

A critical analysis of social procurement obstacles: insights from contractors and clients in Botswana

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the barriers associated with the implementation of social procurement (SP) from the vantage points of contractors and clients as key stakeholders in the Botswana construction industry. The study further offers recommendations to mitigate these identified barriers, providing valuable insights for decision-makers in the construction sector looking to maximize the benefits of SP.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed semi-structured interviews to collect data from 31 respondents. Barriers to SP implementation were assessed within the four domains of the study's conceptual framework: resources, procurement practices, policy and regulation and socio-cultural aspects. Subsequently, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the gathered data to arrive at the findings.

Findings – The study highlights that key stakeholders in the construction sector are significantly affected by the same barriers hindering the implementation of SP in both developing and developed countries, though at varying rates. Fronting is one of the obstacles discovered in the study, which is not common in most developed countries where SP research is advanced.

Research limitations/implications – The study's shortcomings include a lack of generalization due to the convenience sampling technique used and the lack of empirical research on SP in Botswana.

Social implications – This research provides essential guidance for key stakeholders in overcoming SP implementation challenges. Furthermore, it gives the government information to improve social value initiatives.

Originality/value – This research is the first to assess SP obstacles in Botswana and adds to the conversation on SP implementation in developing countries.

Keywords Clients, Challenges, Contractors, Social procurement, Social value

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Social procurement (SP) leverages an organization's purchasing power to generate positive community outcomes while meeting traditional requirements of cost, quality, timeliness, and safety (Loosemore, 2016). The construction sector, a leading player in social value creation, plays a crucial role in offering training and employment opportunities for disadvantaged individuals (Okeke, Nnaemeka-okeke and Awe, 2023). Contractors or clients often include social clauses in tenders, requiring commitments to minority groups (such as women and individuals with disabilities), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and social enterprises (Loosemore, 2016). SMEs, in particular, can view social

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sustainability as a competitive advantage with financial benefits (Safdar *et al.*, 2024) and surveys indicate SME owners believe that enhanced social practices could improve financial performance. Consequently, governments increasingly use social procurement regulations to ensure contractors deliver social value, (Murphy and Eadie, 2019; Selviaridis *et al.*, 2023). However, social responsibility remains underdeveloped within the construction industry (Petersen and Kadefors, 2016). In response, public project contractors are now expected to demonstrate their social impact on local economies and communities (Raiden *et al.*, 2019). Innovative models like Australia's Connectivity Centre are further advancing social procurement by supporting marginalized groups and collaborating with social enterprises to help disadvantaged job seekers, enhancing both social impact and procurement goals (Meltzer *et al.*, 2024).

Countries like Australia, Sweden, Canada, and the UK have adopted social procurement policies, whether through mandated or voluntary regulations. Notable examples include the UK's Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012), the EU's procurement law (European Union, 2014), ISO 20400 (2017), and South African Government (2017), as highlighted by Loosemore *et al.* (2020a, b). Recently, Botswana has joined these efforts, incorporating sustainable procurement principles in its updated Public Procurement Act (2021). Previous studies highlight the limited investigation into social procurement within developing economies, despite the growing interest in the topic (Lou *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, social procurement's global recognition as essential for social value creation remains challenging (Natoli *et al.*, 2023). While social procurement criteria are gaining traction in project-based fields like construction, relevant research and theories are limited, (Lou *et al.*, 2023; Natoli *et al.*, 2023; Bridgeman and Loosemore, 2024). The existing literature largely emphasizes SP policies in Western countries, with an overrepresentation of research from regions like Australia, Canada, and the UK (Loosemore *et al.*, 2023a). To date, few studies address SP barriers specifically from the perspectives of contractors and clients in Southern Africa. Expanding SP research to African contexts, such as Botswana, could significantly enhance the global understanding of social procurement practices and challenges.

Loosemore (2016) examined barriers to social procurement in Australia's construction sector, specifically the challenges faced by social enterprises. Similarly, Okeke and Nnaemeke-Okeke (2021) found that in Nigeria, women remain the most disadvantaged group in construction despite ongoing policy efforts. In Botswana, Bothale (2017) analyzed value-for-money obstacles in public procurement, finding issues with low bidding prices, bidder selection, and professionalism; however, his focus was on government procurement rather than contractors. This study differs from previous related research, such as Okeke, Nnaemeka-Okeke and Awe (2021), which focused on how employment requirements create opportunities for disadvantaged groups in Nigeria. Similarly, Williams (2023) who examined barriers to gender-responsive public procurement in South Africa explored barriers to social sustainability from the client's perspective only. Kuruneri and Zivanai (2024) identified limited awareness as a critical factor undermining the effectiveness of social procurement in Botswana while exploring the concept within the local context. Unlike these studies, our research examines the barriers to social procurement in Botswana from both the client and contractor perspectives, two crucial views for successful SP implementation.

Furthermore, Botswana's unique governance context, especially with the recent Public Procurement Act of 2021 and Procurement Regulation of 2023, provides a distinct basis for comparison with other African nations. While Nigeria's federal structure results in varied policy application, and South Africa's decentralized system struggles with corruption and service inefficiencies, Botswana's centralized, stable governance enables more consistent policy enforcement. These structural differences shape each country's challenges, highlighting the importance of examining Botswana's social procurement obstacles in its specific context.

The study aims to answer this key question: *What are the key obstacles impeding social procurement implementation in Botswana's construction sector?*

This study significantly expands the understanding of social procurement by examining SP challenges in Botswana within an African context and comparing these findings with research from both Africa and Western nations. Additionally, it provides valuable insights into addressing inequality, poverty, and unemployment by enhancing SP effectiveness in Botswana and other emerging economies, thereby supporting sustainable development goals for inclusive growth and social protection. Moreover, the study addresses geographic biases in SP research, enriching the global discourse on SP and advancing social value delivery worldwide, while informing policy development and strategic decision-making.

2. Literature review

This section of the study explores various literary materials critical to broadening the understanding of the concept of social procurement, examining the various social value-related frameworks in Botswana.

2.1 Social procurement and social value policies in Botswana

Social procurement is an emerging paradigm that enables companies to leverage their purchasing power to generate social value that far exceeds the value of the products and services acquired (Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020). The notion of social value focuses on identifying and measuring the beneficial effects that organizations and activities exert on society, communities, individuals, and the environment, transcending mere financial profit (Gyadu-Asiedu *et al.*, 2024). Social value is evidenced through various outcomes, including social inclusion (e.g., of marginalized minorities), employment and training opportunities, equitable working conditions, access to public contracting for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), environmental stewardship, and ethical practices within supply chains (Troje and Andersson, 2021). Governments and institutions use social procurement to achieve secondary objectives, such as employment generation and poverty reduction through public contracts (Barraket *et al.*, 2016; Raiden *et al.*, 2019; Loosemore *et al.*, 2021).

However, the uptake of SP and effective implementation rely on coercive regulations and procurement clauses (Selviaridis *et al.*, 2023; Nawaz and Guribie, 2022; Razmdoost and Alinaghian, 2024). While coercive clauses can be effective, they may lead contractors to do only the bare minimum to satisfy the client rather than fully integrating social procurement into their business strategy. These social value elements are addressed throughout various procurement stages, including requirement definition, vendor selection, supplier evaluation, and contracting. Socially responsible businesses also support SP to fulfill their CSR mandates (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021). As a policy tool, SP enables governments to leverage construction supply chains to address issues like unemployment (Loosemore *et al.*, 2022), often tying public contracts to broader social goals (Lerousse and Van de Walle, 2021). Research highlights how SP fosters work opportunities for disadvantaged groups by including employment mandates for local or minority-owned firms (Loosemore and Denny-Smith, 2016). Furthermore, social procurement is seen as an effective tool to help countries achieve their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), directly supporting several SDGs (LePage and Renaerts, 2023).

Botswana's Public Procurement Act of 2021 emphasizes empowerment programs that drive social value. The accompanying Public Procurement Regulation of 2023, particularly Part X (Reservation and Preferential Treatment), outlines criteria for reservation and preference requirements, skills transfer, reservation schemes, preference schemes, and subcontracting to promote social value through procurement. The Local Preference Scheme (LPS), dating back to 1976, reserves 20% of each ministerial budget for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs) supporting youth, women, people with disabilities, and rural area

dwellers. Other empowerment initiatives include the Citizen Economic Empowerment Policy (CEEP), Economic Inclusion Act of 2021, and Economic Diversification Drive (EDD), demonstrating the government's commitment to citizen empowerment. The Public Procurement Act mandates that tender documents specify CEEP, EDD, or LPS preferences. This study examines the challenges contractors and clients face in aligning with these schemes and implementing procurement policies aimed at social value.

2.2 Barriers to the implementation of social procurement

2.2.1 *Resource constraints.* Resource constraints are among the major obstacles to social procurement across various contexts.

