

Addressing economic efficiency–sustainability tensions in public procurement decision-making: unpacking the role of decision framings

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Duccio Tosi and Francesco Testa

Institute of Management, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, Italy

Nicole Darnall

*Kogod School of Business, American University,
Washington, District of Columbia, USA and*

*School of Public Affairs, American University,
Washington, District of Columbia, USA, and*

Fabio Iannone

Institute of Management, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, Italy

Abstract

Purpose – Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) research recognizes sustainable public procurement (SPP) as a key lever for addressing global sustainability challenges. However, translating these ambitions into procurement decisions frequently create tensions between internal economic efficiency and sustainability objectives. This study investigates how public organizations address these tensions through procurement decision-making.

Design/methodology/approach – We adopt a multiple case study design involving 10 public organizations, drawing on interviews, archival documents, and field observations, analyzed abductively with the Gioia method.

Findings – We identify three SPP decision-making approaches – cost-driven, values-driven and ambidextrous – that differ in how internal economic efficiency and sustainability are prioritized. These approaches are underpinned by two decision framings: a rational and a public value-oriented framing. Variation across approaches reflects whether one framing predominates or whether both are concurrently combined.

Originality/value – This study advances SSCM research by offering a decision framing perspective that complements and extends the institutional logics lens in explaining organizational responses to sustainability-related tensions. It reveals rational and public value-oriented decision framings as generative mechanisms through which distinct SPP decision-making approaches emerge in public organizations. The study also enriches research on ambidexterity in public organizations by showing that it arises from the capability to hold together different decision framings.

Keywords Sustainable public procurement, Tensions, Decision-making, Decision framings, Qualitative research

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Public procurement accounts for 13–20% of global GDP (World Bank, 2020) which, in turn, contributes to 19 and 38% of the global carbon and material footprint respectively (Ottelin *et al.*, 2018). The public sector thus has a tremendous opportunity to address the global



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sustainability challenges that arise from procurement (Dimand *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, governments and scholars are increasingly focusing on sustainable public procurement (SPP) as a critical lever for advancing sustainability transitions (Amann *et al.*, 2014). SPP embeds environmental and social criteria into procurement processes (Behraves *et al.*, 2022), positioning procurement as a key decision point through which sustainability can be operationalized into supply chain practices (Laosirihongthong *et al.*, 2019).

This central role has been acknowledged by research at the intersection of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) and SPP (Brammer and Walker, 2011; Walker and Brammer, 2009; Preuss, 2009). Given its scale and expenditure capacity, SPP enables public organizations to shape supplier behaviors by embedding sustainability criteria into tendering and contracting processes, thereby encouraging suppliers to adapt their practices and align with environmental and social standards (Amann *et al.*, 2014). From this perspective, SPP is not only a mechanism for acquiring sustainable goods and services, but also a powerful tool through which public organizations can exert significant influence on markets and advance environmental and social objectives across supply networks through their purchasing decisions (Malacina *et al.*, 2025).

Sustainable procurement decisions often generate tensions between sustainability ambitions and internal economic efficiency, as pursuing environmental and social value creation frequently conflicts with cost containment and budgetary discipline (Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020; Brammer and Walker, 2011). The need to reconcile these divergent demands renders procurement decision-making inherently complex (Wu and Pagell, 2011; Plaček *et al.*, 2026).

This complexity intensifies in public procurement. Unlike private-sector settings, public procurement unfolds under dense regulation, strict accountability and spending constraints, heightened societal scrutiny and strong public demands for efficient resource allocation and collective value generation (Grandia and Meehan, 2017). These conditions limit discretionary space in SPP-related decisions and expose public organizations to elevated and heterogeneous expectations (Behraves *et al.*, 2022), thereby making it more difficult to reconcile competing objectives. In particular, public buyers operate within highly formalized and rule-bound procedures that constrain supplier selection and interaction (Harland *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, they are exposed to multiple and often conflicting societal expectations, as procurement decisions must simultaneously respond to diverse public demands, including cost efficiency, environmental protection, and social outcomes (Wontner *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, shifting electoral mandates and accountability to political principals may prioritize short-term, visible outcomes over longer-term sustainability goals, as political actors tend to favor initiatives that deliver tangible results within electoral time horizons (Gelderman *et al.*, 2015).

These features suggest that sustainable procurement in the public sector is not simply a contextual variation of private-sector SSCM, but a qualitatively different decision-making setting, in which the economic efficiency–sustainability tension is more bounded, more exposed to scrutiny, and more structurally embedded in institutional arrangements.

SSCM research has shown that managers and organizations may respond differently to sustainability-related tensions (e.g. Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Saunders *et al.*, 2020; Wu and Pagell, 2011), emphasizing either economic or sustainability considerations, or seeking to accommodate both simultaneously. However, this body of work has predominantly focused on private-sector settings (Matos *et al.*, 2020), paying limited attention to public procurement, which unfolds within an especially constrained and demanding decision-making context. While the SPP literature has documented the institutional conditions and implementation challenges associated with integrating sustainability into public purchasing (e.g. Brammer and Walker, 2011; Preuss and Walker, 2011; Wontner *et al.*, 2020; Plaček *et al.*, 2021), it remains unclear how public organizations interpret, evaluate, and navigate the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability within procurement decision-making. This gap matters because, due to the central role of SPP in influencing supplier sustainability behaviors and outcomes (Malacina *et al.*, 2025), the way in which such tension is addressed through

procurement decisions has direct consequences across supply chains (e.g. through the nature and stringency of sustainability requirements set for suppliers), making the organizational mechanisms underlying these decisions consequential beyond the boundary of the public buyer.

This study aims to fill this gap by answering the following research question: *How do public organizations address the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability through procurement decision-making?*

We assess this question through a multiple case study of 10 Italian public organizations analyzed abductively following the Gioia method (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Magnani and Gioia, 2023).

Our results show that public procurement unfolds within market, regulatory and social conditions that intensify the difficulty of concurrently pursuing internal economic efficiency and sustainability objectives. Within this context, public organizations adopt three SPP decision-making approaches – cost-driven, values-driven, and ambidextrous – that differ in how these objectives are prioritized. These approaches are underpinned by two decision framings, a rational framing, centered on economic and organizational considerations, and a public value-oriented framing, focused on long-term societal outcomes, which shape how procurement decisions are structured and justified.

These findings advance public procurement and SSCM literatures, as well as scholarship on ambidexterity in public organizations. First, we contribute to public procurement research by identifying three distinct SPP decision-making approaches through which public organizations respond to the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability. Second, we extend research on sustainability-related tensions in SSCM (Saunders *et al.*, 2020; Wu and Pagell, 2011; Xiao *et al.*, 2019), which has predominantly relied on the institutional logics lens (Schumm and Niehm, 2024; Razmdoost and Alinaghian, 2024), by introducing a decision framing perspective that uncovers decision framings as generative mechanisms that explain variation in responses at the decision-making level. By examining these mechanisms in the public sector procurement context, where the economic efficiency–sustainability tension is compounded by structural constraints, we further extend SSCM insights to settings in which sustainability-related tensions are less amenable to discretionary management. Third, we contribute to research on ambidexterity in public organizations (Cannaerts *et al.*, 2020; Gieske *et al.*, 2020) by showing that an ambidextrous decision-making approach emerges from the capability to hold together rational and public value-oriented decision framings.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The unique setting of SPP

In translating sustainability objectives into supply chain practice, procurement plays a central role (Miemczyk *et al.*, 2012). Through procurement activities, organizations strategically define supplier selection criteria, tender requirements, technical specifications, and contractual conditions that shape how environmental and social considerations are incorporated into purchasing processes and supply relationships (Villena, 2019). By specifying sustainability-related award criteria or contractual clauses, buying organizations directly influence suppliers' practices along the supply chain (Wontner *et al.*, 2020).

While these functions apply across both public and private sectors, much of the existing research on sustainable procurement focuses on private-sector supply chains, where procurement decisions are characterized by managerial discretion and relational contracting arrangements (Hinterhuber and Khan, 2025; Laosirihongthong *et al.*, 2019; Miemczyk *et al.*, 2012).

By contrast, public procurement operates under fundamentally different conditions. Procurement decisions are situated within dense regulatory frameworks, heightened accountability requirements, and explicit public mandates (Gelderman *et al.*, 2015; Forster *et al.*, 2025). Public buyers act as custodians of public resources and are therefore subject to

strict rules aimed at ensuring transparency, integrity, competition, and equal treatment of suppliers (Walker and Brammer, 2009). From a bureaucratic discretion perspective, these constraints limit the scope of administrative action in supplier selection, contracting practices, and relational engagement, making public procurement a highly formalized and circumscribed decision setting compared to private sector (Harland et al., 2019). Forster et al. (2025) empirically substantiate this, showing that the legislative and regulatory pressures bearing on public organizations strongly constrain procurement decisions throughout the entire procurement lifecycle.

