

Procuring Socially Responsible Services Within Sustainability-driven Thessaloniki

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Abstract This descriptive exploratory case study reveals the current state of an innovative municipal services' design for socially responsible tenders, as well as its sustainability findings. A mixed-method approach enables the collection of rich, contextual information from the 60 participating organizations that contribute to the three-step design of this socially responsible framework. Data is analyzed using bivariate analysis against the different research variables. Findings indicate an individual notion of strongly correlated procuring public services, involving traditional and digital communication approaches. They lead to innovative public private socioeconomic synergies in supply chain management (SCM), as well as the reestablishment of the city's social and environmental profile. Growing implications in the Greek public and private sectors link the role of social responsibility to sustainable supply chain management practices (SSCM). As a result, current municipal tenders are reflecting a socially responsible framework design for the city's growth and sustainable development. In a European post-financial-crisis era where budgets are limited, this study contributes to: i) European sustainability socially responsible services; and ii) lessons learned from the participating actors of a SR design, setting a valuable SSCM example for other European counties.

1 Introduction

The procurement of public goods and services accumulate approximately 14% of the European Union (EU) gross domestic product (GDP). Public procurement (PP) refers to the process where central and local governments purchase and provide services, public works and goods [1]. The European small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly contributing to these PP practices offering value added services to local societies. SMEs are the drivers of the local communities as they are providing jobs and stimulate sustainable growth. In the past five years, they have created around 85% of new jobs and provided a path to prosperity for millions of

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families. Therefore, it is important to strengthen their active participation in public tenders, especially local ones. Historically, PP of business services is the primary performer with regards to three key SMEs performance indicators in the supply chain process. Public services' procurement is forming the key public driver of economic growth [2]. As a result, it is important to eliminate on-going PP problems that discourage SMEs' participation to public tenders. This paper explores, taking as an example Thessaloniki, a sustainability-driven PP framework that could surface the exact nature of the on-going problems that stifle entrepreneurial growth.

In 2012 in Thessaloniki, a city in northern Greece, the city's mayor started planning a municipal procurement framework leading to public-private partnerships (PPP). The procurement methodology was based on a qualitative socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) framework, concerning three thematic, consulting-related categories: the city's history; social activities and culture; environment and urban landscape. The tender participation and public-private networking was significant. In 2012, Thessaloniki was preparing for its centenary celebration. Thus, it publicly procured consulting and promotion-related services in an effort to rebrand the city's social profile. These services still maintain social responsibility as a focal point, complementing the city's SSCM and sustainable procurement (SP) strategy [3, 4]. SP strategy is considered the procurement that in our case is consistent with SSCM, ensuring transparency and accountability in a society, living within environmental limits, and promoting socially responsible governance [5, 6].

The aim of the study is to reveal an innovative design of a socially responsible framework and its key performance indicators that should be monitoring its successful implementation. It aims to engender a lively discussion about the necessary activities (tactical or strategic) in order to engage the city's stakeholders, especially the SMEs, in public services provision. Designing a socially responsible (SR) procurement framework is both a challenging and complex objective [7, 8, 9, 10]. It engages diverse, often conflicting, stakeholders into a sustainable strategic framework that helps SMEs [11]. The city residents as the primary stakeholders and ultimate recipients of local public services are usually disappointed, whilst public services lack a SR orientation. Thus, Greece currently shows a decline in social impact and SCM quality-performance indicators [2]. Socially responsible procurement-designs in Greece are in their infancy. Therefore, it is the first time that the city of Thessaloniki explores such a procurement framework. Such a framework could serve as an example of a local economy stimulator. It could motivate Thessaloniki's stakeholder-cities in the Balkans and contribute to SR international networking. Indicative stakeholder-cities include Sofia, Bucharest, Belgrade and other cities in the Balkan Peninsula. The case's novel design is still attracting value-added, SR practices and promotion-related services for rebranding the city's profile [13]. Therefore, the study's findings contribute to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature by advancing SRPP research relating to contemporary procurement practices and legalities in EU. As a result, this study exhibits an alternative design for developing SR publicly procured services. The findings of this study reveal a strong association between traditional and digital communication approaches towards the tender's formulation design, as well as its successful implementation. An active interaction among diverse groups of stakeholders requires transparent and socially responsible (SR) support and methods of communication to be interlinked.