This obstacle is recognized in social procurement literature as a knowledge-based limitation that hinders successful implementation (Kuruneru *et al.*, 2025; Kuruneru and Zivanai, 2024; Troje, 2023; Nawaz and Guribie, 2022; Sabini and Alderman, 2021; Loosemore, 2016). It endorses the resource-based perspective that internal organizational competencies, including skills and knowledge, are essential for effective strategy implementation. The literature attributes this knowledge gap to several factors, including a lack of technical expertise, limited understanding of the concept, and inadequate training for those responsible for implementation. The growing awareness of social procurement in Scotland and Victoria has been linked to differences in policy design (Loosemore *et al.*, 2025). However, most studies focus on developed countries, raising the question of whether these underlying factors are consistent across different economic contexts.

Financial constraints also present a significant barrier to social procurement implementation (Sabini and Alderman, 2021; Loosemore *et al.*, 2020). Contractors often perceive social procurement as costly, while clients believe it increases procurement expenses (Wontner *et al.*, 2020). For instance, hiring marginalized individuals requires additional mentoring and training, which demands extra financial resources (Loosemore *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, financial constraints often limit the government's ability to support long-term sustainability goals (Pot, 2021). As a result, inadequate government support remains a widely recognized barrier to SP (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020; Okeke and Nnaemeka-Okeke, 2023; Loosemore *et al.*, 2023), with contractors frequently relying on financial assistance to offset SP-related costs. Although the literature highlights financial limitations as a major challenge, it does not critically examine whether these concerns are justified or stem from a lack of understanding of social procurement's long-term benefits. This raises important questions about whether the perception of rising costs is linked to knowledge gaps, misconceptions, or a preference for short-term financial returns over long-term social and economic gains. Beyond financial and knowledge constraints, other resource-related challenges include insufficient management support (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020; Troje, 2021) and a poorly capacitated market unable to meet demand (Loosemore and Reid, 2019). These factors further hinder the successful implementation of social procurement, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of how resource constraints interact and reinforce each other.

2.2.2 *Policy and legislative constraints.* Another significant barrier to social procurement is the conflict between its cooperative objectives and the fragmented, project-based nature of the construction industry, making social procurement more challenging (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021, 2022). This illustrates the conflict between institutional compulsion (via legislative mandates) and the practical realities of building, as examined in institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Additionally, it highlights the challenge of implementing social procurement in a sector driven more by cost and time constraints than by long-term social benefits. Troje (2021) argues that SP laws in Sweden ignore this sectoral reality, which leads to significant non-compliance and casual treatment of social procurement. While prior studies emphasize the need for clearer laws and guidelines, researchers such as Arrowsmith (2010) argue that social procurement policies should avoid excessive prescriptiveness and reserve specific actions to contractor discretion. This discrepancy indicates that the efficacy of SP policies

relies not only on regulatory precision but also on their flexibility in addressing sector-specific limitations. Additionally, in China, social clauses are often vulnerable to fraud, as contractors may fabricate information to meet these requirements (Natoli *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, project stakeholders lack consensus on SP's potential benefits, which contributes to low support for the cultural and capability shifts needed to implement SP effectively (Loosemore *et al.*, 2022; Mupanemunda, 2020). Although legislative drivers can facilitate SP adoption, inconsistent application of EU regulations and the often-optional nature of enforcement limit their effectiveness (Varga and Hayday, 2023). This indicates that regulations alone are insufficient; effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are needed to ensure they deliver social value.

2.2.3 Procurement risk aversion. In the construction industry, social procurement is often compliance-driven, limited to low-value, low-risk operations, and typically carried out by existing contractors lacking social value-creation capabilities or by small organizations with limited capacity (Reid and Loosemore, 2017). This approach to social procurement, focused on meeting social value tender requirements, is seen as the main reason contractors rarely integrate SP into their business strategies and struggle to deliver significant social value (Montalbán-Domingo *et al.*, 2018; Loosemore, 2016). Furthermore, while public authorities may show interest in adopting SP laws (Castellas *et al.*, 2017), suppliers frequently lack the necessary scale to deliver on these mandates effectively (Natoli *et al.*, 2023) and tend to involve inexperienced suppliers^{**},^{**} perceived as riskier and more costly compared to established contractors (Mupanemunda, 2020). Consequently, these factors collectively fuel negative perceptions among procurement specialists, hindering effective SP implementation (Barraket *et al.*, 2016; Mupanemunda, 2020). Beyond the risk-averse approach of procurement officials, subcontractors also view marginalized individuals as potential risks to project cost, productivity, and safety, leading to their exclusion (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020). This highlights a paradox: while social procurement policies aim to address the exclusion of minorities, contractors often view marginalized groups as a risk to project completion. Overcoming this hurdle requires a cultural shift from traditional procurement to a social value-focused approach (Loosemore, 2016) and regulatory adjustments to integrate social value into megaprojects (De Nito *et al.*, 2024).

2.2.4 Socio-cultural constraints. Lack of management support is a significant barrier to effective social procurement implementation in construction, as the success of SP often hinges on strong leadership and commitment (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020; Troje, 2021). Some researchers argue that political will and dedicated leadership are critical for the success of such transformative initiatives (Dragicevic and Ditta, 2016). However, top-down SP implementation without contractor input can limit its effectiveness in the sector (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021). This suggests that leadership challenges require a collaborative approach between clients and contractors in integrating social values into procurement practices (Loosemore, 2016; Kuruneri and Zivanai, 2024), while poor leadership commitment undermines social value outcomes. Several reasons can be attributed to such non-commitment to social value by management, including the associated costs (Wontner *et al.*, 2020), productivity, and safety concerns (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021b). SP in construction often requires companies to employ marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, who face considerable workplace barriers (Kwok Wai Wong and HQ Lin, 2014). While the Botswana leadership has introduced SP policies, procurement management still prioritizes lowest-cost bids, thus limiting the adoption of social value in tender decisions (Botlhale, 2017). This highlights a contradiction, that although social value policies are in place, financial realities influence procurement choices, complicating the parity between financial sustainability and social impact (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021b). Researchers recommend incorporating social value key performance indicators in bid evaluation criteria, thus integrating SP considerations into procurement processes instead of treating them as ancillary elements (Kuruneri and Zivanai, 2024; Murphy and Eadie, 2019).

Despite the success of social procurement in other sectors, key marginalized groups like women remain underrepresented in the global construction industry (Shibani *et al.*, 2021).

Similarly, in the food logistics sector, [Pilati and Di Stradis \(2024\)](#) found that social procurement practices often discriminate against women. However, while Botswana leaves the inclusion of women in the construction sector to contractor discretion ([Mukhopadhyay and Moswela, 2020](#)), Australia has taken a more proactive approach. The Australian Model Construction Gender Equity Bill (2024) mandates quotas and enforces monitoring to address this underrepresentation ([Dickson and Gerber, 2024](#)). This highlights that while both countries may face similar challenges, their socio-economic contexts differ. Furthermore, recent data reveal a decline in female participation, highlighting the inadequacy of passive government strategies ([Dickson and Gerber, 2024](#)). Women in construction face numerous challenges, including harassment, poor work-life balance, health and safety risks, lower wages, and limited access to site-based and managerial roles ([Shibani et al., 2021](#)). Additionally, studies report hostile work environments characterized by unattractive terms, bullying, and harassment ([Cattell et al., 2016](#); [Oyewobi et al., 2019](#)).

People with disabilities also face significant discrimination in the construction industry. For example, subcontractors often perceive disadvantaged groups, including women and individuals with disabilities, as threats to productivity, cost efficiency, and safety ([Loosemore et al., 2019](#)). [Simbaya et al. \(2019\)](#) highlight that disabled individuals require support to perform effectively in work environments. This underscores the construction sector's sensitivity to marginalized groups, particularly women and people with disabilities, due to the physically demanding nature of the work. However, best practices and regulations advocate for greater representation of women in the industry.

2.3 Conceptual framework

The literature review and [Ershadi et al.'s \(2021\)](#) study on sustainable procurement informed the development of the conceptual framework for this research. This approach responds to literature's demand for a more comprehensive conceptualization and theorization of social procurement, a domain frequently criticized for its insufficient theoretical foundation and lack of organized models ([Lou et al., 2023](#); [Natoli et al., 2023](#); [Bridgeman and Loosemore, 2024](#)). [Ershadi et al. \(2021\)](#) identified resources, policies, compliance, culture, and communication as key elements of sustainable procurement, which align with the social procurement literature. The framework presented in this study is structured into four domains: resources, policies and regulations, socio-culture, and procurement practices, each analyzed from both internal and external organizational perspectives.

The primary distinction from sustainable procurement lies in the consolidation of policies and compliance and the shift from "culture" to "socio-culture," reducing the number of domains from five to four. These adjustments, informed by the literature, enhance the framework's applicability to social procurement, with each domain encompassing broad themes and subthemes that address barriers to implementation.

The domains within the conceptual framework were guided by two key theories frequently cited in social procurement literature: the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Institutional Theory ([Razmdoost and Alinaghian, 2024](#); [Loosemore et al., 2021](#); [Wontner, 2018](#)). These theories serve to categorize the moderating variables influencing social procurement adoption.