Also, public procurement decisions are subject to pervasive scrutiny, as the ultimate beneficiaries are citizens, who are both service users and taxpayers (Behraves et al., 2022). From a public value perspective, public organizations are expected to allocate resources and make decisions that advance outcomes collectively regarded as valuable by society (Benington and Moore, 2010). However, citizens' expectations can vary widely and are often contradictory, ranging from preferences for cost-effectiveness, local development, minority advocacy, and emissions reduction (Grandia and Meehan, 2017).

Moreover, public procurement decisions take place within political-administrative structures where decision-makers, from a principal-agent perspective (Lane, 2006), are accountable to elected officials and, ultimately, to the electorate (Gelderman et al., 2015). As a result, priorities may shift following electoral cycles and changes in political leadership (Walker and Brammer, 2009). These dynamics may lead public actors to favor initiatives yielding visible, short-term results within electoral time horizons, potentially constraining the long-term ambition of sustainability-oriented procurement.

Finally, public procurement decisions are affected by market conditions within the boundaries set by regulatory and budget constraints. Implementing sustainability criteria requires public organizations to assess market availability and suppliers' sustainability attributes (Preuss, 2009); however, their ability to interact with suppliers is tightly regulated to ensure spending accountability and prevent corruption (Harland et al., 2019). In addition, monitoring sustainability requirements during contract execution entails significant demands in terms of time, cost, and expertise, which are usually scarce resources in public organizations (Wontner et al., 2020).

Taken together, SPP occurs in an especially constrained decision-making context, in which organizations operate with less discretion and greater exposure to heterogeneous societal expectations than their private-sector counterparts. Understanding how procurement decisions unfold under these conditions is therefore essential for explaining the unique challenges of achieving sustainability in public sector procurement.

2.2 Tensions and decision-making complexity in sustainable procurement

Sustainable procurement decisions typically involve multiple, and often competing, objectives, as sustainability considerations must be weighed against established priorities such as cost efficiency (Busse, 2016; Plaček et al., 2026), quality requirements (Li, 2013), or operational flexibility (Fayezi et al., 2018). As a result, such decisions are frequently characterized by trade-offs and tensions, rendering the decision-making process inherently complex (Wu and Pagell, 2011; Xiao et al., 2019). This complexity is compounded by uncertainty and information challenges (Wu and Pagell, 2011). Sustainability attributes are often difficult to measure, compare, or verify across suppliers, and the effects of procurement decisions on environmental and social outcomes may only materialize over extended time horizons (Saunders et al., 2020). Accordingly, sustainable procurement has been conceptualized in SSCM research as a domain of complex decision-making, where competing objectives and evaluative ambiguity coexist (Fayezi et al., 2018; Xiao et al., 2019; Kenny et al., 2026).

Against this backdrop, research in sustainable operations and supply chain management has documented the presence of trade-offs and tensions in the pursuit of sustainability (Matos

et al., 2020; Montabon *et al.*, 2016), including conflicts between internal organizational objectives and broader sustainability outcomes (Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020), between short-term operational priorities and longer-term sustainability considerations (Klassen and Hajmohammad, 2017; Esfahbodi *et al.*, 2016), and between different stakeholder expectations (Vidal *et al.*, 2023; Carter *et al.*, 2020).

When sustainability-related tensions are confronted at the level of procurement decision-making, they often epitomize the conflict between economic performance and sustainability aims (Khan and Hinterhuber, 2024; Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020; Brammer and Walker, 2011). This conflict becomes particularly acute when procurement choices move beyond “low-hanging fruit” sustainability options (e.g. incremental reductions in energy use or waste) and involve more substantive forms of sustainability that require significant investments and organizational change (Wu and Pagell, 2011; Montabon *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, while the economic implications of procurement decisions (e.g. purchasing costs, budget pressures) are borne directly by the focal organization and promptly reflected in performance metrics, the environmental and social benefits associated with more substantive sustainability initiatives often accrue beyond organizational boundaries and are only partially captured by firm-centric evaluative criteria (Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020). These insights point to the tension between internal economic efficiency, which focuses on cost reduction and budgetary discipline (Xiao *et al.*, 2019), and substantive sustainability as particularly central to procurement decision-making.

In the specific context of SPP, this tension may become especially pronounced. On the one hand, strict budgetary constraints, formal accountability requirements, and limited discretionary space intensify the emphasis on cost containment and budget control in procurement decision-making (Preuss, 2009; Brammer and Walker, 2011). On the other hand, public organizations are increasingly expected to leverage procurement to generate environmental and social value for the community (Grandia and Meehan, 2017). While scholars have acknowledged the centrality of the tension between economic and sustainability considerations in SPP (e.g. Wontner *et al.*, 2020; Preuss and Walker, 2011; Plaček *et al.*, 2021), the organizational responses to this tension within public procurement decision-making remain underexplored.

2.3 The role of decision framings in sustainability-related tensions

Extant research has emphasized that responses to sustainability-related tensions depend on how such tensions are interpreted within organizational decision-making processes (Montabon *et al.*, 2016; Hahn *et al.*, 2014; Glac, 2009). Research on managerial sensemaking highlights that sustainability issues are filtered through cognitive and evaluative frames that shape what decision-makers perceive as salient, legitimate, and actionable (Hahn *et al.*, 2014; Xiao *et al.*, 2019).

These frames can be understood as interpretive templates through which individuals select and organize information in complex decision situations (Walsh, 1995), guiding how they make sense of competing objectives and which courses of action are considered appropriate (Hahn *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, such frames structure how economic and sustainability considerations are weighed, which criteria are mobilized to justify choices, and which consequences are foregrounded or downplayed in decision evaluation (Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Alexander *et al.*, 2014; Reuter *et al.*, 2012; Glac, 2009).

SSCM research has frequently examined sustainability-related tensions through the lens of institutional logics, understood as “socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules” (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999: 804), showing how they contribute to defining which priorities are considered relevant within a given context (Schumm and Niehm, 2024; McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021). For example, Razmdoost and Alinaghian (2024) illustrate how buying firms adopting social procurement practices contend with competing market and social logics that configure the priorities organizations must

navigate. Complementing this perspective, decision framings operate at a more situated and cognitive level, capturing how such priorities are interpreted and articulated within specific decision-making processes (Glac, 2009). Different framings may emphasize distinct evaluative orientations, privileging economically oriented criteria or broader value-based considerations (Keeney, 1996; Reuter *et al.*, 2012; Alexander *et al.*, 2014), thereby influencing how competing objectives are integrated in decision-making. Accordingly, similar sustainability-related tensions may give rise to heterogeneous organizational responses ranging from prioritizing economic issues to accommodating more ambitious sustainability goals or attempting to balance both simultaneously (Hahn *et al.*, 2016). In the context of SSCM, Wu and Pagell (2011) show that organizations confronted with such tensions may rely on different “environmental postures”, leading decision processes to emphasize economic, environmental, or social considerations to different degrees, or to consider them jointly.

While prior research has deepened our understanding of how organizations in the private sector prioritize economic and sustainability objectives (Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Wu and Pagell, 2011), less is known about how these dynamics unfold in public procurement decision-making contexts. In such settings, procurement decisions are embedded in accountability regimes, statutory mandates, and collective value expectations (Benington and Moore, 2010; Gelderman *et al.*, 2015). As a result, the ways in which economic efficiency and sustainability ambitions are framed, legitimized, and operationalized in decision-making may differ from private-sector environments.

Despite growing interest in SPP (Malacina *et al.*, 2025), we still lack an understanding of how public organizations address the tension between economic priorities and sustainability ambitions when making procurement decisions under conditions of constrained discretion and heightened societal expectations. Building on the concept of decision framing, we examine how procurement decisions are structured and justified through different evaluative orientations when organizations confront competing objectives.

3. Method

To answer our research question, we conducted a qualitative analysis using a multiple case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) involving 10 public organizations. The case study methodology is considered particularly valuable for investigating complex, real-world phenomena that require further theoretical development (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), such as organizational responses to sustainability-related tensions in public procurement decision-making (Walker *et al.*, 2012).

3.1 Sample selection and research context

This research adopted a purposive sampling approach to ensure the selection of participants’ characteristics matched the study’s aims (Eisenhardt, 1989). We collected information mainly from municipalities but also from two regional agencies providing services to citizens and businesses. We considered different types of public organizations to allow for theoretical replication across organizational settings (Yin, 2009). This allowed us to assess whether the observed results reflect general decision-making approaches in public procurement rather than being specific to the municipal context. Yet, municipalities remained the primary empirical focus because they directly manage a wide range of essential public services (e.g. local public transportation, waste management, school construction) and have a central role in implementing environmental policies at the local level, activities which largely materialize through procurement decisions (Harland *et al.*, 2019).