2 Public procurement theories and practices: The case of Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki Metropolitan Development Agency (TMDA S.A.) – a state-owned enterprise – was in charge as partner for procuring the consulting services. It branded the city's sustainability profile cooperating with the municipality of Thessaloniki in a public-private type of scheme. A socioeconomic procurement infrastructure focusing on transparent diffusion of public economic resources requires a well-balanced, sustainability framework. Regrettably, a handful of theories could fit and complement the complex Greek PP system. Therefore, these theories considered could potentially contribute to the solution of this on-going problem. This endeavour was and still is important as unsustainable economic development based on subjective, politically tinged, fiscal constraints excludes regional, socially responsible procurement and planning.

2.1 An overview of the related contemporary PP theories

In 2012, the Greek legal system privileged administrative and economic selection criteria. It relied on the principle of the lowest bid. Therefore, the lowest offer allows to win a tender [14, 15, 16] without considering other qualitative criteria. These qualitative criteria were considered as secondary in the supply chain management (SCM) decision-making hierarchy [17]. Accordingly, we aimed to design based on compatible contemporary theories, a framework where the economic criteria harmonically coexist with environmental and social criteria.

It is imperative to design and implement a socially responsible framework, balancing administrative and social parameters for sustainability [26, 31]. Currently PP theories merit practices and processes that encourage creativity and promote innovation. It is important to consider these two soft design-aspects to overcome implementation challenges. In particular, the challenges of institutionalizing public procurement as part of a national or even international innovation policy [38]. These new trends on public procurement and supply practices are increasingly relating to a service-oriented design. Therefore, the procurement elements (e.g., critical success factors and key performance indicators) of such designs should include technical and non-technical specifications. These design-elements (technical and non-technical) should relate to product and service combinations, efficiently improving resource usage through circular economy [39, 40].

Consequently, contemporary PP theories need to incorporate sustainability practices for infrastructural project-designs. In Thessaloniki's case, this need was facilitated with the implementation vehicle of TMDA S.A., following a public-private partnership (PPP) type of scheme. EU and government policy documentation stresses the important role of these type of partnerships for SRPP [18]. In this case, as in other internationally, it is challenging to formulate measurable social sustainability criteria [42]. In addition, Green Public Procurement (GPP), which is also considered in Thessaloniki's quality of life parameter, could serve as a potential policy instrument. It could contribute to products and services' environmental footprint reduction and improve environmental value for society [41].

As a result, PP services should be formulated through a balanced framework of critical success factors (CSFs) and key performance indicators (KPIs). This novel framework design balances CSFs with social, economic and environmental qualitatively focused KPIs. Therefore, this “triple bottom line” (e.g. social, economic, environmental) approach empowers a sustainability focused procurement design [19].

2.2 Engaging stakeholders for a socially responsible procurement framework

According to these contemporary theories and practices, the unbalanced and monolithic public practices that focus solely on price indicator are placed under examination. Following the discourse the CSFs and their KPIs are presented:

CSF1: Thessaloniki's Promotion of Pull Attributes. SRPP framework's first CSF (CSF1) was the services' offer relation to the city's pull attributes and social profile. Pull attributes for a city are defined as the attributes, which are attracting tourists to the destination (e.g. culture, history, climate, service and product prices etc.) [20]. Thus, the relevance to the thematic pillars was a prerequisite for a successful service offer. There were three thematic categories for the procurement of the services (e.g. historical consulting and promotion services, social activities and culture services, environment and urban landscape services) that were selected to support CSF1. All the proposals had to be submitted under a specific pillar. The organisational campaign's pillars procured were thematically analysed. They were based on the centenary programme's conception of the city's profile, pull attributes, and social parameters [21]. It was decided by the mayor's cabinet that it was important to design a procurement framework encompassing the city's pull attributes as they are the main factors for attracting visitors. Thus, these pillars acted as social economic and environmental KPIs to these important promotional pull attributes [22]. The selected KPIs measured the relevance of each proposal to the following thematic pillars for sustainable development: i) city's history; ii) arts and culture of the city; and iii) environment and urban landscape.

