Professional background and organisational position determines access to resources. The professional backgrounds of our participants had significant implications for their access to resources. The participants came from many professional backgrounds including mainstream project management roles, working for not-for-profits, working in government employment agencies or relevant departments, unions backgrounds or mainstream communications, human resource management or corporate social responsibility roles within or outside the industry.

While those from outside the construction sector brought an understanding of social procurement and external connections which construction industry participants did not have, they often complained of being treated as "outsiders" (R4) and having to work harder than "insiders" with a construction background to be trusted:

> Coming from a construction background gives you access to the subcontractors because they see you as one of their own. but coming from outside construction gives you access to networks and experience which construction people don't have – R1.

Overall, our results highlighted three main types of roles which had significant implications for access to potential resources to implement social procurement:

(1) The *stand-alone role* – These participants generally had social procurement in their role title and worked from head office. They worked across different projects and had exclusive responsibility for implementing social procurement into their organisations. They tended to be at most risk of isolation and have least access to easy resources. On the other hand, these roles also provided greater organisational visibility and enable the development of more specialised knowledge and expertise which differentiated them from other project roles.

(2) The *imbedded role* – These participants generally operated at an individual project level and had formal (and often sole) responsibility for implementing social procurement into a project. This role had comparatively easy access to resources since it afforded higher levels of visibility and legitimacy and gave most access to the project supply chain into which social procurement was being implemented.

(3) The *integrated project-based role* – These participants were also embedded within a project, but their role was typically hidden and informal and generally performed on top of an existing role. They therefore had relatively easy access to resources since they were able to leverage a more well-resourced and recognised role. However, the informality of this role also created the risk of subjugating social procurement to more recognised competing priorities which are widely perceived to be more important.

Research Question 2 – How do social procurement intrapreneurs in the Australian construction industry secure the resources they need to achieve social procurement objectives?

In response to RQ2, our data analysis yielded six main themes which can be broadly clustered under the following headings.

Theme 2.1: Creating resources at the front end of projects. Participants agreed that the best place to create resources was during the front-end planning and tender stages of projects when there is the greatest desire to win work and when key decisions are being made:

> That's where a lot of innovation happens […] at the front end of projects […] that's where you can create resources and governance structures to allow that impact to happen – R9.

However, many participants complained that resources promised at planning and tender stages would often not eventuate during the delivery stage and that decision-makers were often unaccountable for early commitments made to their clients.

> Resources are often included in bids but then disappear once the project starts on site – R11.

Theme 2.2: Creating resources through the influence of others. Given the relatively disempowered positions of the participants, many relied on leveraging resources through the influence of others in more established and powerful positions or business units. This required a strategic understanding of which roles held power in an organisation, of different business unit goals, of how social procurement was relevant to them and an ability to leverage resources from these areas:

> […] my goals was to understand what they were motivated by and I carve my argument to how investing either time in helping us would meet their goals – R15.

> It's all influence […] my job is to try to persuade other people to spend their money on my thing – R5.
>
> It comes down to someone being able to navigate an organisation and really know what wagon to hitch onto. So inclusion and diversity was really big at [company name] at that time and very influential […] so I just went up to our head of diversity and said wouldn't it be great if we did all the great stuff you are doing for our people here for our suppliers – R15.

A number of participants specifically used the term intrapreneur to describe their roles, arguing that that they often had to work outside the rules to get things done:

> […] I had to become an intrapreneur. I had to do my own communication […], find people to help me do that .[…] without getting really any approval for it – R12.

Senior leadership buy-in was seen as especially important, especially at a project level:

> all you need is to give people the authority to make decisions around value rather than price and this is where senior management endorsement and support is so important […] especially at a project level – R9.

While formal leadership support was important, so too was informal support from like-minded "allies" R4 from across an organisation. To do this, many participants created informal internal communities of practice to create a willing coalition of social procurement champions to promote social procurement on their behalf:

> No one gave me permission to set up the community of practice. I just did it – R7.

Theme 2.3: Creating resources through relational practice. Participants described social procurement as a "relational practice" which involved constant networking and collaborating:

> One of the key things is connecting the dots, talking to anybody that will listen and recruiting them as an informal champion for what we do – R8.

Participants described creating new resources by re-connecting disconnected parts of the social value ecosystem (externally and internally):

> A massive piece of this is the connection part […] […] not-for-profit organisations, government agencies and subcontractors who generally don't talk to each other […] we connect them to create new ideas and resources – R7.