The research context consists of Italian public organizations. This choice rested on three main considerations. First, since SPP policies vary considerably across countries (Brammer and Walker, 2011), focusing on a single country reduces potential bias related to geographic dislocation. Second, Italy has been a pioneer in SPP policies within the EU, introducing the

“National Action Plan for Green Public Procurement” in 2008, which demonstrated an early commitment to integrating environmental criteria into procurement. Third, with the 2016 Public Procurement Code, Italy became the first European country to mandate Minimum Environmental Criteria (CAM) for specific public procurement categories (Testa *et al.*, 2020).

Case selection was conducted in two phases. The first phase took place in 2021, stimulated by a research project on the internal dynamics of SPP, funded by SNA (the Italian National School of Public Administration). The second phase was conducted in 2024, as our analysis of phase one data indicated that theoretical saturation had not yet been achieved (Bowen, 2008). Because both phases fall within the same Italian regulatory framework governing SPP, and given the homogeneous perception of the external context emerging from the data, the time lag between data collection phases did not affect the consistency of the findings.

Given our research aim and to enhance comparability, we targeted public organizations with formally recognized commitments to sustainability initiatives (outside the specific domain of procurement). This selection criterion was not aimed at selecting “best-performing” organizations but rather at focusing on decision-making contexts in which sustainability was sufficiently institutionalized to generate potential tensions with economic efficiency considerations. Accordingly, we conducted a desk analysis to identify organizations recognized by the same third party for their sustainability initiatives. We identified and contacted 17 public organizations (10 in the first phase and 7 in the second) that, between 2020 and 2024, received an official recognition from Legambiente – the leading Italian environmental NGO – for their engagement in sustainability-related activities and projects (e.g. green mobility, renewable energy, waste management and circular economy, territorial protection, inclusivity and accessibility).

Eight organizations agreed to participate in the study (5 in the first phase and 3 in the second). During the second phase, we identified 2 additional municipalities through a snowballing technique applied to interviewees, drawing on insights from other researchers and existing contacts. Eligibility was cross-checked by reviewing recent public documents and procurement tenders. Although these two organizations had not formally received a recognition for their sustainability initiatives, they were included based on documented evidence of strategic sustainability objectives publicly reported in official planning documents. Overall, our final sample consists of 10 public organizations: 8 municipalities and 2 regional agencies (see Table 1).

3.2 Data collection

We combined semi-structured interviews, field observations, and archival research to collect data and enable triangulation of our findings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009).

In-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted by two researchers using a semi-structured interview protocol (Eisenhardt, 1989). Each section of the protocol included core questions addressed to all respondents, alongside tailored questions for different organizational roles. For each organization, we contacted at least one political informant (e.g. mayor for municipalities; president for regional agencies), one managerial informant (e.g. head of procurement office), and one technical-administrative informant directly involved in the procurement (e.g. public works specialist). The combination of multiple respondent roles enabled us to capture how procurement decisions were justified and evaluated across the organization. In Org.#2 and Org.#10, political and managerial contacts were unavailable. However, since the interviewee in both was the head of the procurement office (i.e. the individual most directly involved in procurement), we included both organizations in the sample. Moreover, in these cases, interview data were complemented by a more extensive use of documentary evidence, including internal documents directly provided by interviewees (e.g. specific procurement tenders, programmatic documents, internal procurement guidelines, evaluation templates). In total, we performed 27 interviews with 36 individuals (see Table 1).

Table 1. Database and sample characteristics

Organization	Type of organization	Municipality population	Geographical location	People interviewed	Date of the interview	Duration of the interview	Field notes	Archival documents
Organization #1	Municipality	5.000–9.999	North–Center	Managerial subject (Head of procurement office)	15/06/2021	32'	Field notes (4 pages) ≈2 h of observation	Organization's website Procurement calls Social media (Facebook) Online databases
				Technical subject (Environmental management and procurement technical specialist)	06/07/2021	42'		
				Political subject (Mayor)	06/07/2021	37'		
Organization #2	Municipality	20.000–59.999	North–Center	Managerial subject (Head of procurement office)	05/05/2021	35'	–	Organization's web-site Social media (Facebook) Internal documents Online databases
Organization #3	Regional public organization	–	North–Center	Managerial subject (Head of procurement office)	20/04/2021	69'	–	Organization's website Internal documents Online databases
				Technical subject (Environmental and technical specialist)	20/04/2021	35'		
				Managerial and political subject (General Director and President)	20/04/2021	30'		
Organization #4	Municipality	5.000–9.999	South	Managerial subject (Secretary General)	03/03/2021	38'	–	Organization's website Procurement calls Social media (Facebook) Online databases
				Technical subject (Procurement compliance and technical oversight specialist)	08/03/2021	28'		
				Political subject (Mayor)	16/03/2021	38'		
				Political subject (Vice Mayor)	10/03/2021	46'		

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Organization	Type of organization	Municipality population	Geographical location	People interviewed	Date of the interview	Duration of the interview	Field notes	Archival documents		
Organization #5	Municipality	5.000–9.999	Center	Technical subject (Bursar)	17/03/2021	22’	Field notes (3 pages) ≈1.5 h of observation	Organization’s website newspaper articles Internal documents Online databases		
				Managerial subject (Secretary General)	17/03/2021	21’				
				Technical subject (Public works specialist)	17/03/2021	28’				
				Political subject (Vice Mayor)	10/03/2021	35’				
Organization #6	Municipality	60.000–99.999	Center	- Political subject (Vice Mayor)	12/02/2024	56’	Field notes (4 pages) ≈1.5 h of observation	Organization’s website Procurement calls Internal documents Online databases		
				- Managerial subject (Infrastructure and public works director)						
				- Technical subject (Infrastructure and public works technical specialist)						
				Managerial subject (Secretary General)	14/03/2024	30’				
Organization #7	Municipality	20.000–59.999	Center	Political subject (Councillor for Housing Policies, Mobility Transportation Policies, Public Works)	18/03/2024	43’	Field notes (3 pages) ≈2 h of observation	Organization’s website Internal documents Newspaper articles Social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) Online databases		
				- Managerial subject (Budgeting and accounting director)	23/02/2024	35’				
				- Technical subject (Budgeting and accounting specialist)	15/02/2024	92’				
				- Technical subject (IT specialist)						
				- Managerial subject (Head of environmental department)	18/03/2024	36’				
				- Technical subject (Public Green specialist)						

(continued)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Organization	Type of organization	Municipality population	Geographical location	People interviewed	Date of the interview	Duration of the interview	Field notes	Archival documents
Organization #8	Municipality	100.000–249.999	Center	Managerial subject (Head of procurement office) Managerial subject (Contract Manager) Political subject (Budget councillor) - Managerial subject (Head of educational services) - Technical subject (Educational services specialist) - Technical subject (Food services specialist)	27/03/2024 18/03/2024 16/02/2024 18/03/2024	40' 45' 45'	Field notes (5 pages) ≈2.5 h of observation	Organization's website Procurement calls Internal documents Newspaper articles Online databases
Organization #9	Regional public organization	–	Center	- Political subject (President) - Managerial subject (Director) - Managerial subject (Head of procurement office) - Technical subject (Food technician)	12/03/2024	81'	Field notes (2 pages) ≈1.5 h of observation	Organization's website Procurement calls Internal documents Online databases
Organization #10	Municipality	>500.000	North	Managerial subject (Head of procurement office)	06/03/2024	35'	–	Organization's website Social media (LinkedIn) Internal documents Newspaper articles Online databases

Note(s): All organizations and interviewees, together with any potentially identifying information, have been coded to ensure anonymity and confidentiality

Source(s): Authors' own work

Field observations. Whenever possible, site visits accompanied interviews, allowing observation of on-site behaviors and practices and informal conversations with technical-administrative staff. Observations focused on how procurement-related activities were coordinated across departments, how monitoring and compliance requirements were managed in practice, and how resource constraints were experienced in daily work. These insights helped contextualize interview accounts. Overall, we collected 21 pages of notes over ~11 h of observation.

Archival data. We gathered archival data from organizations' websites, publicly available technical documents (e.g. procurement notices), and online sources (e.g. newspaper articles, social media posts, databases and national repositories). In several instances, participating organizations also shared additional internal documents (e.g. specific tenders, project reports, and other technical, strategic, and programmatic documents). Archival data were consulted both before interviews – to obtain an initial overview of each case – and after interviews – to triangulate statements and refine case understanding. Overall, we collected 55 documents corresponding to 571 pages of archival data.