The prominent stakeholders and collaborators of this procurement framework at a national and international level were invited to participate. For a long period, approximately 5 years, the city of Thessaloniki was open to organisational proposals, relating to the city's rebranding for its centenarian celebration. An indicative list of such organisations includes national museums, social corporations, non-governmental organisations, and others. The inclusion of the local communities and government stakeholders was also considered valuable for the successful framework design [23]. Therefore, national and international stakeholders assisted TMDA S.A. procurement organising committee, maximising the SR benefits of all engaging parties. Thus, stakeholders' engagement was necessary for signalling the second KPI of this CSF1, KPI2. A common way for public disclosure is digital data dissemination, as SOEs are legally obliged to communicate their actions and results to external stakeholders [24]. At the same time, these novel procurement-design initiatives minimise the negative effects of the ongoing Greek financial crisis [25]. The public tender for these socially and environmentally balanced sustainability services commenced in 2012. The PPP cooperation model selected, provided the necessary flexibility for embedding several qualitative CSFs and KPIs to the process. Research reveals that such dynamic

collaborations among diverse institutions in relation to their CSR activities is important, especially for the arts-oriented thematic pillar of this CSF. Thus, the TMDA S.A. organising committee filtered its public procurement decisions through this SRPP framework with four CSFs that embraced specific KPIs.

CSF2: Promotion of Thessaloniki's social activities. In an EU era of post-financial crisis, the introduction of socially oriented factors to a procurement-framework design is critical [26]. Such dynamic socioeconomic designs further complement and address the needs of the engaging stakeholders, as analysed in CSF1. The designing philosophy of this SCF2 is relating to the need of several managers and business collaborators to obtain essential information from personal ties and SN, and in their absence, organisations are constrained to rely on close collaborators. Therefore, there were three KPIs in this CSF: KPI1) entrepreneurial initiative; KPI2) youth friendliness; KPI3) unemployment rate. All of these KPIs measure the SR orientation of this CSF2. The unemployment rate (KPI3) is socially important as the ongoing financial crisis in Thessaloniki is accountable for the city's youth unemployment rate of 52% and an overall unemployment figure in its residents of 25% [27]. The entrepreneurial initiative (KPI1) is another socially responsible performance indicator as it catalytically therapizes the unemployment figures by creating new SMEs [12]. The city's youth was also invited to participate voluntarily in the procured events by assisting in several ways (e.g. internships, volunteer work, etc.). Youth participation in the procured services and their related activities (e.g. professional and scientific conferences, thematic conferences and symposiums, presentations etc.) provided the opportunity for the youths to create valuable contacts and accumulate experience with the participating institutions. Consequently, a youth-friendly proposal strengthened KPI2.

CSF3: Promotion of the city's social networking (SN) and quality of life. Adherence to the Greek public services social value is an EU legal rule (e.g. legal rule: article 3 P.D. 186/1992) in relation to public procurement. Specifically, the compliance with the relevant EU legislation practices ensures that all national or international businesses and SMEs can bid for the procured tender (e.g. the three principles of transparency, equality and publicity). There are two KPIs supporting this CSF: KPI1 Close cooperation with all the suppliers, including SMEs; and KPI2: Consideration of the participants' quality certifications and environmental documentations. KPI1 supports all the suppliers, including the SMEs, which expressed their interest in submitting an offer under one of the three tender pillars procured. The assistance towards SMEs for a qualitative proposal and the facilitation for tailor-made services is necessary for successful delivery. As public tenders in Greece tend to be daedal, time consuming and opaque, very few SMEs, which have limited resources, participate to such initiatives [28]. Therefore, the role of digital marketing of the project was a priority [29]. As a result, municipality and TMDA S.A with this designed SR framework, override the questionable past practices. The press release publications of a tender are important for publicity but the adoption of digital marketing through a series of social media activities [30] was considered necessary for confirming publicity of the tender to the SMEs. KPI2 considers the participants' environmental documentations and quality certifications that have to be referenced. The two main reference schemes for this KPI are the international standard ISO 14001 and the European standard EMAS (Eco-Management and Audit Scheme).