Given that social procurement was poorly understood (Theme 2.1), education was also a commonly used mechanism to influence others and build resources. Of particular importance was educating influential people about the value of social procurement, how to mitigate any perceived risks and the benefits for them of engaging:

> you can't deliver the commitments on your own. your job is to educate other staff members so that they were thinking about these things as part of their KPIs […] – R11.
>
> I spent a lot of my time educating the executive on why this was important and taking them on that journey – R3.

Theme 2.4: Building supply chain capacity to deliver social procurement. Participants also emphasised the importance of nurturing a reliable supply of social businesses which could operate credibly in the construction industry. In the words of one respondent who regretted neglecting the supply side of social procurement implementation when she started her role:

> We went too hard too fast […] we couldn't cope because when you are creating all the momentum of demand on one side you need to have the supply on the other side – R5.

Participants used several strategies to build supply chain capacity which included: supporting minority businesses; simplifying tendering processes; reducing the size of work packages; running information and training sessions and boot camps for prospective suppliers; and developing a more resource-intensive incubation hub model (see Theme 3.3):

> […] we would teach them how to deal with corporate procurement, how to market themselves, how to streamline, how to manage risk […] how to not get too emotional because they are buying a product or service – R16.

Numerous intermediaries have evolved in Australia to help build supply chain capacity and connect the construction industry to various parts of the social procurement eco-system such as social enterprises, local business and Indigenous businesses. However, participants widely agreed that most existing intermediaries were of limited value and did not understand the needs of the industry or have strong enough connections into it to find meaningful and sustainable employment for job seekers. Frustrated by the ineffectiveness and impartiality of these intermediaries (which often represented a particular interest group like social enterprises), two participants had taking the initiative to fund and develop their own project-based intermediaries. However, these initiatives depended entirely on significant centralised resourcing from their using organisations which was very rare and unlikely in our sample:

> We make it easy for our supply chain by creating a hub which provides all the support they need […] our aim is to minimise the risk for them – R7.

Importantly, in questioning the focus of many existing social procurement policies, most participants felt that they couldn't rely on the social economy sector (social enterprises, minority businesses etc.) to meet the targets being set, but needed to engage their existing supply chains.

If they don't come on board then they don't get the job – R8.

However, this posed numerous challenges because most subcontractors see social procurement as a risk to cost, time, quality and safety. Union opposition to social procurement policies was also widely seen as a problem:

> There are certain elements of work where we would normally like to employ an Indigenous business but the CFMEU [construction union] are starting to say they don't have an EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement] with us – R8.

Theme 2.5: Being strategic and reducing perceived risk. Many participants emphasised the dangers of spreading limited resources too thinly and the importance of being strategic in their leveraging of existing resources. The most successful social procurement initiatives built on existing initiatives, strengths and resources, focussed on issues close to key stakeholders' hearts, set realistic goals and started with simple, quick and easy wins. This typically involved focusing on low-risk spending categories which were not on the "critical path" of project programs such as cleaning, security and landscaping services. The inclusion of social benefit organisations like social enterprises and Indigenous businesses into larger work packages on the critical path of project programs, was perceived to be too risky for many in the industry and require fundamental changes to existing procurement practices such as the unbundling of contracts. These were generally presented as longer-term aspirations although a number of participants were experimenting with such mechanisms:

> My advice is to start with the lots less than you were thinking […] go with the basics and smart small and think about one thing that you want to do in a 12 month period. and don't try to boil the ocean with a long list of activities and change the world – R15.

Theme 2.6: Creating resources by creating value. Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of providing a value proposition to senior managers. While some argued that stories were important to engage people, the majority warned against being emotional. Sticking to facts and figures was seen as critical in legitimising their roles:

> My arguments were quite rational […] it depends on the audience but I would never lead by saying it's the right thing to do because no one really cares . always stick to facts […] […] because these requirements are contractual and you must demonstrate you can deliver – R19.

The project-based nature of construction made this challenging because social needs and regulatory imperatives constantly changed:

> our social value is difficult to define […] it changes across different states, it changes across different projects, across different clients and geographical locations and it changes over time – R10.

All participants recognised the limitations of a compliance-based approach to social procurement:

> In 2022 I dropped social procurement altogether[…] I don't refer to it at all. it isn't the 3% here or there. it is what is the potential of this community and how can we use this infrastructure vehicle to generate that – R5.

However, most participants were also pragmatic and recognised that mandated targets were a powerful tool to leverage support and that not everyone is able to exceed the targets being set:

> […] n Victoria where they asked us to start doing it. the key driver is governments mandating it. at least at the start – R16.

Discussion

Research question 1 – what is the nature and cause of any resource constraints that social procurement intrapreneurs in the Australian construction industry face in meeting their social procurement objectives?