2.3.1 Institutional theory. Institutional Theory posits that the social environment surrounding enterprises shapes organizational behavior, leading to similar structures and practices across firms within an industry ([Meyer and Rowan, 1977](#)). It provides a comprehensive lens for identifying and analyzing the factors contributing to the sustainability and legitimacy of organizational practices, including social, legal, environmental, and economic variables ([Baumol et al., 2009](#); [Roy, 1997](#); [Hirsch, 1975](#)). Legitimacy is defined as the degree to which social procurement practices are considered appropriate and acceptable by stakeholders ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#)). Unlike frameworks that assume a purely rational approach, Institutional Theory emphasizes the role of social processes, norms, and expectations in shaping corporate behavior. Diverse stakeholders

impose social conformity demands on organizations, resulting in shared operational characteristics across companies. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) introduced the concept of isomorphism, which refers to the structural similarity that emerges among organizations due to various external and internal pressures. They classified isomorphism into three distinct categories: coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism, as explained further by DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

Firstly, coercive isomorphism arises from formal pressures, such as government regulations and policies that mandate contractors to incorporate social value into procurement practices. These regulatory requirements compel organizations to align their procurement strategies with broader sustainability objectives to remain compliant and competitive within the industry. Secondly, normative isomorphism is driven by professional standards and industry norms that shape organizational behavior. Professional bodies, such as the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply (CIPS) and regulatory agencies, play a key role in promoting sustainable procurement practices within the construction sector and beyond. These institutions establish ethical guidelines and best practices that influence procurement professionals to integrate sustainability into their decision-making processes. Lastly, mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations replicate the procurement strategies of successful industry leaders. In response to uncertainty, firms adopt proven social procurement practices to enhance their reputation, efficiency, and competitive advantage. Collectively, these forms of isomorphism contribute to the widespread institutionalization of sustainable procurement practices within the industry.

This study applies these three types of isomorphism to examine the barriers impeding responsiveness to environmental changes that encourage social procurement adoption. Institutional Theory is particularly relevant for analyzing these barriers because it offers a holistic perspective on external challenges, considering environmental, political, technological, and social factors.

2.3.2 Resource-based view (RBV). Complementing Institutional Theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV) focuses on an organization's internal assets, competencies, capabilities, and knowledge, emphasizing resources developed within the organization rather than external influences (Penrose, 1959). RBV defines resources as all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, and knowledge that enable the formulation and execution of strategies to enhance efficiency and effectiveness (Barney, 1991). RBV highlights the significance of unique resources and capabilities in achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). These resources can include human capital, information technology, equipment, and knowledge (Sarkis et al., 2010). Implementing sustainable practices, such as social procurement, relies on the interaction between organizational culture and management processes, which are shaped by human resource characteristics (Daily and Huang, 2001). According to RBV, organizations with valuable, rare, and inimitable resources can achieve superior performance and long-term success (Grant, 1991).

While resources are fundamental to competitive advantage, previous studies have often emphasized business capabilities (Njagi and Shalle, 2016; Powell et al., 1997). These capabilities, rooted in business processes, are complex bundles of skills and knowledge that facilitate the effective execution of tasks within organizational workflows (Boampong-Ohemeng et al., 2015). These resources, whether tangible or intangible, provide companies with a competitive edge (Barney and Mackey, 2016) in adopting practices like social procurement, which are increasingly essential for securing public tenders. This study employs RBV to examine how internal resource constraints and organizational capabilities limit institutions' ability to effectively implement social procurement practices. By integrating RBV and Institutional Theory, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of both internal and external barriers to social procurement adoption.

Figure 1: This conceptual framework illustrates independent variables as indicators of the obstacles businesses encounter in adopting social procurement. The relationship between these obstacles and the outcomes of social procurement initiatives is influenced by various moderating factors. The dependent variables reflect the effects and outcomes associated with either overcoming or yielding to these challenges.

The framework in **Figure 1** emphasizes several key factors that influence the implementation of social procurement initiatives in Botswana. These factors include stakeholders, resources, policies and regulations, socio-cultural aspects, and procurement practices. Understanding these elements is crucial for effectively addressing the challenges and enhancing the impact of social procurement in the region.

The following provides a summary of each domain within the social procurement conceptual framework:

Resources: The capacity and distribution of resources at both intra- and extra-organizational levels influence sustainability outcomes (Raitu *et al.*, 2015). This domain encompasses financial resources, knowledge, human resource competencies, and infrastructure.

Policies and regulations: The procurement and execution methods play a key role in determining the longevity of construction projects. This domain focuses on regulations, rules,

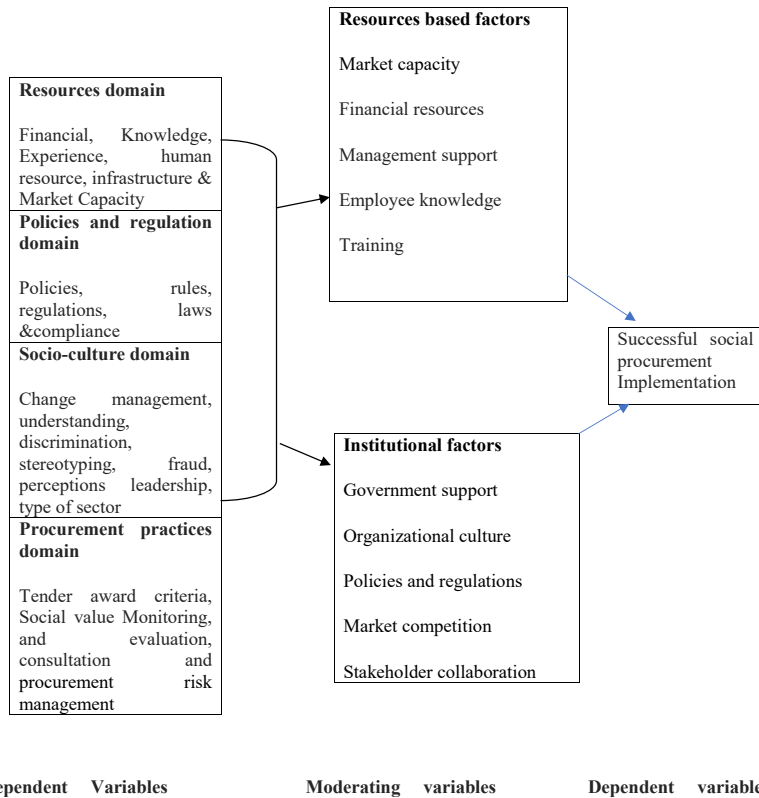


Figure 1. Conceptual framework Notes: Within this conceptual framework, the independent variables serve as indicators of the obstacles that businesses could encounter while attempting to adopt social procurement. The link between these obstacles and the results of social procurement efforts is influenced by the moderating factors. The dependent variables include the many effects and outcomes associated with the process of overcoming or succumbing to these obstacles. Source: Authors' compilation (2024)

processes, and policies from both internal and external perspectives. The norms and views of procurement staff influence the adoption of social procurement (Barraket and Weissman, 2009). It also addresses barriers related to contractors' compliance with social value clauses.

Socio-cultural: Beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes help shape a corporate sustainability culture (Ershadi *et al.*, 2021). Social procurement introduces new challenges to these socio-cultural elements. Concepts like SP often push against cultural elements that affect social procurement performance, such as leadership, corporate transformation, and procurement strategies (Tan *et al.*, 2019).

Procurement practices: This domain focuses on barriers within the internal and external supply chains that prevent the delivery of social benefits. Effective communication between supply chain partners is essential for maintaining this connection. It involves consultation and the absence of control and management processes. However, SP policies imposed without addressing the construction industry's compliance capacities are unlikely to benefit society (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020a, b).

3. Methodology

This section of the study provides an overview of the research approach, data collection techniques, data analysis, and justification behind the choices made in gathering the required data.

3.1 Research approach

Researchers employed a qualitative approach to gain insights from contractors and clients in the construction sector regarding obstacles to implementing social procurement. This methodology was selected for its capacity to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences, opinions, and behaviors of stakeholders (Lim, 2024; Mantula *et al.*, 2024). Direct engagement with participants allows researchers to capture nuanced perspectives, which are crucial for understanding the complexities of social procurement practices. Such depth and quality of information are often difficult to achieve through quantitative methods alone.

3.2 Data collection

The study conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 construction and client representatives. The interview questions were designed based on themes and gaps identified in the social procurement literature. To enhance question quality, the researcher collaborated with co-authors and peers in the field, incorporating their feedback for further refinement. Participants received the interview questions several days in advance to ensure quality contributions. They were selected based on their roles and procurement experience. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for several reasons. Firstly, they allowed participants to provide detailed information through a combination of open and closed questions, while still enabling them to freely express their thoughts and interact with the researcher (Karatsareas, 2022). Secondly, the study was exploratory in nature, given the limited research on barriers to social procurement in the construction sector, and it provides a solid foundation for future quantitative studies. Thirdly, semi-structured interviews facilitated two-way communication between respondents and researchers. Moreover, the telephone interview approach was preferred due to its greater convenience in terms of time and cost compared to face-to-face interviews (Gray *et al.*, 2020). The interviews were conducted over the phone between June 2022 and September 2023, as this method was more convenient for both participants and researchers. Each interview lasted between 18 min and 1 h. Lastly, the interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed manually, as many participants switched between Setswana and English. Manual transcription was necessary because the transcription software could not accurately capture Setswana. Participants were asked questions such as: "What is

3.3 Sampling

A total of 31 participants were interviewed, comprising 15 contractors and 16 client representatives. All contractors were based in Botswana, although four had headquarters in South Africa and China. Client representatives were procurement officials from the public sector and state enterprises, operating under the guidance of the public procurement authority. Convenience sampling was used to select participants. Contractors were identified through the Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Board (PPADB) website, which lists contractors awarded public tenders, while clients were sourced from LinkedIn based on their availability and willingness to participate (Golzar *et al.*, 2022; Stratton, 2021) with some referrals contributing to the study sample. Contractors were defined as companies hired by the government to carry out construction-related projects. The study focused on 15 large contractors who received public tenders worth at least P10 million in the past four years, ensuring that participants had sufficient budgets to potentially make a positive social impact. Figure 2 illustrates the convenience sampling process.