The SRPP framework is presented in the figure 1.

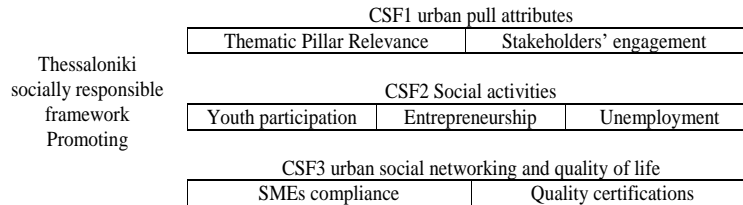


Fig. 1 The design of the SRPP framework

2.3 Implementing the procurement framework as a project

The interest was high, signifying a successful tender procedure and accumulated 285 proposals, which were economically compatible. Based on the presented qualitative framework 60 proposals were selected, as bidding winners for implementation. These selected institutions received services contracts averaging 35,000 euros in three different thematic pillars. More than 50% of those were SMEs, which complied with the required quality indicators and environmental certifications.

Thematically oriented services procured projects included: i) scientific conferences; ii) historic exhibitions; and iii) other culturally related projects exhibited changes in the city's environment, in neighborhoods, in habits and city traditions. Most of these procured services were supported, and still are, through municipal volunteers, primarily young people. Simultaneously, these services provided valuable social support with working positions for the city residents especially young people [31]. Once the procurement design and implementation was completed according to the methodology steps analyzed, a research project for evaluating the impact of procured services was initiated. It aimed to provide significant information for the application and development of the exhibited SR framework.

3 Research methodology

A mixed method approach was utilised for the collection of rich data, which assists in the understanding of the key benefits of a SR procurement as well as in the examination of the stakeholder levels of satisfaction. Participating corporations are considered those which were successfully selected to implement the procured SR services, based on the designed procurement framework. TMDA S.A. administration staff supported the whole research methodology, both qualitative and quantitative.

The data collection lasted almost three years, due to public bureaucracy. A response rate of 98% was achieved, as 59 organisations out of 60 were able to complete the evaluation process through the structured questionnaire and interviews. Qualitative data was collected through a mix of one to one interviews lasting up to 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted with all the participating corporations. The three thematic categories were identified from the qualitative dataset by utilising content analysis [32]. For quantitative data, interview participants were also recipients of hard copy questionnaires, which were utilised as the most effective tool for collecting data and administering a wide sample group of corporations [32, 33]. Questionnaires were focused upon the levels of satisfaction regarding the procurement-process services provided by the TMDA S.A., the availability of support and administrative services relating to the projects' promotion during implementation and most importantly the usage of digital media streams throughout the procurement's methodology steps. The questions were designed to ensure simple, straightforward responses. This approach was undertaken in a bid to ensure increased response rates as well as reduce chances of incorrect completion. Respondents were also informed about the confidentiality of their responses. A 5-point Likert scale was utilised. The findings of this primary research reveal an SR procurement of municipal services that provides valuable empirical data for an alternative and innovative framework of public procurement.

4 Findings and results

The findings suggest strong levels of satisfaction across both printed and digital materials used in the SRPP framework according to the CSF3 employed. Similarly, the combined usage of traditional and digital promotion tools was also found to be useful, according to CSF1 and CSF2 employed. The overall levels of satisfaction across the different elements related to KPIs of the CSFs are high, with digital marketing tools employed throughout the procurement services returning the highest score of 3.6. Such an unexpectedly high result indicates the value of the CSF3 in relation to SN transparency in public procurement [34]. In CSF3, modern forms of public procurement interspersed with the need for traditional ones create a balance in terms of moving forward with innovative procurement approaches while still providing appropriate traditional access for organisations and individuals. Figure 2 exhibits these findings, in which digital promotional activities, related to the quality of services and to SMEs' services compliance (CSF3) seem to be perceived as the most useful, scoring 3.6. The red line in Figure 2 signifies the neutral satisfaction score of 3.