3.3 Data analysis

Our analysis followed an abductive approach to identify the most plausible explanation for the emerging patterns in the data (Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013), iteratively connecting empirical evidence with theory (Magnani and Gioia, 2023). To manage the qualitative material we applied the Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), using axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to move from “informant-based” first-order concepts to “researcher-based” second-order themes and aggregate dimensions.

The unit of analysis is the organizational decision-making approach to SPP. Accordingly, each case was examined at the organizational level, focusing on how economic efficiency and sustainability considerations are addressed overall in procurement decisions.

Case construction was based on the integration and triangulation of the different data sources. Interviews provided insights into how decision-makers framed and justified sustainable procurement choices, archival data traced formal procurement practices and organizational arrangements, and field observations offered a contextual understanding of how procurement activities were organized and enacted.

The abductive data analysis proceeded in five stages. First, we articulated the theoretical lens guiding our inquiry. Given the research question, we drew on the literature on sustainability-related tensions and decision-making in procurement and SSCM (e.g. Fayezi *et al.*, 2018; Wu and Pagell, 2011; Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Montabon *et al.*, 2016; Alexander *et al.*, 2014; Keeney, 1996). More specifically, we drew on the notion of procurement sustainability tensions (Fayezi *et al.*, 2018), on the ways in which organizations deal with trade-offs in sustainable supply chain decision-making (e.g. the “environmental postures” identified by Wu and Pagell, 2011), and on established typologies of decision-making, such as alternative-focused (emphasizing the comparison of options based on observable performance outcomes) and value-focused decision-making (emphasizing the identification of values to guide choices) (Keeney, 1996). These concepts sensitized our analysis to how competing economic and sustainability objectives might be interpreted and operationalized in procurement decision-making and informed our initial analytical focus.

Second, for each organization, we read primary and secondary data to build a complete case picture. Immersion in the empirical material allowed us to situate our theoretical lens within the specific conditions characterizing public procurement and develop an initial understanding of how SPP choices were enacted in each case. Table 2 presents the within-case profiling of each organization.

Table 2. Within-case profiling: salient SPP procurement areas, illustrative practices and procurement organizational arrangements

Case	Salient procurement areas of SPP application (2020–2024)	Examples of key SPP practices (2020–2024)	Procurement organizational arrangements
Organization #1	Services for citizens; public works	Public works contracts specifying the use of durable, low-impact materials associated with higher upfront costs (e.g. paving of sidewalks with Ecodrain-certified recyclable materials to reduce flood and erosion risks, and landscaping of public green areas with native plants to enhance urban biodiversity); service procurement (maintenance of public parks) including qualitative environmental and social service characteristics (use of eco-friendly products and employment of staff following social inclusion criteria)	Procurement activities are coordinated through a centralized procurement office responsible for tender procedures and contractual compliance. Line departments define needs and technical specifications, while the procurement office supports procedure design and documentation. Interaction between the procurement office and line departments occurs on a recurring basis throughout the procurement process, including during the initial definition of requirements, where considerations extending beyond strictly procedural aspects are also discussed
Organization #2	Facility management; energy services	Procurement of heating and cooling system aimed at lowering energy consumption; maintenance contracts (e.g. schools and municipal offices) including efficiency-oriented adjustments to existing installations such as thermostat regulation, replacement of old filters, and insulation improvements	A centralized procurement office manages tender procedures and ensures formal compliance. Line departments define needs and technical specifications, while the procurement office oversees documentation and supports the comparative assessment of procurement options in relation to available resources, in line with the spending rationalization and cost containment objectives outlined in the municipality's Single Programming Document
Organization #3	Environmental services; monitoring equipment; ICT	Procurement of monitoring equipment combining durability and low energy consumption (equipment not covered by mandatory environmental criteria, with strict specifications on recyclability, long lifespan, and reduced operational energy use); service contracts for air, water, and soil monitoring including low-impact reagents, optimized sample transport, and modular instrument setups to ensure both environmental performance and cost efficiency	Procurement responsibilities are embedded within a centralized procurement function, in coordination with multiple technical and operational units. Line departments define needs and technical specifications, while the procurement function manages tender and contractual procedures. A specialized unit within the organization provides technical support in the preparation of specifications and in the assessment of product environmental certifications. In several instances, tender documentation incorporates environmental requirements that go beyond baseline regulatory provisions. Interaction across procurement, line departments, and specialized functions occurs throughout the whole procurement process, enabling cross-functional alignment

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Case	Salient procurement areas of SPP application (2020–2024)	Examples of key SPP practices (2020–2024)	Procurement organizational arrangements
Organization #4	Routine goods and services; minor maintenance	Purchase of standard office supplies (e.g. paper, pens, toner) with legally required recycled content; procurement of conventional cleaning services for offices and schools including basic environmental clauses (such as separate collection of cleaning-related waste and restrictions on hazardous chemicals); routine maintenance contracts for public buildings using standard materials and methods (such as periodic painting with conventional paints, plumbing repairs, and replacement of worn-out fixtures)	Procurement responsibilities are decentralized across line departments, which manage tender preparation and supplier selection within their respective areas. A procurement compliance and technical oversight specialist provides supervision to ensure adherence to regulatory and procedural requirements. Municipal regulations define the role of the procurement compliance and technical oversight specialist as primarily concerned with regulatory and procedural compliance. Tender documentation predominantly refers to procurement procedures conducted through the national electronic marketplace (MEPA), where environmental criteria reflect the minimum standard regulatory provisions embedded in the platform
Organization #5	Public works; facility management	Public works contracts for school and municipal building renovations, sidewalk paving, and public facility upgrades using durable, low-impact materials (e.g. FSC-certified wood, recycled asphalt, eco-friendly paints), with combined procurement of green areas and urban furniture to reduce logistics and labor costs, using durable materials to minimize future replacement needs; Public facility management services including the management of multifunctional public facilities (e.g. schools, community centers, libraries, and sports facilities) with service specifications that integrate environmental and social objectives, such as the adoption of circular approaches to furnishings and equipment, inclusive service delivery models, and enhanced accessibility for vulnerable users. These services were partially financed through European funds obtained via competitive calls	Procurement responsibilities are decentralized across line departments, which manage tender preparation and supplier selection within their respective areas. Coordination across departments relies on recurring interactions during tender preparation, especially in procurements involving multiple service areas. Interaction occurs throughout the procurement process, combining departmental autonomy with cross-departmental alignment when needed. These exchanges take place within an organizational context in which administrative and political levels maintain regular dialogue on procurement-related matters

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Case	Salient procurement areas of SPP application (2020–2024)	Examples of key SPP practices (2020–2024)	Procurement organizational arrangements
Organization #6	School catering; energy services; public works	Catering service contracts including sustainability-related service characteristics, such as the use of organic and locally sourced food, higher nutritional standards (high share of seasonal ingredients), and menu designs aimed at reducing environmental impacts (avoiding ultra-processed food), resulting in higher service costs compared to standard catering practices; public works procurement for the renovation of public buildings and facilities incorporating environmental considerations in materials selection and construction techniques, including the use of certified and low-impact materials, recycled or natural components, and durability-oriented construction solutions, despite higher upfront costs than conventional alternatives	Procurement activities are coordinated through a centralized Procurement and Contracts Office responsible for managing tender procedures and contractual compliance. Line departments define needs and technical specifications, while the Procurement and Contracts Office supports the drafting of tender documentation and the structuring of award criteria. Interaction between the Procurement and Contracts Office and line departments takes place from the early stages of procurement planning and continues throughout the process, allowing requirements and qualitative considerations to be jointly refined before formal tender publication
Organization #7	School catering; facility management; public lighting	Replacement of street lighting with LED systems selected for reduced energy bills; catering services including portion control and waste-reduction measures (i.e. adjusting meal quantities to actual attendance and offering different portion sizes to reduce plate waste); facility management contracts for municipal buildings specifying energy-saving operational measures, such as optimized heating schedules, reduced operating hours, and basic energy monitoring	Preparatory procurement tasks, including needs definition, budget planning, and technical specification drafting, are carried out within line departments, where procurement requirements are consolidated prior to being transmitted to an external Central Purchasing Body. In particular, the operational management of tender procedures is delegated to the provincial Central Purchasing Body. This configuration separates internal responsibility for defining procurement requirements from the formal execution of tender procedures. In so doing, it distributes procurement activities across organizational levels and reinforces department-level responsibility for budget management, consistent with the cost containment objectives outlined in the municipality's Regulation on Performance Measurement and Evaluation