Convenience sampling was chosen for its practical advantages, including ease of participant availability and accessibility (Simkus, 2022; Stratton, 2021) and its efficiency in terms of time and cost (Golzar *et al.*, 2022) through the use of reliable online platforms. In this exploratory study, convenience sampling enabled the collection of initial insights from a readily accessible pool (Mweshi and Sakyi, 2020), aligning with the goal of exploring an under-researched issue. The sample size was determined by the diversity and depth of information collected, rather than by a specific number of respondents (Merriam, 2009). Interviews continued until data saturation was reached, which occurred after the 26th interview. To confirm data saturation, five additional interviews were conducted, resulting in a total of 31 participants.

3.4 Data analysis

This qualitative study employs thematic analysis to interpret the data, allowing for multiple interpretations that effectively categorize information and reveal patterns aligned with the conceptual framework (Braun and Clarke, 2024). This method has been successfully applied in previous social procurement studies (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021, 2022). The study used the six steps of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006): immersing in data repeatedly (the authors read through interview transcripts over and over to understand the data); categorizing and coding (the authors looked at each piece of data and put specific data extraction into themes); theme search (the authors found themes more precisely and focused); and redefining themes (the researcher looked over and improved themes in this step). Theme refining commenced where the researcher adjusted the codes to enhance and accurately describe the dataset until they were no longer refinable, lastly, (report writing) at this point the report writing process began. Figure 3 illustrates the thematic analysis process in detail. Themes were developed deductively from the conceptual framework, informed by the literature review, while also considering any significant themes that emerged outside this framework.

Each co-author validated the data by comparing the recorded interviews to the transcripts and reviewing the thematic analysis to ensure the themes reflected participants' contributions (Rowlands, 2021). Furthermore, data validation involved sending transcripts to participants for accuracy confirmation. Discrepancies were resolved to enhance reliability. The research also included peer debriefing to strengthen dependability and credibility, (Abidin *et al.*, 2024), with colleagues from two departments and external peers reviewing the coding techniques, findings and analysis and providing valuable feedback. This process ensures the study meets quality standards of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Cuba (1985) and referenced by Treharne and Riggs (2015). Any discrepancies

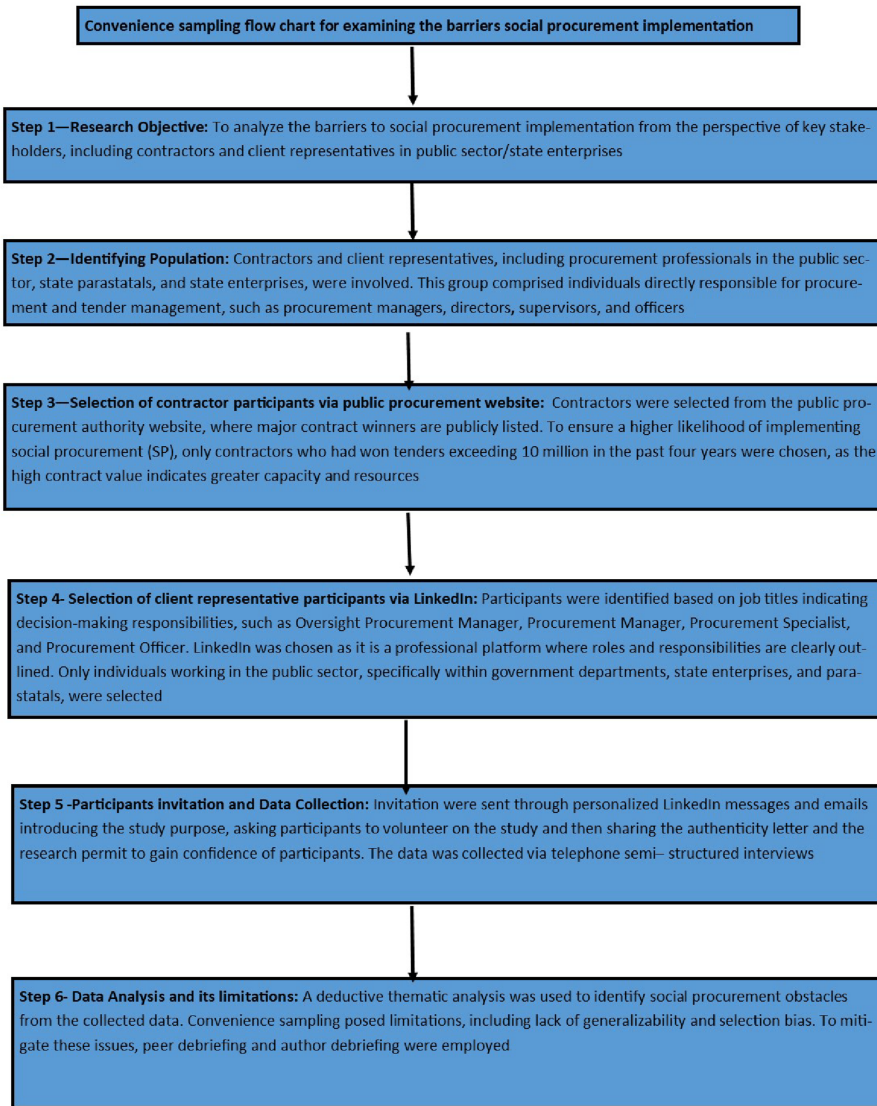


Figure 2. Convenience sampling process flow chart for examining the barriers social procurement implementation

in the data or analysis were discussed thoroughly until a consensus was reached. Peer debriefing helps mitigate bias, inconsistencies, and misalignment with study objectives, while also enhancing data quality and researchers' data collection skills (McMahon and Winch, 2018).

Participants in the study come from a variety of backgrounds and have extensive procurement experience.

Table 1 outlines the portfolios, experience, and qualifications of the participants.

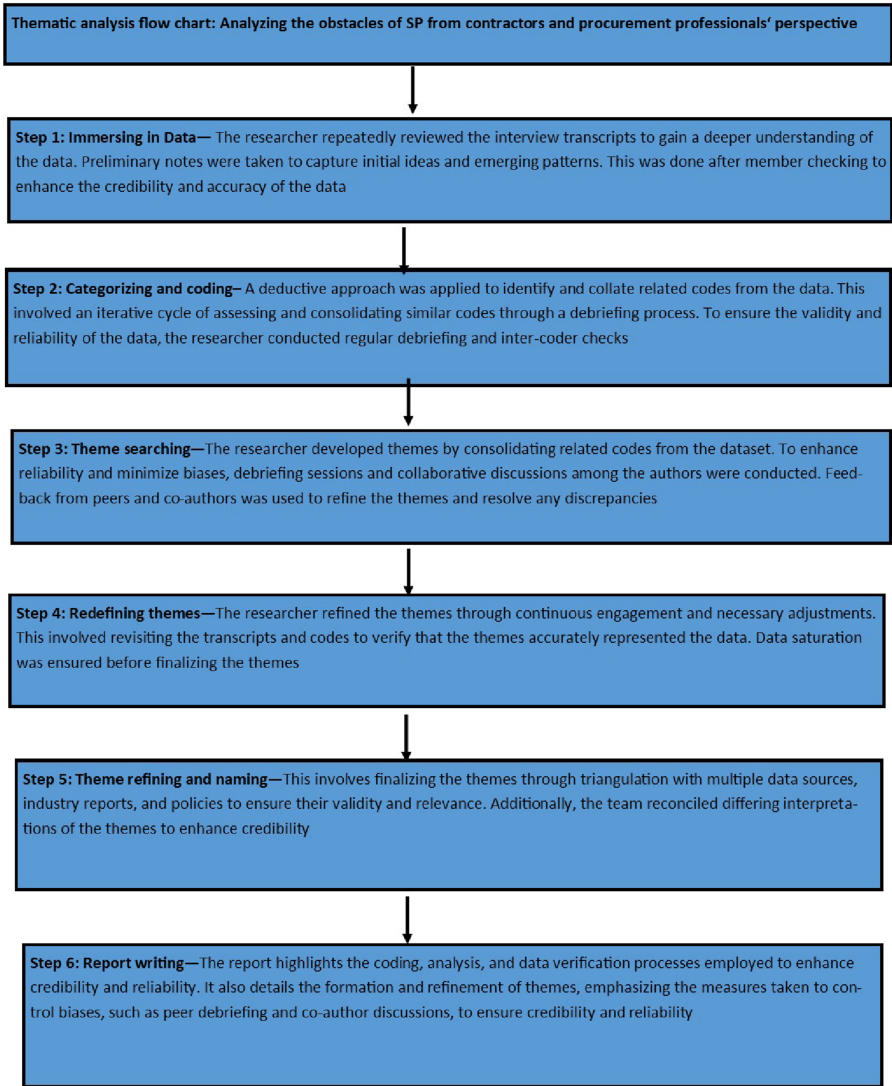


Figure 3. Thematic process flow chart detailing the step-by-step processes used to analyze the data and derive meaningful themes

Table 1 shows that most of the respondents were procurement professionals, covering about 71% of the entire population. About 20% were qualified engineers, and approximately 3% had no related qualification. The non-qualified engineering participants, who represented contractors, exemplified how non-professionals handle procurement. Overall, the respondents' experience, along with the academic background of some participants, offers valuable insights for the study, which the study participants validated. Additionally, Table 1 indicates that, despite the varying qualifications of the procurement players, they are highly experienced in conducting procurement activities within the construction sector.