Our finding that most social procurement intrapreneurs have insufficient resources to do their jobs effectively, supports Troje (2022) and highlights the value of bricolage theory as a conceptual lens to understand. As outline above, Bricolage theory describes how individuals in resource constrained environments, such as our participants have to improvise and be creative in piecing together whatever resources are available to perform their roles (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Adding to this theory in a construction industry context, our results also show that not all resources have the same value and that the problem, in construction at least, is more one of access to resources rather than quantity. In indicating a clear hierarchy of enabling resources it was interesting that financial resources were generally seen to be the least important. This is important in a construction context given the tight budgetary constraints under which most projects operate and that many of the perceived risks of social procurement in social procurement relate to its impact of core project deliverables such as costs (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). Rather, relationships (with other powerful actors like project directors) were widely seen as the most important resource in addressing participants' lack of legitimate power in a construction project hierarchy (Troje and Gluch, 2020). Most participants felt that if these relationships were strong then other resources would tend to follow. While relationships across the social procurement eco-system (social enterprises, Indigenous businesses, disability enterprises, employment agencies, government organisations, intermediaries etc.) were also important, our results also add a note of caution to Barraket's (2019) and Razmdoost and Alinaghian's (2024) advocacy of intermediaries as relationship

brokers. In contrast, our results show that they are widely mistrusted within the construction industry for lacking independence, for not having strong industry connections to secure jobs and for not understanding the construction industry's unique culture. Interestingly, recent research by Buy Social Canada (2023) also questioned the value of the growing numbers of intermediaries which are emerging in response to social procurement policies, arguing that their loyalties to one stakeholder group undermines their ability to independently make value-adding connections for the benefit of all stakeholders. In particular, Buy Social Canada (2023) found that the self-interested third-party certification systems which are often offered by such intermediaries can be counterproductive to supply chain diversification by limiting the range of legitimate social benefit organisations that can participate in the social procurement eco-system. Our results highlight the need for more research into the potential role of industry-led and project-based intermediaries such as the examples provided in our results. Our results suggest that such intermediaries, while temporal because of their links to a specific project, offer numerous advantages over traditional permanent sector-specific intermediaries though their strong connections to private businesses which can provide jobs for job-seekers. Furthermore, they have no allegiances to any one specific ecosystem actor.

Also new is our finding that poorly designed social procurement policies create their own resourcing constraints if the targets set do not reflect the capacity of the construction industry and social sector to respond. Policy research is rare in the field of construction management (Troje, 2021) but our findings highlight the need to develop policies in consultation with the demand and supply-side organisations which must deliver them in practice. Our findings indicate that top-down imposed policies which fail to consider these resourcing constraints are likely to fail and lead to gaming and the commodification of already vulnerable job seekers in an attempt to meet the targets being set. That is, unless they are accompanied by extra resources to fill those gaps between what the industry has available and what is needed to implement those policies in practice. An alternative and less resource intensive strategy for policymakers would be to address the reasons for those resources not being made available.

Adding to the extant literature on barriers to social procurement (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020; Nawaz and Guribie, 2022; Natoli *et al.*, 2023; Lou *et al.*, 2023), our results isolate four main reasons for a lack of resources in implementing social procurement:

(1) poor understanding of social procurement and how to implement it;
(2) a widespread perception that value is only measured economic terms;
(3) perceptions that the minority individuals and businesses targeted by social procurement are a risk rather than an asset to competitive advantage; and
(4) lack of accountability for social procurement outcomes because they are not monitored and enforced by policymakers.

Our findings support Curtain (2001) who indicates that if government policies like social procurement are to be effective, policy goals need to be clearly articulated, inclusive, realistic and responsive to community needs. However, our results indicate that social procurement policies are currently perceived by many people in the construction industry as unrealistic, inflexible, complex, unresponsive to community needs and inconsistently monitored and enforced. This may explain the widespread compliance-based approach to implementation which we observed (see also Loosemore and Reid, 2019) and which Curtain (2001) argues is the inevitable result of such poor policy design. However, rather than seeing this as a criticism of the construction industry we note that Athanasoglou *et al.*'s (2021) argues that a compliance-based response is a rational, pragmatic and potentially effective strategy for organisations to adopt in the early stages of policy implementation.

Finally, our results add further nuance to Troje and Gluch (2019) and Loosemore *et al.* (2022a, 2022b) who found that social procurement intrapreneurs come from a wide range of professional backgrounds. From a bricolage theory perspective this is important because this also determines relative access to resources to implement social procurement. effectively into their organisations. However, we also found that there is no one "ideal" professional background to generate all the resources needed to implement social procurement effectively. Rather, our results indicate that social procurement is best implemented by a team of intrapreneurs with a variety of different backgrounds which provided access to a range of different resources.