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Case	Salient procurement areas of SPP application (2020–2024)	Examples of key SPP practices (2020–2024)	Procurement organizational arrangements
Organization #8	Facility management; urban services; energy	Procurement of facility management services for municipal buildings specifying performance-based requirements for the operation and maintenance of building systems, including contractual targets for reducing resource consumption and extending the functional lifespan of facilities, going beyond minimum regulatory standards; development of a urban park on redeveloped brownfield sites through European funds obtained via competitive calls, enabling the environmental remediation and social reuse of former industrial areas; urban regeneration project involving the transformation of disused municipal bus depots into spaces dedicated to cultural and artistic activities, combining environmental redevelopment with new social and economic functions for the local community; development of cycling paths using recycled materials (e.g. recycled rubber)	A centralized procurement function oversees tender procedures and contractual compliance within the municipality. Operating as an interdepartmental office, it supports line departments by providing guidance on the integration of environmental criteria and assisting in identifying appropriate solutions during tender preparation. Needs definition and technical specification drafting remain within line departments, with structured moments of coordination during tender preparation, particularly for procurements involving multiple service areas. Procurement-related matters are also discussed on a recurring basis between political and administrative levels, connecting policy orientations with operational decisions throughout the procurement process
Organization #9	Catering services; accommodation services	Catering procurement specifying high food quality standards combined with reduced environmental impacts, such as the use of organic and certified products, a high share of local and seasonal ingredients, and menu designs aimed at lowering the environmental footprint of meals, together with social considerations including fair labor conditions along the supply chain and inclusivity in food provision; Student accommodation services including requirements that go beyond minimum regulatory standards by emphasizing enhanced environmental quality and user well-being, such as stricter criteria for indoor environmental conditions, the use of low-impact and health-oriented materials in furnished spaces, and the provision of shared and accessible common areas designed to improve living conditions and user well-being	Procurement responsibilities are organized within a dedicated Service for Procurement, Contracts, and Assets, which manages acquisitions and tender procedures at organizational level. Line units define needs and technical specifications, while the Service for Procurement, Contracts, and Assets supports the preparation of tender documentation and contractual arrangements. Interaction between the Service and operational units is characterized by ongoing consultation during the preparation of procurement documents, with particular attention to discussing the content of service requirements before formalization and their consistency with the organization's institutional objectives

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Case	Salient procurement areas of SPP application (2020–2024)	Examples of key SPP practices (2020–2024)	Procurement organizational arrangements
Organization #10	Facility management; ICT; mobility services	Facility management contracts for large municipal buildings and surrounding public spaces specifying advanced environmental requirements, including the use of low-impact and non-toxic materials in maintenance activities and large-scale tree planting and greening interventions in densely built areas, aimed at improving urban environmental quality and community well-being beyond routine operational standards; procurement of ICT equipment specifying extended durability requirements; mobility service contracts for shared and public mobility services including stringent requirements on emissions reduction and service innovation, such as the introduction of low-emission fleets and digitally enabled mobility solutions aimed at improving accessibility and environmental performance	Procurement activities are coordinated through a centralized procurement function responsible for managing tender procedures and contractual compliance across the municipality. Line departments define needs and technical specifications, while the procurement function supports the preparation of tender documentation and award criteria. Procurement-related matters are framed within directions defined at political and senior administrative levels, which provide a reference framework for the formulation of requirements and tender conditions. In several procurements, tender documents include environmental criteria that extend beyond minimum regulatory requirements

Source(s): Authors' own work

Third, we conducted an in-depth examination of the data to identify recurring patterns and extract first-order concepts. In doing so, we focused on how public procurement contextual conditions were described, how economic and sustainability considerations were articulated in procurement decisions, and which evaluative criteria were invoked in justifying choices. Through within- and cross-case comparisons, differences began to emerge in the way public organizations addressed internal economic efficiency and sustainability objectives through procurement decision-making and recurring patterns were observed in how procurement choices were justified and legitimized. These patterns pointed to underlying differences in how the decision space was constructed, prompting us to focus more closely on how decisions were framed.

Fourth, we returned to the literature on tensions and decision-making in SSCM (Wu and Pagell, 2011; Montabon *et al.*, 2016; Alexander *et al.*, 2014; Keeney, 1996) and engaged with the concept of decision framing (e.g. Hahn *et al.*, 2014; Glac, 2009) to further interpret and theoretically refine the empirical patterns identified in the previous stage. This concept proved particularly appropriate, as the observed variation lay in how procurement decisions were structured and made sense of in relation to economic efficiency and sustainability considerations. The iterative movement between empirical insights and theoretical constructs sharpened our analytical lens, enabling the progression from first-order concepts into more abstract second-order themes and aggregate dimensions.

Fifth, we revised and consolidated the emerging conceptual model in light of the refined analytical lens and a systematic re-examination of all cases. This final iteration enabled us to stabilize the configurational model of SPP decision-making approaches that capture how public organizations address the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability objectives. It also clarified the underlying mechanisms shaping these approaches.

One researcher was responsible for identifying relevant codes, which were discussed with two other researchers. We relied on a negotiated agreement procedure (Yin, 2015), whereby

differing interpretations were debated and reconciled through 10 dedicated meetings. We also conducted a peer debriefing with an external scholar with expertise in SPP and SSCM (Spall, 1998), where we presented the emerging data structure and incorporated critical feedback to refine and validate our analytical scheme. The data structure and resulting model underwent 11 iterative revisions to ensure conceptual coherence and alignment with the empirical material.

Throughout the analysis, we monitored the emergence of new themes and categories. Following the principle of theoretical saturation (Bowen, 2008), data collection and analysis proceeded until additional data no longer generated substantively new themes or altered the emerging analytical structure. Preliminary categories began to stabilize after analyzing the first five organizations, while the inclusion of additional cases (organizations 6–10) allowed us to sharpen and consolidate them. Analysis of the final cases yielded no new categories, indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached.

4. Results

4.1 Public procurement contextual conditions

The data revealed three main public procurement contextual conditions related to the market, regulatory, and social context, which intensify decision-making complexity in SPP, thereby increasing the challenge of simultaneously pursuing internal economic efficiency and ambitious sustainability objectives through SPP decision-making (Wu and Pagell, 2011; Xiao *et al.*, 2019). Organizations showed a homogeneous depiction of these contextual conditions (see Table 3).

Regarding the market, respondents reported that suppliers frequently fail to meet sustainability requirements, forcing public organizations to adapt to limited offerings and sometimes accept suboptimal solutions: “...they only had one model, so I had to adapt to that model...” (Bursar, Org.#5). Moreover, some suppliers resist adopting sustainability practices, driven by cost-saving and profit-oriented views: “...there is a tendency to do as it used to be done, always trying to save money...” (Head of procurement office, Org.#2). Others misrepresent sustainability commitments declared during tenders, exploiting the limited oversight capacity of public organizations. These market conditions narrow the options available to public buyers, increasing the likelihood that more demanding sustainability requirements entail lower competition, higher costs and greater uncertainty in supplier evaluation (Grandia and Meehan, 2017).

The regulatory context also plays a central role in SPP. In Italy, public procurement regulations are widely perceived as rigid and burdensome, due to their volume and frequent changes: “the constant changing of regulations has definitely led to hassle and confusion” (Public works specialist, Org.#5). They are also considered ambiguous and incomplete, leaving several product and service categories uncovered. These regulatory features tend to constrain strategic discretion in procurement decisions and to reinforce a cautious, risk-averse stance, discouraging the proactive introduction of ambitious sustainability requirements in tenders (Harland *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, the social context adds further complexity in SPP decision-making. Citizens’ scrutiny often pushes administrators to favor visible, quick fixes over initiatives with deeper sustainability benefits: “...if you post a picture of an abandoned flowerbed, there is immediately a barrage of criticism...” (Mayor, Org.#4). Moreover, despite growing environmental awareness, sustainability initiatives often trigger conflict among groups with divergent interests, complicating decision-making: “...when I make a bicycle path, I have equal citizens happy and unhappy, because I took away five parking spaces” (Councillor, Org.#7). Such conflicts thus make procurement decisions more contentious, raising the political challenge of pursuing sustainability-oriented choices, particularly when these involve higher upfront economic costs (Wontner *et al.*, 2020).

Taken together, market, regulatory, and social conditions intensify the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability ambitions. Yet, despite a shared external setting, organizations vary in how they interpret and respond to this tension. The following sections examine how such variation unfolds in practice.