Table 1. Overview of portfolios, experience, and qualifications of the participants

Key stakeholder type	Position	Experience (Years)	Qualification	Pseudonym
Contractor	Procurement Officer	7	Degree in Civil Engineering	P1
Contractor	Procurement Manager	9	Degree in Logistics Management	P2
Contractor	Project Site Manager	10	Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P3
Contractor	Project Director	12	MSc Electrical Engineering	P4
Contractor	Project Engineer	9	Degree in Industrial Engineering	P5
Contractor	Procurement Officer	4	Diploma in Civil Engineering	P6
Contractor	Procurement Manager	8	Degree in Civil Engineering	P7
Contractor	Project Manager	10	Degree in Procurement Management	P8
Contractor	Project Manager	18	Diploma in Logistics and Transport management	P9
Contractor	Purchasing Officer	6	None	P10
Contractor	Project Director	4	Degree in Material Engineering	P11
Contractor	Project Site Manager	8	Diploma in Construction Engineering	P12
Contractor	Procurement Officer	5	Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P13
Contractor	Construction Project Manager	9	Degree in Construction Engineering	P14
Contractor	Procurement Officer	3	Degree in Supply Chain Management	P15
Client-Parastatal	Procurement Manager	9	MSc Supply Chain Management	P16
Client-Parastatal	Procurement Oversight Manager	20	Professional Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P17
Client-Public Sector	Procurement and Logistics Director	10	MSc Logistics and Procurement	P18
Client-Parastatal	Senior Procurement Officer	6	Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P19
Client-Public Sector	Procurement Officer	7	Diploma in Procurement	P20
Client-Public Sector	Principal Procurement Officer	9	Degree in Transport and Logistics Management	P21
Client-Public Sector	Principal Procurement	16	MSc Logistics Management	P22
Client-Parastatals	Project Procurement Specialist	6	Degree in Logistics and Project Management	P23
Client-Public Sector	Principal Procurement Officer	18	Professional Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P24
Client-Public Sector	Procurement Officer	5	Diploma in Logistics Management	P25
Client-Parastatal	Procurement Agent	4	Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P26
Client-Parastatal	Procurement Manager	25	Degree in Procurement and Logistics	P27
Client-Public Sector	Procurement Officer	4	Advanced Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P28
Client-Public Sector	Procurement Officer	6	Degree in Logistics and Project Management	P29
Client-Public Sector	Procurement Officer	3	Diploma in Procurement and Supply	P30
Client-Parastatal	Procurement Officer	7	Degree in Logistics Management	P31

Note(s): Table 1 shows that most of the respondents were procurement professionals covering about 71% of the entire population. About 20% were qualified engineers and approximately 3% had no related qualification. It's worth noting that the non-qualified engineering participants were representatives of contractors and they demonstrated how procurement is done by non-professionals. Overall, the experience of the respondents coupled with the academic background of some participants provides valuable insight for the study and is justified to form part of the study participants. Additionally, Table 1 indicates that despite the varying qualifications of the procurement players, they are highly experienced in conducting procurement activities within the construction sector

4. Results and discussion

The following sections detail the overarching deductive themes, as shown in Table 2, that arose from the interviews concerning the external and internal obstacles to social procurement. The

Table 2. Social procurement: key hurdles (thematic presentation)

Area	Themes	Subthemes (internal/External organizational barriers)
Barriers to Social Procurement	Procurement Practices Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor monitoring and evaluation 4.2.6 • Poor Market capacity 4.1.1 • Limited knowledge 4.2 • Risk of rising cost 4.2.4
	Policy and regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak policies 4.1.4 • Lack of management support 4.2.2 • Lack of government support 4.1.3
	Socio-cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stereotyping against women and disabled 4.2.4 • Fronting 4.1.2

Note(s): Table 2 shows the various themes and subthemes that were derived from the data and form the base for discussion for this specific installment of the paper

data showed poor monitoring and evaluation, poor market capacity, limited knowledge, risk of rising cost, a lack of management commitment, lack of government support, gender and disability stereotypes, inadequate internal and external policies and fronting. The results are then discussed in consistence with the social procurement conceptual framework domains created and considering the literature for easy understanding and interpretation. Table 2 (Insert here).

Table 2 shows the various themes and subthemes that were derived from the data and form the base for discussion for this specific installment of the study.

4.1 Procurement practices barriers

4.1.1 Poor monitoring and evaluation. Participants noted that poor monitoring and evaluation, a crucial component of procurement practices, weakens the effectiveness of social procurement in the construction sector. This subtheme is an element of the procurement practices domain in the conceptual framework which influences the successful implementation of SP. Previous studies also identify poor monitoring and evaluation as detrimental to the success of social procurement (Troje and Kadefors, 2018; Doloi, 2024). Unlike previous studies, participants here attribute poor evaluation to a lack of collaboration between the procurement unit, which defines the contract’s social values, and the project team, responsible for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation the social value elements. This outcome emphasizes organizational silos, as seen by the structural deficiencies in the procurement procedures that hinder the implementation of social value. This contrast with Montalbán-Domingo et al. (2018) which highlights the absence of metrics for assessing social sustainability, noting that public sector metrics mainly focus on health and safety. These differences indicate contextual variation in organizational objectives and structures in the construction industry where the project team is not housed in the procurement unit. The following excerpts reiterate this theme:

The project personnel take responsibility when it comes to monitoring and evaluation. When they evaluate, the project team leaves the procurement team behind, which knows about the social aspect. So, monitoring and evaluation are not effective. P26

I think the challenge is the implementation and evaluation part. You can develop a good policy, but if there is no one to implement and evaluate it, P19

“We don’t necessarily pay more attention at the end of the project. We mostly focus on the outcome.” P20.

The excerpts above highlight participants' concerns about the inadequate implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of social procurement within projects, as those responsible for defining social value are not directly involved in its implementation. This disconnect reveals differing perceptions of SP between the procurement and project departments.

The project's focus on core deliverables, with minimal emphasis on social value monitoring, may result from the tension noted by [Loosemore et al. \(2022\)](#) regarding the collaborative nature of procurement and the fragmented, short-term focus of construction projects. To address this barrier, it is essential to develop an integrated monitoring framework that incorporates social key performance indicators (KPIs) into the broader project success criteria. Establishing a social performance measurement framework supports a holistic monitoring and evaluation approach that integrates social sustainability factors throughout the project lifecycle. Collaboration challenges, both internally and externally, have been identified in previous research as a significant barrier to effective SP implementation ([Loosemore et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, promoting integrated communication channels and interdepartmental project evaluation committees can enhance open communication and joint accountability.

4.2 Resource barriers

Four themes emerge as significant obstacles to the implementation of social procurement: poor market capacity, limited knowledge, the risk of rising costs and lack of management support which fall under the resource domain of the framework. These barriers hamper SP implementation instead of providing a competitive advantage as per the assertion of the resource-based view theory. The subthemes are explored in detail below:

4.2.1 Poor market capacity. The study identifies poor market capacity as a significant barrier that discourages contractors and clients from supporting local firms and disadvantaged populations. As illustrated in [Table 2](#), this theme falls under the broader category of resource constraints. Poor market capacity is characterized by limited supplier accessibility and a lack of cash, inadequate expertise, or inability to deliver goods and services. As a result, contractors are often compelled to source materials from South Africa, leading to a reliance on external markets. This finding aligns with [Natoli et al. \(2023\)](#), who emphasize that insufficient capacity and resources are key challenges to social procurement implementation. Similarly, [Loosemore and Reid \(2019\)](#) highlight that despite the potential benefits of social procurement in Australia, the supply chain often lacks the necessary capacity to fully leverage these opportunities. However, [Natoli et al. \(2023\)](#) do not account for the limited manufacturing/factory plants prevalent in Botswana in their findings. This indicates a need to develop the manufacturing sector to stimulate competition through policy reforms that give priority to manufacturing projects.