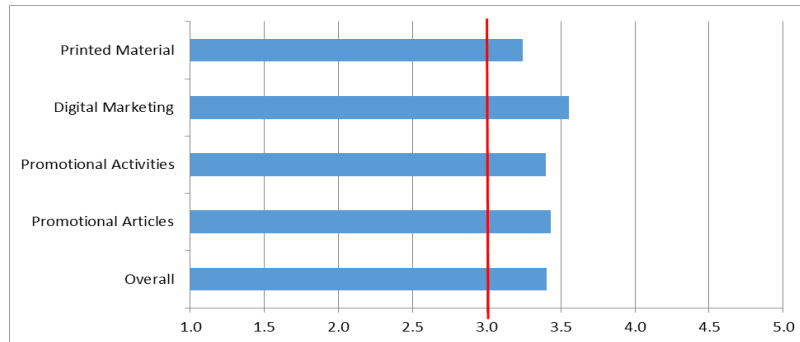


Fig. 2 CSFs' level of satisfaction among their related KPIs

Therefore, taking into consideration the effects of the above three CSFs it is clearly visible that the impact of the digital procurement policies, especially in communication and marketing practices of the tender, is rather significant. In addition, KPIs integrating transparency and publicity through a series promotional activity was important, as all these KPIs scored well above the average of 3 out of 5.

The individual notions of procuring public services through printed media, digital media alongside promotional activities in traditional and digital approaches are all strongly correlated. The results indicate a positive correlation between all variables, which suggests the synergy and importance of these elements working in tandem. As such, it is difficult to apply digital or traditional approaches without utilising both in tandem. Indeed, the success of Thessaloniki's SR framework could be a product of the utilisation of both rather than a dominant focus upon one medium.

Table 1 exhibits the three CSFs employed and their Spearman correlation among them. Firstly, it presents the correlation of CF1 (the promotional documents present the pull attributes of Thessaloniki). Secondly, the correlation of CSF2 (the socially responsible activities of Thessaloniki). Thirdly, CSF3 correlation in terms of the promotion of the city's social networking (SN) and quality of life, as marketed through digital tools and printed material. Table 1 results among the different categories of procuring activities exhibit the strongest positive outcome for CSF3-innovative services of the digital promotion, a fact that confirm the satisfaction level exhibited in Figure 2 [35].

Table 1 The Spearman correlation among different CSFs

Correlations	CSF1: Promotion of Thematic Documents	CSF2: Promotion of SR Activities	CSF3: SN & quality of life: Digital Marketing	CSF3: SN & quality of life: Printed Material
CSF1: Promotion of Thematic Pillar Documents	1			
CSF2: Promotion of SR Activities	.840**	1		
CSF3: SN & quality of life: Digital Marketing	.866**	.791**	1	
CSF3: SN & quality of life: Printed Material	.681**	.623**	.733**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Therefore, findings provide: i) horizontal multilateral flexibility and transparency in regional CSR and governance; ii) balanced regional stakeholders' well-being; and iii) transferability potential to similar EU cities that lack multi-level, collaborative governance culture.

5 Conclusions

This case study reveals the designing efforts and the lessons learned, from the creation and application of an innovative SRPP framework. Currently, legal and managerial, municipal-procurement processes fail to provide impactful municipal services to the local communities [34]. Paradoxically, the procurement of socially responsible, value-added, municipal services in Greece is vital to its economic survival, as youth unemployment reaches almost 45% [2]. Therefore, there are several major contributions of the SRPP framework towards the solution of this on-going problematic situation.