Table 3. Coding structure and representative quotations for public procurement contextual conditions

Representative quotes for Public procurement contextual conditions	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“With the simple case of the glasses, there was a bit of work to do because they (suppliers) only had one model, so I had to adapt to that model. They’re not very equipped in that sense; they do more things that aren’t compostable and recyclable than anything else.” (Bursar, Org.#5) “Medium to large companies, so those with at least 25 employees, are more likely to make this transition because they have more means to do so and a greater corporate culture let’s say. Smaller ones clearly have many more difficulties and lack a certain sensitivity yet, but unfortunately our country is full of microenterprises”. (Head of procurement office, Org.#8) “from the suppliers [. . .] perhaps there is more resistance. That is, there is a tendency to do as it used to be done, always a tendency to save money, whether it is on labor or whether it is on products or whether it is on worksites.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#2) “we are often left let’s say almost alone to fight windmills. We have the law telling us to implement CAM, but on the other side we have suppliers complaining because we ask them to use certain kinds of transport means, or suppliers bidding even though they don’t really have the requirements we ask for, trusting then to prove they meet the requirements at a later stage or knowing that at a later stage maybe the controls loosen up a bit”. (Head of procurement office, Org.#9) “There are many suppliers who write in improvement bids that they do things they can’t or don’t want to implement in order to just get the score. They present a project done well with the inclusion of many nice things that they then do not implement. Often we fail to monitor on a regular basis, and a perverse mechanism is created whereby those who made a good bid and win the tender then do not implement the things they promised and then have significant savings because they do not deliver on their commitments”. (Procurement compliance and technical oversight specialist, Org.#4) “The difficulty was for the technical service to identify which products were true zero kilometer products, and then to try to resist the provocations of the economic operators who instead wanted to pass off as zero kilometer products that were not so zero kilometer”. (Head of procurement office, Org.#10) “...I think there were maybe 10 operators in Italy who were able to have all the certifications under those CAM regulatory requirements, and the level of participation in the tenders that we did proves it - we are talking about tenders that were quite important from an economic point of view anyway -, that is, million-euro open procedures with 3–4 bids.” (Director, Org.#9)	Inadequacy of the market to provide sustainable products or services Supplier resistance to sustainability implementation Supplier misrepresentation of sustainability claims Regulatory rigidity	Market context Regulatory context	Public procurement contextual conditions

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Representative quotes for Public procurement contextual conditions	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“efficient work of the public administration is held back by a set of regulations that see us as potential offenders and therefore they try to limit everything . . . they force you to justify everything, every action, even the hardly justifiable-as I was saying before the comparison of curricula or a whole series of other issues.” (Secretary General, Org.#4) “The minimum environmental criteria (CAM), are often subject to so many potential interpretations that in some cases can give some application problems.” (Infrastructure and public works technical specialist, Org.#6) “I think the CAM regulatory requirements are quite generic and complex at the same time. In my opinion, they should be more precise.” (Public works specialist, Org.#5) “Minimum environmental criteria (CAM) are not exhaustive, they do not cover all activities that are contracted. They should definitely be increased. There are some activities that are absolutely not covered by CAM”. (Head of procurement office, Org.#8) “at the national level but also European level, there are no minimum environmental criteria (CAM) or similar tools for what are our main purchases”. (Environmental and technical specialist, Org.#3) “the constant changing of regulations [. . .] has definitely led to hassle and confusion about regulations and reliable procedures, and this clearly then reverberates on the final product as well, understood as sustainability of the procurement.” (Public works specialist, Org.#5) “the brake on SPP improvement is the current overregulation. Although I am extremely supportive of this legislation [on CAM] I have concerns about the actual implementation because it gets lost in a series of meanders of regulations that have to be applied and so paradoxically the civil servant when preparing a tender is more concerned about not getting it wrong than getting it right.” (Procurement compliance and technical oversight specialist, Org.#4) “If we are seen as an organization that respects the environment and everything, regardless the publicity, we are also viewed more favorably by lot of citizens, given the growing widespread sensitivity.” (Vice Mayor, Org.#5) “we have recipients who are the best in this regard, because we see that they are basically more environmentally sensitive than past generations”. (Director, Org.#9)	Regulatory ambiguity Regulatory incompleteness Regulatory burden Environmental sensitivity of citizens	Social context	

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Representative quotes for Public procurement contextual conditions	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“It is clear that especially in recent years with social media, which has become more and more pervasive, and with the fact that if you post a picture of an unkempt or abandoned flowerbed, there is immediately a barrage of criticism. Administrators are very image-sensitive and so they try to compel offices to remedy the most visible aspects of dysfunction.” (Mayor, Org#4) “Certainly the population is aware of the choices being made. For example, I received complaints from some citizens who complained that they preferred to see green but uncultivated grass on the side of the road instead of seeing yellow grass because of the herbicide, which then, slowly, slowly will be cut and will be removed.” (Mayor, Org.#1) “This is a process that also has educational aspects toward the citizenry that are complex to manage. I give an example, when I make a bicycle path I have equal citizens happy and equal citizens unhappy, because I took away five parking spaces. So, sustainability issues still have a level of conflict today, because so many people are always used to taking the car and don’t want to know about biking. It is not just a matter of expanding service and possibilities so that automatically people change their habits.” (Councillor, Org.#7) “In general, the difficulties involve making the protesting citizen understand why the green choice prevailed and not the perhaps more aesthetically pleasing one. Many understand it without explanation, but there are always citizens who contest the decision because they are not well-versed in the green concept”. (Vice Mayor, Org.#5) Source(s): Authors’ own work	Social monitoring on organizational action Divergent citizen opinions on organization’s sustainability initiatives		

4.2 SPP decision-making approaches

The within-case analysis revealed that organizations adopted three distinct SPP decision-making approaches which differed in how economic efficiency and sustainability considerations were prioritized in procurement choices, thereby reflecting alternative ways of addressing the tension between the two (see [Table 4](#)).

Table 4. Coding structure and representative quotations for SPP decision-making approaches

Representative quotes for SPP decision-making approaches	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“Clearly, purchasing budgets can be limiting. When deciding whether to buy or not, I prioritize staying within budget over selecting the most sustainable option. I focus on achieving a concrete result with the resources available, which can certainly be an obstacle to sustainability.” (Budgeting and accounting specialist, Org.#7) “often the green choice isn’t made because it’s not economically accessible, and so this is always the concern . . . Sometimes we have to compromise downwards and not upwards as we should because sometimes the financial demand is excessive.” (Head of procurement office Org.#2) “We have changed the boiler of the municipality and we are changing ceiling lights because we are confident these actions translate into tangible savings in the municipality’s budget.” (Head of procurement office Org.#2) “... we look for those more compatible solutions where there is a significant cost savings, so an even better image, even more environmentally friendly, and an expense savings.” (Head of environmental department, Org.#7) “we use the MEPA (Public Administration Electronic Marketplace) [. . .] as our own shopping cart, so we go and see what’s there, what products are there, whether they match our needs, what kind of certifications they have, and then if the information is not sufficiently detailed, we just launch fact-finding surveys with suppliers to try to bring our point of view a little bit closer to that of the economic operators.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#10) “[when we incorporate sustainability requirements into tenders] We do not take a solution for granted. [. . .]. We have this valid aspect to emphasize, which is that we do not copy and paste. If one tender went well it is not necessarily done in the same way the tender afterwards: we reason, we evaluate, and if there is something to change in the case we change.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#9) “... through preliminary market consultations, we try to identify suppliers that offer more advanced sustainable solutions, not just the standard claims that sound good but say very little.” (Infrastructure and public works technical specialist, Org.#6) “We have now turned to another supplier who can provide certification for the finished product. Regarding purchases of textiles, such as clothing for our workers, we have been looking for certified products, and have been purchasing products with the “trust in textiles” label for several years for almost all products, including T-shirts, sweatshirts, and pants.” (Environmental management and procurement technical specialist, Org#1)	Making sustainable purchases when economic conditions allow Pursuing win-win solutions through SPP Thoroughly verifying sustainability characteristics when making purchases Proactively searching for more sustainable suppliers	Cost-driven approach Values-driven approach	SPP decision-making approaches

(continued)