Botswana, as a developing country, faces comparable challenges, although to a different extent than Australia, which is advanced in social procurement implementation. Botswana's market capacity obstacles are exacerbated by the poor industrialization and a smaller domestic market, and this discrepancy indicates the significance of customized intervention strategies in order to overcome SP implementation. While public bodies in Botswana express interest in pursuing social procurement, they are often discouraged by suppliers who lack the capacity to meet demand. In contrast, social procurement aims to address capacity-related challenges through a market development approach ([Newman and Buckett, 2012](#)). However, limited capacity is a common challenge for most SMEs ([Obanda, 2011](#)), including the marginalized businesses targeted by social procurement in Botswana. Moreover, Botswana's market structure, characterized by a limited number of factories and industries, forces local enterprises to depend on external markets to meet demand. The dependency of foreign markets compromises local market development and creates unhealthy economic reliance that affects the country's ability to attain sustainable development goals. These insights underscore the importance of strategic interventions to strengthen local supply chains and reduce reliance on imports. This theme is supported by the following excerpts:

The problems are the same; for the majority of suppliers, you find that it's about limited capacity and expertise, especially since we don't have a strong manufacturing sector. P22

Market capacity, my brother; they always struggle to deliver; they lack entrepreneurial skills; some eat money before delivering the orders. P24.

I think the issue of the unavailability of certain materials specified by customers is the leading reason we end up buying from other countries. P7.

The challenge of poor market capacity exacerbates Botswana's import-export imbalance and negatively impacts local businesses. The country's weak industrialization is evident in the insufficient local supply, which undermines the effectiveness of the Procurement Act of 2021 and the Economic Inclusion Act, both of which aim to support local vendors. It is worth noting that Botswana's historical reliance on imports, particularly from neighboring countries like South Africa, has contributed to the underdevelopment of its manufacturing sector. Current policies are not sufficiently promoting or creating a conducive environment for establishing local manufacturing plants, leading to continued dependency on external markets. This theme highlights a significant market gap, underscoring the need for the government to invest in manufacturing and factory projects or to attract foreign direct investment. Therefore, initiatives such as tax exemptions for manufacturing companies willing to set up operations in Botswana and create substantial employment opportunities could stimulate industrial growth.

[Loosemore et al. \(2021a\)](#) argue that if participant capabilities within the social procurement ecosystem are overlooked, governments risk falling short of their more ambitious objectives. In developed countries like Australia, social enterprises play a crucial role in enhancing market capacity ([Loosemore, 2016](#); [Natoli et al., 2023](#)). However, participants in this study indicated a lack of awareness of such businesses in Botswana. This knowledge gap may stem from vague local regulations on social enterprises, unlike the more defined frameworks in developed nations. Weak market capacity reduces the impact of government spending and limits support for local businesses. Therefore, state financiers, such as the Citizen Economic Development Agency (CEDA), should prioritize funding manufacturing business proposals with the potential to reduce dependency on imports. However, funding manufacturing startups without implementing protective regulations would limit their competitiveness against established international manufacturers. Furthermore, implementing social procurement alongside small and medium enterprise (SME) empowerment initiatives could enable local businesses to meet demand and compete more effectively. Strengthening market capacity requires collaboration among the public sector, contractors, and third-sector organizations. Additionally, unbundling tenders, easing access to funding, and providing subsidies for SMEs can enhance market capacity.

4.2.2 Limited knowledge. [Table 2](#) shows that participants' lack of awareness about social procurement was a key barrier to SP implementation. These findings align with global observations by [Loosemore \(2016\)](#), [Nawaz and Guribie \(2022\)](#), [Lou et al. \(2023\)](#), and [Troje \(2023\)](#), who noted that social procurement implementers worldwide struggle to understand the concept. Although knowledge gaps persist even in developed countries with established training programs, the situation is likely more challenging in Botswana's construction industry due to limited access to such educational resources. This emphasizes the importance of knowledge as a determinant of SP's performance as underscored in the resource domain of the framework. The following interview excerpts show how the knowledge gap hinders SP implementation in construction.

Lack of understanding is the main challenge because people cannot implement what they don't know, so there is a need to raise awareness. P14.

Due to a lack of knowledge on social procurement, the priority is making profit, and little attention is given to these secondary values, P13.

The statements above reflect the limited knowledge among key stakeholders who are expected to drive social procurement in the construction sector. This is unsurprising, as over half of the

contractor participants lack procurement qualifications, limiting their understanding of SP. It also suggests that procurement is often handled by untrained individuals with little awareness of social value in procurement. Therefore, these individuals are likely to focus solely on project delivery, overlooking the strategic role of social procurement in stimulating economic growth and advancing sustainable development goals in countries like Botswana. Bridging these knowledge gaps requires more than just training; it also calls for changes in hiring practices to ensure that qualified personnel manage procurement in the construction sector. Additionally, to enhance awareness and address the knowledge gap, supportive organizations play a vital role in promoting social procurement internally, (Reid and Loosemore, 2017; Sabini and Alderman, 2021).

Participants noted that contractors often resist social procurement initiatives, perceiving them as diminishing value while continuing to prioritize price in traditional procurement practices. Similarly, public sector procurement professionals tend to favor the least-cost criterion for contract selection, despite Botswana's revised Procurement Act explicitly supporting local initiatives and promoting evaluation criteria beyond just price (Bothale, 2017). These perceptions reveal a limited understanding of the long-term value of SP, leading stakeholders to view it as expensive. This narrow perspective reflects the pervasive influence of traditional procurement methods within the construction supply chain. This mindset is likely rooted in a lack of adequate educational programs, insufficient policy guidance on social procurement implementation, and limited training on social sustainability.

To bridge these knowledge gaps and shift mindsets away from traditional procurement practices, both short- and long-term training initiatives are essential. However, contractors are often reluctant to invest in SP training for target groups (Wontner *et al.*, 2020) as it reduces profit margins. Free online courses offer accessible resources for stakeholders, while strategic partnerships between private, public, and third-sector organizations can boost awareness and drive change by facilitating knowledge transfer. Lastly, the government can further support social procurement initiatives by conducting awareness campaigns through leveraging its purchasing power to influence supply chain practices. These approaches encourage key stakeholders to shift their focus from simply considering costs to recognizing the strategic value of social procurement.

4.2.3 Risk of rising costs. The risk of rising costs poses a significant barrier to social procurement implementation, particularly due to resource constraints, as outlined in Table 2 and Figure 1. While financial resources provide competitive advantage consistent with Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, increasing costs threaten the successful implementation of social procurement and diminishes the profits made as revealed by the study's findings. On the contrary, companies that allocate financial resources towards local capacity building could also transform cost into competitive advantages, such as brand loyalty and improved supply chain resilience. This challenge aligns with global studies from Australia and Indonesia, which also identify cost as a major obstacle to SP adoption (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020; Willar *et al.*, 2021). Contractors argue that sourcing locally often incurs higher expenses than purchasing from international suppliers, leading to increased overall costs. This perspective echoes Loosemore *et al.* (2019), who linked higher costs to lower productivity among disadvantaged workers as well as additional monitoring and training expenses. On the other hand, contrasting evidence from Nilsson and Nilsson-Lundmark (2016) suggests that modest investments in establishing work prerequisites can lead to significant socio-economic benefits, including reduced welfare costs and increased tax revenues. These different temporal points of view help to explain this discrepancy: whereas contractors usually give short-term financial metrics top priority, this study indicates that embracing a long-term strategic view would make the rising cost issue nonsignificant.

The only way to promote it is when it's enforced by the client because contractors are concerned with their profit and things that consume money are not important. P14.

I would also say buying from citizen-owned companies can also come at a high price. For example, we were buying some gadgets that we discovered were priced four times the market price. P16.

Buying locally is costly because, as we said, they do not have the capacity, and sometimes the buying price is not a problem, but the after-sales services become an expense on our side. P18.

The study suggests that the government, as a primary client, prioritizes price over broader value-for-money considerations. Despite efforts to integrate sustainability into procurement, Botswana has yet to fully transition from traditional tender evaluations to practices that emphasize sustainability and social value. Client representatives frequently observe that local contractors charge more than international suppliers, largely because local firms lack the economies of scale enjoyed by larger, established companies. This cost disparity poses a substantial risk when purchasing locally, particularly given Botswana's underdeveloped industrial sector. Additionally, the reliance on imports and small market size contribute to higher local prices, whereas international vendors benefit from larger markets and economies of scale. Contractors perceive social procurement as eroding their profits, while clients believe it increases purchasing costs (Wontner *et al.*, 2020). This perception reveals that contractors focus on the short-term costs of SP, overlooking its long-term benefits, such as enhanced reputation, competitive advantage and market differentiation and community goodwill. Moreover, the ongoing pressure to minimize expenses in the construction industry conflicts with the financial demands of implementing social procurement policies, creating a tension between cost-efficiency and social value objectives. Therefore, mutual understanding of the impact of SP among key stakeholders is essential to ensure strategic alignment within the supply chain and prevent any one party from bearing the cost risk associated with SP practices.