The first contribution of this framework is its potential to serve as a valuable tool to the local business community and its engaging stakeholders. It combines all the necessary SR communication elements, both on-site and on-line. SMEs could reach these consulting services, receive an integrated service to their PP tender proposal, and engage accordingly. In addition, the proposed CSFs could be encouraged both from municipal and private local stakeholders to the centralised PP decision makers. Previously, the local SMEs could not have access to any form of local consulting, even in relation to low budgeted local PP tenders. As a result, local entrepreneurs were not aware on how to reveal these qualitative parameters. The 'lowest economic bid' rule was the national norm.

The second contribution is that the newly formed company of TMDA S.A. and its SRPP framework could serve as a business communication vehicle between the Greek peripheral city of Thessaloniki and Athens. Such a socially responsible bilateral, periphery-centre communication could serve as an example for revealing the topical needs of the city and improve the quality of life of Thessaloniki citizens. Even more, a potentially dynamic national SRPP methodology could be developed, which will recognise the needs of the regional stakeholders and create a social network that stimulates value-added growth for local SMEs.

Third contribution is the framework's design that balances CSFs and qualitative KPIs, which should be considered in the price of the offering services in a public tender. Thus, it contributes to the triple bottom line for the synergetic development of social and environmental factors with the economic ones. Procuring SR price-sensitive services provides an efficient and eventually effective procurement design in an EU member state. In addition, it provides the necessary flexibility in PP for small and peripheral actors through transparent, fair and socially responsible services [26].

Fifth framework contribution relates to managerial practices behind the procurement-design structure. They are transparent, measurable and thus they could form a pole of attraction for SMEs [36]. Current legal practices, especially for smaller tender offers, in our case averaging 35,000 euros, are not subject to EU regulations. As a result, small and regional tender-offers in Greece are lacking transparency. Thus, current municipal practices, not only in Greece but also in EU fail to comply with the transparent approach of this SR design.

Overall, the rich data collected from the city's stakeholders verify the framework's design as effective. Based on the specified thematic pillars (e.g. CSF1/KPI1) and together with the use of digital technological tools (e.g. CSF3/KPI1 and KPI2) this procurement design performs effectively according to the participating actors. Thus, the extensive use of digital communication and social networking seems to minimize the high cost of competitive bidding for all engaging stakeholders and especially for the valuable local SMEs (e.g. CSF1/KPI2). It also seems to improve the transparency levels of municipally procured practices. These explicit design features remain an absolute necessity for attracting SMEs to a public bidding process, especially in times of financial crisis. In addition, this framework's design provides the ability to contribute to sustaining value pluralism and social responsibility in the public sector with: i) strong association between traditional and digital procurement approaches; and ii) clearly interlinked socially responsible support and methods of communication. Thus, as evaluation findings reveal, it allows the necessary flexibility that circumvents rigid and expensive, time-consuming bidding currently in effect in several municipalities in Greece.

This case also provides a significant contribution to further understanding the relationship between SMEs and CSR practices [37]. It concludes that the current use of the lowest-price bid should not be the main criterion for SRPP, as it perpetuates a problematic situation. The lowest-price criterion, if solely used, is a major barrier for economic growth. On the contrary, SR and transparency (e.g. CSF3) could improve the access and eventually the result of the public procurement of services through thematic disclosure (e.g. CSF1), SR publication of critical factors (e.g. CSF2) and dissemination of SR services that provide an effective SN (e.g. CSF3) with the engaging stakeholders. Although, this SR framework is limited to the discovered

qualitative factors (CSFs), which were examined and analyzed in relation to their impact (see table 1), it concludes that procuring SR services is not a one-stream supply chain process. It is rather a dynamic and interactive cross-functional process, engaging with a diverse number of vital administrative, managerial and legal considerations. Framework's implications are impactful to the European SR business practices and legalities due to its assimilation and synergetic application of mutually balanced factors.

Finally, given the project's success, we strongly believe that its application at national scale or in other regions of EU could solve the current problematic situation. The complexity associated with the framework's design and evaluation of its procurement processing, results to further studies on SRPP practices for an ongoing city effort to grow in sustainable manner. These studies do not necessarily have to promote the discussions relating to a city's profile, but rather to enhance the quality of its resident's everyday living.

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