Table 4. Continued

Representative quotes for SPP decision-making approaches	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“Only some of the products we regularly purchase are covered by CAM while others aren’t, like snacks or beverages. Even when they’re not formally included, we still add sustainability criteria, and quite strict ones, I should say.” (Food technician, Org.#9) “Regarding operations such as the station redevelopment, there both in the bidding process, [. . .], and in the course of the work, certain aspects were privileged. For example, [. . .] we safeguarded all those magnolias that were instead planned to be all cut down, creating a second row of them and using a system with environmental criteria not minimal but well beyond minimal [. . .], which concerns the whole part of drainage and water under the roots. It was a very particular, advanced system to be able to continue to maintain trees at that level within an urban system.” (Infrastructure and public works director, Org.#6) “Economic and environmental goals do not always align [. . .]. Especially at the beginning, when we started purchasing with this focus, we realized that sustainable products were priced higher than those from the market less attentive to these parameters, so it was a choice to go green despite the higher costs . . . it had to guide us also the administration to invest more in terms of economic resources, especially on some services and products”. (Head of procurement office, Org.#10) “The electric scooter we are about to purchase is unlikely to perform particularly well in terms of road performance. For instance, it may struggle on steep roads, given that the area is quite hilly. It is also expensive, but at least it is electric and therefore has a lower environmental impact” (Head of procurement office, Org.#1) “let’s say that for us the aspect of environmental sustainability is inescapable, so in any case for us it is a requirement to pursue and therefore we try to combine it with the budget. Therefore when we make an inquiry about the cost of a particular good or service we also include these sustainable aspects, so it is part of our technical specifications and therefore we could not go back on certain features.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#3) “I conduct a market research, send requests for various quotes, find that type of glass, and choose the one that offers it to me at the best economic level, because the organization has this obligation here, but the features must be the ones I ask for.” (Public works specialist, Org.#5)	Going beyond minimum legal compliance in procurement Accepting lower internal efficiency to achieve greater sustainability benefits Combining sustainability and cost considerations in supplier selection	Ambidextrous approach	

(continued)

Table 4. Continued

Representative quotes for SPP decision-making approaches	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“We implemented two photovoltaic systems at two major schools. It was a brilliant operation that allowed us to replace the asbestos roof of the middle school, which had been dragging on for years. So on that occasion, with that brilliant operation that cost the municipality almost nothing, we replaced the asbestos and installed the photovoltaic system. On that and on another school, where we needed to waterproof the flat roof. We were at our wit’s end, so this option was studied, and thanks to that, we also received a regional grant for asbestos removal. So, this project was studied, allowing us to replace the roofs and obtain savings and renewable energy. [...] The intention was to install photovoltaic panels to use renewable energy. Then the asbestos had been there for a long time and the other roof needed to be waterproofed, so we took the opportunity.” (Public works specialist, Org.#5) “It is not easy to combine economic, environmental and social objectives when making a purchase. The main limitation that an administration has is the budget, so obviously the purchasing process has to be consistent with the budget forecast and what is budgeted for that purchase. It is done by inserting a series of clauses that reward the environmental and social aspects; Obviously to do this significant funding is needed because meeting these criteria has a considerable economic cost. But the ability we have had to design interventions well in order to receive European funding has facilitated us in being able to combine all these aspects.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#8) “First, we see that if we assess green purchases well, it is like investing in high product quality. We have to evaluate the whole package, so not just the environmental or economic aspect that we see written on the product but in general product and service performance throughout its life cycle.” (Environmental and technical specialist, Org.#3) “When we go to make purchases, in addition to all the technical characteristics of the firefighting, the pedagogical characteristics, the shape, functionality, origin and characteristics of the materials, etc., we also asked ourselves what should be the life cycle of the product and especially at the end of the life cycle, that is assumed to be durable since these are investments, and also the economic and environmental cost of disposal.” (Educational services specialist, Org#8) Source(s): Authors’ own work	Seizing opportunities to meet multiple needs Assessing the overall value for money in procurement decisions		

4.2.1 Cost-driven approach. A cost-driven approach entails applying SPP when it does not compromise internal economic performance. This means that economic considerations are preponderant in procurement decision-making, while sustainability remains secondary and conditional. This approach emerges clearly in Org.#2 and Org.#7. Both organizations only make sustainable purchases that fall within narrow budget limits, settling for suboptimal

environmental or social outcomes: “*When deciding whether to buy or not, I prioritize staying within budget over selecting the most sustainable option.*” (Budgeting and accounting specialist, Org.#7). Likewise, in Org.#2’s tender specifications, award criteria are predominantly cost-based, rendering sustainability engagement in procurement structurally subordinate to internal economic priorities.

Complementarily, sustainability considerations in procurement decisions are also primarily aimed at achieving cost savings: “*...we look for those more compatible solutions where there is a significant cost savings [...].*” (Head of environmental department, Org.#7). In the same vein, in Org.#2’s performance reports, sustainable purchases are highlighted mainly in terms of their contribution to expenditure reduction. This reflects an instrumental rationale focused on win-win solutions (Xiao *et al.*, 2019).

4.2.2 Values-driven approach. A values-driven approach involves SPP being applied proactively and thoroughly, prioritizing the creation of environmental and/or social value, even at the expense of internal economic efficiency. Accordingly, the organizational focus on sustainability in procurement decisions is high, while the focus on internal economic efficiency is low. This approach is evident in Org.#1, #6, #9, and #10. Such organizations tend to be very thorough in the verification of the sustainability characteristics of the products and services to be purchased, delving into the details and taking nothing for granted.

This behavior is also reflected in a proactive search for suppliers capable of meeting high sustainability requirements: “*...through preliminary market consultations, we try to identify suppliers that offer more advanced sustainable solutions...*” (Infrastructure and public works technical specialist, Org.#6). Archival data from Org.#9 confirms this practice, as procurement resolutions include explicit verifications of suppliers’ capacity to meet the organization’s sustainability goals. Organizations adopting a values-driven approach also go beyond legal compliance, setting sustainability criteria above regulatory thresholds (e.g. Org.#1 and #6) and for product/service categories not formally covered by mandatory requirements (e.g. Org.#9 and #10).

More sustainable choices often entail additional economic costs (Wu and Pagell, 2011). However, organizations characterized by a values-driven approach demonstrate willingness to sacrifice internal economic performance to achieve greater sustainability benefits: “*...it would have been much cheaper to stick to the basic requirements for the sidewalk paving, but we decided that the environmental impact mattered more, even if it clearly meant higher costs*” (Environmental management and procurement technical specialist, Org.#1). As a result, when economic and sustainability objectives are perceived as conflicting, priority is given to the environmental and social aspects over cost.

4.2.3 Ambidextrous approach. The third approach identified is ambidextrous, in which SPP is enacted as a deliberate attempt to simultaneously pursue internal economic efficiency and substantive sustainability objectives. This approach is observed in Org.#3, #5, and #8. When faced with conflicting issues, these organizations do not pursue one objective over the other or limit sustainable purchases to only those that allow for short-term economic returns. Rather, they accept and navigate the tension through procurement decisions. In this regard, supplier selection strives to combine sustainability and cost considerations, as illustrated by the Head of the procurement office from Org.#8: “*We obviously have to respect budget constraints, but at the same time the sustainability requirements we set are not optional. Carrying out a careful comparison of suppliers is essential precisely because both aspects must be satisfied*”. Economic and sustainability priorities are therefore treated as equally salient in procurement decisions.

Organizations adopting an ambidextrous approach also leverage emerging opportunities to meet multiple needs simultaneously. Rather than regarding budget constraints as fixed limits, they actively seek funding opportunities to expand the scope of procurement interventions. For example, Org.#8 accessed European funds to implement an urban redevelopment project combining environmental and social aims (urban reforestation and universally accessible public recreational spaces) while remaining feasible under budget constraints.

Finally, in Org.#3 and Org.#8 in particular, procurement decisions rely on a broader evaluation across economic, environmental, and social factors over the product/service life cycle, as articulated by the Environmental and technical specialist from Org.#3: “*We need to evaluate the whole package, so not just the environmental or economic aspect that we see written on the product, but in general the performance of the product and service throughout its life cycle*”. This reflects the concept of “Value for Money Procurement” (Preuss, 2009), whereby overall value derives from the concurrent assessment of economic and sustainability criteria.

4.2.4 Understanding variation in SPP decision-making approaches. A comparative reading of the three approaches reveals systematic differences in how organizations prioritize and combine economic efficiency and sustainability considerations in procurement decisions.

Although all organizations operate under similar market, regulatory, and social constraints, they differ markedly in the emphasis attributed to economic performance and environmental/social value in procurement decisions (Preuss, 2009).

Across cases, some organizations subordinate sustainability to economic imperatives, others prioritize it even at the expense of economic performance, and still others place emphasis on both objectives, seeking to pursue them concurrently. These differences reflect alternative ways of addressing the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability in procurement decision-making (Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020; Montabon *et al.*, 2016). The three approaches thus capture distinct, empirically observed responses to this tension.

The analysis also revealed a contrasting pattern in one organization (Org.#4), in which the economic efficiency–sustainability tension is not actively experienced in procurement decision-making. In this case, SPP is enacted passively, as a set of externally imposed requirements to be complied with, rather than as a domain of active decision-making. As noted by one respondent, “*I don’t see that there is any particular focus beyond regulatory compliance*.” (Bursar, Org.#4). As a result, procurement decisions are not directed toward prioritizing or balancing economic efficiency and sustainability objectives, but instead follow a rule-based and non-deliberative pattern, in which choices are treated as routine applications of regulatory requirements. This suggests that, in the absence of a perceived tension, procurement does not become an arena for active decision evaluation.