In summary, contractors view social procurement as a cost that could undermine their competitiveness. Interviewees emphasized that the government, as the primary client, should offer support to alleviate the financial burden that restricts cost-saving initiatives. The government can provide tax breaks, enable flexible pricing, and facilitate partnerships between contractors and social enterprises. To make SP more attractive, clients, sponsors, and the government should reward contractors who prioritize social value over cost in their tender evaluation criteria. This suggests that countries adopting social procurement need to clearly outline strategies to mitigate rising costs for contractors while achieving social value. Furthermore, the government must ensure that the social value generated aligns with the project's overall objectives and establish a robust framework for tracking this value, especially considering current funding constraints.

4.2.4 Lack of management support. The lack of management support is a significant barrier to the effective implementation of social procurement in the construction industry, as shown in Figure 1 and Table 2. Client representatives expressed their willingness to empower local communities, contingent on support from upper management. This aligns with findings by Loosemore *et al.* (2020) and Troje (2021), who argue that successful SP implementation requires essential resources, particularly management support. Moreover, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need incentives for their leaders to adopt SP initiatives, as these efforts often demand resources more readily available to larger contractors (Loosemore, 2016). This indicates that major construction leaders who shape internal policies have yet to incorporate SP into their organizational frameworks. This reveals an existing discrepancy between strategic intent and operational execution, which could be examined from the institutional theory, where management's normative can influence decision making in the organization. Additionally, from the RBV lens, management is a key determinant of strategic resource allocation needed for social procurement practices, indicating that management is a critical tool to exploit social value for competitive edge in a highly competitive environment. The acceptance or rejection of SP by contractors and clients is heavily influenced by management commitment (Brammer and Walker, 2011) and illuminates the significance of management in driving SP. Furthermore, countries promoting SP must also focus on the type of leadership driving these social value initiatives, as the leadership approach significantly

affects SP implementation. A transformational leadership approach that fosters innovation and encourages employee engagement is more effective in advancing social procurement than a transactional leadership style, which tends to be less people centered. The following quotes reflect top management's perspective on social procurement.

Government subsidies have been declining, and using local companies comes at a price, yet the budget is getting low. There is no support, and it's easy to understand why. P27

I don't have the power to implement the social procurement policy; if the supervisor approves, I'm happy to implement it. P2.

Despite the gradual entrenchment of social procurement in Botswana's construction industry and the implementation of various social empowerment measures, significant challenges remain in transforming the procurement systems of both construction and government sectors. A lack of leadership and managerial commitment reveals a rigid change management culture that resists adapting to new norms. Consequently, when management fails to support SP initiatives, they are unlikely to allocate budgets for crucial changes like training and capacity building, which are essential for effective SP implementation. Poor management support may stem from a limited understanding of the long-term benefits of social procurement and a cost-risk aversion approach driven by the government's emphasis on cost savings post-COVID-19. Therefore, this lack of support hinders the adoption of SP policies and practices throughout the supply network, resulting in slow implementation of SP initiatives.

Training procurement representatives from both contractors and clients at all levels on social procurement practices and new regulations is crucial to fostering leadership engagement. Many contractors believe that such training can help overcome existing barriers. [LePage \(2014\)](#) emphasizes that leading construction firms must pioneer the enhancement of procurement methods to tackle social challenges and embed social value into their operations. Therefore, countries promoting SP should focus on major companies engaged in large projects, as these firms can significantly influence their subcontractors. These industry leaders should spearhead social change, refine internal policies and competencies, and create effective social impact measurement tools ([LePage, 2014](#)).

4.3 Policy and regulatory barriers

The study's participants recognized policy and regulations as a prominent theme, which consists of three subthemes that will be examined in this section. These sub themes align with the policy and regulation domain in the framework and relate to institutional theory. Contrary to institutional theory's assertion that external policies strongly influence company behavior, this study finds minimal impact due to inadequate policy support.

4.3.1 Weak external and internal policies. [Table 2](#) shows that contractors perceive inadequate external policies as significant obstacles to social procurement. For instance, they believe that government policies, such as the Public Procurement Act of 2021 and the Economic Inclusion Act of 2021, lack sufficient emphasis on social value. This perception aligns with the view that SP is most effective when mandated ([Loosemore et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, [Lou et al. \(2023\)](#) found that policy inadequacies whether due to mismatches, vagueness, or lack of clarity are major barriers to SP implementation. Conversely, a study in China revealed that contractors sometimes exploit policy gaps by fabricating evidence of engagement with disadvantaged individuals to gain a competitive advantage ([Loosemore et al., 2023](#)). These findings highlight the urgent need for enhanced policies that clearly define social procurement requirements guiding against manipulation of social value to win tenders. The following statements from participants reinforce this theme:

This would be a return for the government, so this should be part of the criteria that has to carry more weight to ensure tenders deliver a 360-degree value, P11.

Putting clauses that bind these contractors, targeted clauses on disabled and women in that case, contractors will do the social procurement, P1.

Lack of understanding of social procurement, hence why we don't have a policy on social procurement nor track the efforts . . . P12.

Loosemore *et al.* (2021) found that coercive tactics are frequently employed as social procurement tools, aligning with contractors' preference for pressure to adopt SP principles and practices to enhance social value. This finding aligns with institutional theory, which posits that external coercive factors, such as regulations, drive organizational behavior, including the adoption of social procurement (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Consequently, effective social value policies that clearly define social requirements, and outline their evaluation criteria and emphasize continuous monitoring are crucial for the success of SP. However, a study in China revealed that social clauses in tenders are rarely included due to clients' concerns about potential exploitation, where contractors might manipulate information to secure tenders (Natoli *et al.*, 2023). In contrast, the current study's findings reveal that contractors are generally willing to comply when clear social clauses are present. This difference indicates a complicated interaction between policy clarity and ethical adherence, requiring a balanced strategy in policy formulation.

To facilitate this, the Botswana government should review its economic empowerment policies, diversification efforts, and local procurement initiatives to make them more coercive. Subsequently, coercive strategies should be complemented by training, workshops, and campaigns to enhance understanding of SP, which is crucial for its successful implementation. Moreover, Botswana should consider introducing a formal SP policy and consolidating overlapping or conflicting procurement schemes. This policy should include clear key performance measures and mandatory reporting to promote transparency and accountability.

4.3.2 Lack of government support. Table 2 shows that both clients and contractors attribute the slow implementation of social procurement in Botswana's construction industry to insufficient government support. This finding aligns with research by Okeke and Nnaemeka-Okeke (2021) and Loosemore *et al.* (2023a), who emphasize that government support is crucial for managing the costs and risks associated with integrating disadvantaged individuals into projects. Loosemore *et al.* (2023a) further underscore that enabling policies and incentives are essential for facilitating social procurement. Results from this study highlight the need for incentives to ease the financial burden associated with SP. This aligns with studies from China, Sweden, and Australia, which reveal that lack of government support persists even in more affluent countries, despite increased governmental attention to SP. The primary reason contractors are seeking government assistance is because of the financial burden associated with incorporating SP into their operations. Although financial support is needed to mitigate SP-related risks, government fiscal constraints hinder funding for long-term sustainability initiatives (Pot, 2021).

Botswana's budgetary constraints may be due to conflicting national agenda including infrastructure development and poverty reduction. Thus, this resource challenge exacerbates contractors' reluctance to implement SP, possibly increasing social inequality. However, research from South Korea suggests that certain types of government assistance can create excessive dependency on public funding, hindering the research and development efforts of social enterprises and weakening their economic performance (Kim and Jun, 2022). This presents a challenge for the Botswana government to strike a balance between providing support and avoiding unhealthy dependence on public resources. Given the government's current financial constraints, a strategic approach would be to prioritize contracts for contractors committed to delivering social value. As major clients, governments should also develop strategies to minimize the costs associated with secondary value creation for contractors. This support is crucial in encouraging contractors to pursue social value without compromising their competitive edge, especially since price remains a key determinant in tender awards. The following excerpts further illustrate this theme:

The financial burden is also a challenge, as this comes at a price. If the government supports these initiatives and introduces incentives, it would be easier to implement. P12.

The government also needs to support us since there is a cost associated with social procurement. P1.

Loosemore (2016) emphasized the importance of redefining “value” beyond just the lowest price to fully realize the potential of social procurement. By considering a broader range of factors when setting prices, contractors can reduce expenditure on secondary goals and feel less pressured to underbid, allowing for greater creativity in their social value initiatives. Governments can facilitate this shift by offering training in cost-effective practices, providing long-term contracts, granting tax incentives, and prioritizing bids with higher social value. However, effective implementation of these strategies requires thorough monitoring to evaluate costs against benefits. While successful outcomes often hinge on collaborative, top-down initiatives led by the government, such efforts frequently fall short (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021a).

4.4 Socio-cultural barriers

Participants highlighted socio-cultural constraints as hindrances to the implementation of SP. The study uncovered stereotyping and fronting as the two main sub themes under the socio-cultural domain of the framework as per Figure 1 and Table 2.