Research question 2 – How do social procurement intrapreneurs in the Australian construction industry secure the resources they need to achieve social procurement objectives?

Our findings in relation to *RQ2* contribute numerous new insights into how social procurement intrapreneurs overcome the resource constraints discussed above. Our finding that most of our participants created resources by influencing others highlights the importance of giving social procurement professionals more formal organisational identity, legitimacy and authority. While this relational dimension of social procurement implementation has been recognised in previous research (see Troje and Gluch, 2020; Loosemore *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b), our results also expand our conceptual understanding of the types of resources created by these relational networking activities. Drawing on Aldrich and Kyne (2020), these can be broadly categorised into the following types:

- Bonding social capital – created by connecting people with common interests;
- Bridging social capital – created by bringing people together from different backgrounds;
- Linking social capital – created when ties are strengthened to people with access to power, influence or resources.

Theoretically, our results also provide a new conceptualisation of social procurement implementation in construction as a form of *selective bricolage* where resources have to be found on an ad-hoc basis, depending on whether a project is subject to government social procurement policy requirements. As Baker and Nelson (2005) note, selective bricolage is typically the result of organisational incumbents in more established roles being asked by employers take on new challenges (such as social procurement) without extra resources or clear organisational legitimacy, power or identity (see also Troje and Gluch, 2020 and Loosemore *et al.*, 2021). The less a construction firm engages in government projects, the more selective the bricolage activity is likely to be.

While our results conceptualise social procurement in construction as a form of selective bricolage, they also point to the importance of *network bricolage* (organisational networking to create awareness, educate, influence and identify allies), *place-based bricolage* (building an understanding of external situatedness and local context) and *spatial bricolage* (leveraging local community connections, capital and resources) (Baker *et al.*, 2003, Anderson and Gaddefors, 2016, Korsgaard *et al.* 2021). The importance of cross-sector collaboration between government, not-for-profit and private business organisations in implementing social procurement (also identified by McNeill, 2017; Barraket *et al.*, 2016), allows us to expand bricolage theory by adding what we term "*sectoral bricolage*."

Many of the strategies used by our participants (recruiting champions, leveraging other peoples' resources, influencing, networking etc.) reflect the core concepts of resourcefulness, improvisation and recombination which lie at the heart of the bricolage literature (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, Korsgaard *et al.* 2021, Weick, 2001; Baker and Nelson, 2005) . However, drawing on Quinn and Sonenshein

(2008) we find that these can be arranged into a new typology which consists of "Empirical-Rational" (E-R), "Normative-Re-educative" (N-R) and "Power-Coercive" (P-C) strategies:

- An E-R strategy – is based on the communication of information about the benefits of social procurement and how it can create value in a project environment, especially by building it into the early stages of projects.
- A N-R strategy – is based on redefining and reinterpreting existing relationships, norms and values and developing commitments to new ones (changing notions of value, existing supply chain relationships and procurement procedures to diversify supply chains).
- A P-C strategy – is based on the exercise of persuasion, authority and ultimately the imposition of sanctions for not delivering on policy requirements.

Finally, our finding that significantly more social value could be created by policy-makers implementing social procurement at the very start of a new construction project is also important. Currently the social procurement is typically being imposed on building contractors retrospectively during the tender process after most of the major decisions about project planning, design and other constraints have already been made (see for example Nawaz and Guribie, 2022). As the UK's Supply Chain Sustainability School (2017) and Royal Institute of British Architects (2020) notes, while policies such as The Social Value Act 2012 was never specifically intended to apply to the design of places and buildings, designers are not excluded from the need to demonstrate social value on their projects – although the focus until now has been very much on the process of development. It is therefore time for designers and architects to align their thinking with the construction value chain.

Conclusion

This research took place within the context of the growing international use of social procurement policies in the construction industry. Using bricolage theory this research offers a number of new theoretical and practical insights for public procurement researchers, managers and policymakers wishing to maximise the social impact of social procurement policies in this context.

Theoretically our findings provide a new conceptualisation of social procurement intrapreneurs as bricoleurs who engage in a process of selective bricolage in finding creative ways to address significant shortfalls in resources to perform their newly emerging roles. However, we find that resource deficiency is not as universal as previous research suggests. Rather, it appears to vary across different types of resources, across and within different organisations and according to the professional backgrounds, knowledge, attributes, networks, experience and competencies of social procurement professionals. We also find that it is not so much the quantity of resources which is the problem but their accessibility and quality. Our findings also contribute new insights into why the above resourcing problems exist and why in the context of resource constraints a compliance mindset can be an effective implementation strategy in the early stages of field development.

Our findings raise important new questions from a public policy-maker's perspective about what the construction industry can be reasonably expected to deliver in response to social procurement policies – at least in the short-term while the industry matures in its understanding of social procurement and builds the cross-sector relationships which underpin effective implementation. In other words, while policy makers should have high aspirations for the potential use of construction social procurement to create social value, they need to acknowledge that not all the industry can move at the same pace and that it may take time for many parts of the industry to shift to achieve ideal policy goals.

Practitioner implications

For public procurement managers and social procurement policymakers the findings of this research have several important implications:

- Firstly, they indicate that policymakers need to ensure that they genuinely consult the industries into which these policies are being implemented and set realistic targets which reflect existing industry maturity, understanding and resource constraints. This may sound obvious and be a well-established principle of effective policy development, but it is not always the case in the context of construction social procurement. This paradoxically leads to the opposite of what policymakers intend - gaming of the rules and commodification of the disadvantaged job seekers they are trying to help into employment. At best, it leads to a compliance-based approach to policy implementation.
- Secondly, policymakers must ensure that social procurement is taken more seriously by giving sufficient weight to social procurement requirements in tender documents and then monitoring and enforcing those requirements in practice – possibly with financial or contractual penalties for non-compliance.
- Thirdly, given the severe resource constraints we have exposed in our research, policymakers need to ensure that there are sufficient resources to support policy implementation and that they are also clearly communicated and made accessible to all stakeholders in the social procurement eco-system. In doing this, policymakers might also reflect on the self-imposed resourcing constraints created by the relatively top-down and highly targeted nature of social procurement policies in countries Australia compared to other countries. A more bottom-up, community-informed approach might spread resources more efficiently and effectively in some communities where there is a paucity of these groups and where other local priorities might exist.
- Fourthly, given the importance of genuine cross-sector collaboration to effective social procurement implementation, policymakers need to ensure that they encourage and incentivise such collaboration to ensure the relational resources necessary are available. This is where our results indicate that intermediaries are of value, although our results also indicate that they need to be independently hosted by government and not any specific interest group – as is typically the case now in many countries like Australia.
- Fifthly, in addressing the nascent nature of this policy-field, policymakers need to ensure that there are sufficient educational resources to support policy-implementation. Such resources may include best practice case studies to foster innovation in a field where there is little of that at the moment.
- Sixthly, it is important that policymakers do not just focus on the construction stage of projects but leverage the power of social procurement over the whole project life-cycle – especially in the early planning and design stages of projects where the greatest potential for social value creation exists.
- Finally, while policymakers can do little about how private construction firms resource and organise themselves to implement social procurement, they can help to empower social procurement professionals to do so. For example, they could require tendering firms to describe “how” they will comply with social procurement targets as they do in other important areas of construction industry compliance such as safety – where method statements are a common mechanism to explain this. Social procurement method statements could be used in the same way.

Research limitations

We conclude this paper by recognising the limitations of our results in that they need to be interpreted within the context of Australia's relatively mature policy environment compared to other countries. Australia's social procurement policies are also of a targeted top-down nature while other countries (such as the UK) take a more bottom-up generic approach. We also recognise that the sample is focussed on large firms. The reason for this is that we could find no identifiable social procurement professionals working in small firms. However, as small firms working in the supply chains of large firms are gradually required to demonstrate compliance with these policies, further research is needed to contrast the different challenges they may face. Finally, we would note that while the sample of 30 participants represents a reliable sample in qualitative research studies like ours, we acknowledge that larger samples will need to be secured as the field of practice grows.

Future research directions

As for future research directions to build on the above findings, it would be interesting to undertake comparative research in other countries to better understand what impact policy type and maturity has on the way that social procurement professionals access resources to do their jobs. It would also be interesting, as the field of social procurement develops to research how it is resourced in small firms which make up most of the construction industry. For example, in Australia, about 98% of firms employ less than 20 people. It would also be interesting to undertake more detailed case study research to explore in more depth, the lives of social procurement professionals as they go about their day-to-day jobs. Given the nascent nature of social procurement as a field of study, more in-depth case study research would offer several key benefits, including in-depth understanding of the relational strategies which social procurement professionals use to address resource constraints and it would also help to address the lack of theory in the field by enabling the development and testing of theories, particularly in areas where large-scale studies are not feasible or appropriate. Finally, in terms of future research our findings raise some interesting new questions about how the many identified skills, knowledge and attributes needed to resource social procurement in the construction industry can be developed through education and training.

Ethics statement

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Reference: ETH23-8263.

Data availability

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the generation of this paper the authors did not use generative AI and AI-assisted technologies.

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