4.4.1 *Stereotyping against women and disabled.* Table 2 highlights the persistent issue of gender and disability stereotyping in the construction industry. Interviewees expressed a common belief that women and individuals with disabilities are incapable of meeting the demands of construction work. This perception aligns with findings by Loosemore *et al.* (2019), which revealed that subcontractors often view disadvantaged groups, including women and people with disabilities, as threats to productivity, cost efficiency, and safety. Similarly, Loosemore *et al.* (2023b) reported significant underrepresentation of these groups in China’s construction sector, where they are frequently perceived as liabilities. This difference shows how strongly cultural values influence industrial conduct irrespective of legal systems. However, contrasting evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that, with appropriate support, individuals with disabilities can perform as effectively as their peers (Simbaya *et al.*, 2019). The following extracts further illustrate the persistence of these stereotypes:

Most companies believe that women or disabled people are unproductive by looking at the demand for work at sites. P5.

No, we don’t have any disabled on-site or in the project due to the nature of the job, P9.

There are currently no disabled. It’s an area that needs attention: the issue of women and disabled people. P4.

These extracts highlight the reasons for the underrepresentation of women and individuals with disabilities in the construction industry and underscore the need for a mindset shift (Rouhanizadeh and Kermanshachi, 2021). In Botswana, despite legislative efforts to enhance women’s participation, men have continued to dominate decision-making roles for over 55 years since independence. This trend is mirrored across many sectors, making the low representation of women in construction unsurprising. Furthermore, the few women employed by contractors primarily hold administrative positions rather than engaging in on-site construction activities. This underrepresentation of women and people with disabilities is also evident in countries like South Africa and India, despite the implementation of progressive empowerment laws. These misguided perceptions persist, with contractors believing that women and disabled individuals cannot handle the demands of construction work. This discrimination is also tied to rising cost risks, as people avoid engaging marginalized groups due to perceived cost such training and supervision of marginalized individuals. This

discriminatory attitude is worrisome, as nearly half of the participating contractors reported having no disabled workers, reflecting a lack of commitment to diversity. While local procurement schemes (LPS) in Botswana have the potential to benefit women, people with disabilities, and youth, more action is needed to challenge negative perceptions that view marginalized individuals as liabilities to project delivery. These perceptions reflect deep-rooted cultural biases, underscoring the need for a radical shift that can be accelerated through coercive policies and the creation of databases for easy access to qualified women and people with disabilities.

A key limitation of the LPS is that participation is not mandatory for construction contractors, contributing to the continued underrepresentation of these groups. To address this, capacity-building programs can empower marginalized individuals to meet industry standards while raising awareness about the negative impact of fronting, which undermines genuine empowerment efforts. Botswana and other emerging economies could also implement policies requiring contractors awarded contracts above a certain value to engage disadvantaged groups, with significant penalties for non-compliance, as suggested by [Nawaz and Guribie \(2022\)](#). Additionally, the government can offer grants, subsidies, or incentives to contractors who subcontract to companies owned by marginalized groups. These measures would facilitate the integration of marginalized individuals into the construction sector, supporting sustainable development goals in emerging economies.

4.4.2 Fronting. This study defines fronting as a fraudulent practice where an individual exploits the license or registration certificate of a marginalized person to benefit their own company or gain an advantage in tender selection. All procurement professionals on the client side identified fronting as a significant barrier to empowering youth, women, and people with disabilities in procurement. This aligns with findings from previous studies on public procurement challenges ([Esteves and Barclay, 2011](#); [Maritz, 2022](#); [du Plessis, 2022](#)). While this study emphasizes fronting as a major barrier, research in China indicates that social procurement criteria in tenders are scarce, with some clients reluctant to include social criteria due to fears of contractors falsifying evidence regarding the employment of marginalized individuals ([Loosemore et al., 2023b](#)). This illustrates how fraud can undermine efforts to integrate marginalized individuals into various sectors. The following extracts further reinforce this theme:

The other challenge is fronting since they know the women or disabled have certain advantages, so they exploit the opportunity, and this defeats the whole effort of trying to empower marginalized people. P19

Our major challenge in the procurement system is fronting. I will be here telling people that the company is mine without looking at the ripple effect of being dishonest. P26.

The recurring theme of fronting reveals how contractors exploit system loopholes due to the absence of rigorous monitoring and evaluation of social value initiatives. This dishonesty within the supply chain undermines government efforts to empower marginalized groups including women, youth, and individuals with disabilities. Therefore, holistic monitoring and evaluation is needed to ensure that the information provided by suppliers aligns with on-site practices. This approach would prevent contractors from submitting information solely to meet tender requirements without implementing the specified social requirements during project execution.

Fronting erodes trust and thwarts governmental goals of community empowerment, resulting in lost opportunities for intended beneficiaries. Economic pressures often drive SMEs owned by marginalized individuals to accept exploitative-fronting agreements from established companies, lured by minor incentives. Additionally, the limited number of suppliers from these groups encourages others to engage in fronting as a competitive advantage, undermining social value efforts. Combating evolving fronting strategies, would require continuous review and development of laws and policies ([Maritz, 2022](#)). Client and

contractor contract management must enhance their capacity for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of social procurement targets throughout the contract period thus ensuring mega-projects meet secondary objectives. Countries implementing social procurement should impose stricter penalties on those engaging in unethical practices and establish robust verification procedures to reinforce community empowerment efforts. This can be achieved through collaboration between the procurement oversight body and legal entities, conducting audits and compliance checks with competent staff to detect and deter fronting.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study analyzed obstacles to social procurement implementation in Botswana's construction sector from the perspectives of contractors and clients, providing new insights to the discourse on SP in developing nations, where existing literature primarily focuses on Western contexts. The conceptual framework identified nine barriers grouped into four themes: procurement practices, resources, policy and regulations, and socio-cultural factors. Notably, the themes of resources, policy, and regulations each contained three barriers, while the socio-cultural theme included two subthemes, and the procurement practices theme had one. The study highlighted fronting as an uncommon theme, rarely addressed in literature from other continents, such as Europe, yet prevalent in studies conducted in developing countries like Nigeria and South Africa. Other key barriers included lack of management support, weak policies, inadequate market capacity, rising costs, and limited knowledge. Contractors cited stereotypes and insufficient government backing, while clients faced challenges with fronting.

In summary, stakeholders in both developing and industrialized nations experience similar SP adoption challenges, though at different rates. Collaborative efforts are essential for overcoming these barriers. The findings suggest that contractors prefer coercive regulations for SP implementation, but current government initiatives have had limited impact on procurement practices. Governments must create standards for measuring social value outcomes, integrate them into procurement evaluation frameworks, and require all bidders to include social value impact statements. Moreover, governments must establish autonomous monitoring units within procurement authorities to consistently evaluate compliance and report on results. Strengthening policies and enforcing stricter measures against fronting activities among marginalized individuals is also crucial.

5.1 Practical and policy implications

This study has several implications for different stakeholders. To address weak internal and external policies, decision-makers should foster a supportive environment for social procurement by developing policies that enhance social value and align with sustainable development goals. These regulations should mandate contractors to report on their social value performance and link contractor accomplishments to eligibility for future contracts. Short training sessions should be implemented to improve understanding among key stakeholders, along with ongoing training for those involved in sustainable procurement efforts to bolster government initiatives.

To encourage social procurement, financial incentives and preferential treatment for contractors with sustainable practices are essential to address the lack of government support. For instance, South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme and Kenya's procurement laws demonstrate this approach by prioritizing local communities and vendors. Botswana can adopt similar strategies, like the UK's Social Value Act, by mandating that a certain percentage of each contract assessment score be allocated to social value contributions, applicable beyond only modest budget initiatives. Incentives and preferential treatment in tendering would encourage collaboration with social enterprises. Botswana could also consider providing subsidies to social enterprises and offering tax breaks to companies excelling in social value practices as part of their financial incentives strategy. Countries like Australia, Sweden, and

Canada have successfully supported contractors advancing social procurement, indicating that Botswana can adopt these strategies to overcome existing barriers and improve its social procurement landscape.

Integrating women and individuals with disabilities into the construction sector presents a significant economic development opportunity for contractors. Failure to do so may compromise their competitiveness in public tenders, especially in developing countries that prioritize local economic development. Social procurement policies should intentionally support these minority groups by providing incentives to reward contractors who hire them. The government can further embrace inclusion by embedding gender and disability targets in public contracts and incentivizing contractors who meet these objectives.

Community organizations can partner with government agencies and construction companies to enhance the employability of local members and align their skills with industry needs. This could include adopting ideas like Australia's connectivity centers, which support marginalized groups by offering mentorship, networking opportunities, and education on human rights and regulations in the construction sector. Lastly, contractors can collaborate with the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) and the Engineering Registration Board (ERB) to deliver training on effective resource management, market capacity, fronting, and stereotyping, key issues identified in the study as challenges within the sector.

5.2 Limitations and future research

Social procurement implementation constraints may differ in scope and maturity between Botswana and other countries; thus, future comparative studies should explore these variations. Subsequent research could employ questionnaires targeting a larger sample size across different sectors to examine barriers to social procurement. Additionally, this study primarily focuses on the perspectives of clients and contractors responsible for implementing social procurement regulations, neglecting the views of politicians and lawmakers. The researcher acknowledges that the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could enhance representativeness and support generalization by employing probability sampling methods, such as systematic, stratified, or random sampling, and expanding research to include various sectors, regions, and participant groups.

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Informed consent statement

Consent was obtained from all participants, and the purpose of the data was clearly outlined in the authenticity letter forwarded to them.

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