Rather than representing an additional decision-making approach, this case highlights a boundary condition of our framework: the three observed approaches capture alternative ways in which organizations address the economic efficiency–sustainability tension when it is actively experienced in procurement decision-making. When this tension is not experienced, no distinct response emerges.

While this classification describes how SPP decision-making unfolds in relation to the tension, it does not explain why organizations operating under similar contextual conditions adopt different approaches. To account for this variation, we examined how procurement decisions were justified and evaluated across cases, revealing distinct decision framings that underpin and shape such variation.

4.3 Decision framings

Our analysis identified two recurrent ways in which procurement decisions are framed across organizations: a *rational decision framing* and a *public value-oriented decision framing* (Table 5). These framings embody distinct interpretations of the decision space, grounded in different underlying orientations that define how procurement decisions are evaluated (Hahn *et al.*, 2014; Glac, 2009; Alexander *et al.*, 2014; Keeney, 1996). Importantly, decision framings are not mutually exclusive. In some organizations (i.e. Org.#3, #5, and #8), elements of both framings coexisted, suggesting that procurement decisions may be shaped by multiple evaluative orientations operating simultaneously.

Table 5. Coding structure and representative quotations for rational decision framing and public value-oriented decision framing

	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
<i>Representative quotes for Rational decision framing</i>			
“Let’s say that we always try to be pragmatic in the paths we take. That is, when we have to make purchases, we necessarily look at the budget we have and the structure that we are.” (Budgeting and accounting director, Org.#7)	Viewing procurement decisions in terms of budget availability and organizational capacity	Defining the decision space through budgetary and organizational constraints	Rational decision framing
“The organization and the money are these, so procurement choices somehow depend on these factors.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#2)			
“It’s not just a matter of what to buy, it’s a matter of knowing that then someone will ask you why you spent in that way. And there you have to have your papers in order, in the sense that you have to prove that you could afford it.” (Bursar, Org.#5)	Linking procurement decisions to internal budget accountability		
“Every euro we spend has to be explainable internally, and therefore there is also a kind of economic responsibility that we have to comply with.” (Contract Manager, Org.#8)			
“Let’s be clear, when we have to choose what to purchase, we make the comparison based on costs.” (Budgeting and accounting specialist, Org.#7)	Using cost comparisons to structure procurement decisions	Weighing procurement decisions based on economic data	
“The filter we use when we have several options in front of us, in the end, is the price. It is the most immediate criterion that guides us.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#2)			
“In our organization, every purchase has to be supported by a whole set of very precise economic data, otherwise it is really difficult for it to be carried out.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#2)	Expecting decisions to always be supported by accurate financial data		
“In any case, we always want to have clear numbers. For example, when we had to develop the urban park, if we had not known well how much it would then cost us to maintain it over the years, maintenance and management and all that, we probably would not have carried it forward at all.” (Budget councillor, Org.#8)			
“Often there are solutions that, in principle, are also shareable, but then you have to ask yourself what they entail also at an organizational level, that is, whether the organization is able to sustain them in terms of people and time. Unfortunately, these are scarce resources in many contexts, including ours.” (Secretary General, Org.#5)	Evaluating sustainability options in terms of internal resource impacts	Centering decision evaluation in internal implications	
“Some sustainability initiatives require a certain level of management and expertise. So it is necessary to assess whether it is then possible to follow them in day-to-day operations, otherwise they risk remaining only on paper.” (Environmental and technical specialist, Org.#3)			

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
"Every purchase we make clearly has repercussions on the budget, and therefore you have to consider how much room it takes away from other expenses." (Head of procurement office, Org.#2)	Assessing the financial consequences of purchasing options		
"The point is that often certain choices bind us economically for a long time. Think about awarding a continuous service such as public lighting or cleaning. That expense then becomes ongoing, and therefore this is an important aspect to consider." (Councillor, Org.#7)			
<i>Representative quotes for Public value-oriented decision framing</i>			
"these goods, while they may cost a little more, have a long-term impact on the territory. It's an investment that's made; you shouldn't view it myopically and solely based on the cost of a good. You have to see it in the long term, in terms of the impact it has both territorially and socially." (Mayor, Org.#1)	Considering procurement decisions as long-term investments for community well-being	Conceiving decisions through public purpose	Public value-oriented decision framing
"It's not an expense that you just make and that's it. If you make the wrong purchases today, then for years you find yourself dealing with problems in the territory, or in any case with a degraded territory. If you choose well, the whole territory and the community benefit from it." (Vice Mayor, Org.#5)			
"it's a significant cultural change. We must have a very open-minded approach, which is not limited to the activity that is carried out in the organization as such for its own institutional purposes, but which has to look at the organization as being part of a more global scope." (President, Org.#9)	Basing organizational action on responsibility toward the community at large		
"the environmental emergency that we are experiencing imposes on all levels of decision-making-and then also on the practitioners who apply the levels of decision-making-the definition of small actions that then have a multiplier effect on the whole system. And the public sector should be a model to follow. So I think this is very important especially because we are in a public sphere [. . .]. We need to consider environmental aspects in a broad sense, not only in the classic sense of environmental services, but also including all the cultural and educational services that local authorities make available to citizens." (Budget councillor, Org.#8)			
"In the end, the decisions we make are not for the organization itself, and in my view they should never be. We always have to ask ourselves whether what we do makes sense for the service that the organization has to provide to citizens." (Secretary General, Org.#6)	Grounding organizational decisions in the public mission of the organization		

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“The things we do have to be consistent with the public service mission that we are called upon to fulfill, otherwise we lose the sense of what we do. Environmental sustainability, therefore purchasing products that have significant environmental performance, falls precisely within this type of mission.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#3) “Regarding catering, I would say that we are quite proud of the tender we made because it can have a real impact on the environment, even though it may not be immediately visible”. (Director, Org.#9)	Assessing procurement decisions through their environmental contribution	Integrating environmental implications into decision evaluation	
“When we manage to award a tender that not only has met the technical specifications, congruous economic value, etc. but also has important environmental sustainability aspects in it, it is a source of pride and general satisfaction.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#3) “When we evaluate purchasing options, we always ask ourselves what kind of impact they carry with them. For example, this is what we did when we had to pave the sidewalks. We assessed which type of paving was less impactful.” (Environmental management and procurement technical specialist, Org.#1) Clearly, the whole issue of product use and service production also plays a key role in terms of CO2 emissions. You know that it’s estimated that more than 50% of CO2 emissions come from production and consumption, so there’s no doubt that affecting that sector becomes critical not only for sustainability in general but also to begin to take a major line in terms of reducing CO2 emissions. [. . .] so full appreciation in green procurement (General Director and President, Org.#3)	Considering environmental consequences as integral to organizational choices		
“The push toward sustainability started from the political component, which provided a clear direction. Then the offices were asked to translate it into concrete choices, each within its own remit.” (Public works specialist, Org.#5) “certainly the political level, so the relevant alderman, pushed in this direction and then it was followed by the offices. Let’s say the political level issued guidelines with good intentions in a deliberation of the council and then delegating the various technical offices each for its competence to implement those guidelines.” (Head of procurement office, Org.#10) “the general director always includes in the organization’s strategic-programmatic objectives the monitoring of green procurement, so he also has feedback from it through the organization’s reward system.” (Environmental and technical specialist, Org.#3)	Political vision orienting sustainability-related decisions	Sustainability-oriented leadership shaping decisions	
	Setting sustainability objectives as strategic reference points		

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
“in the three-year planning document, where the strategic lines are defined [. . .], one line included environmental sustainability, for example, through a number of resources allocated to bicycle paths. [. . .] I give another example [. . .]: green mobility, so the use of the all-electric municipal car fleet. So these are decisions at the political, strategic level, which then have an impact on actions. [. . .].” (Head of procurement office, Org.#8) Source(s): Authors’ own work			

4.3.1 Rational decision framing. The rational decision framing conceives procurement decisions as guided by calculative rationality. In this sense, they are grounded in formal comparability, economic justifiability, and organizational feasibility. This framing is prominently evident in Org.#2, #3, #5, #7, and #8. Across such organizations, procurement choices are articulated in relation to available financial resources and organizational capacity and tied to internal budget accountability. As the head of the procurement office from Org.#2 noted: “*the organization and the money are these, so procurement choices somehow depend on these factors.*” Procurement decisions are thus framed within a space defined by budgetary and organizational constraints.

Consistently, organizations characterized by a rational decision framing structure procure procurement choices through cost-based comparisons and expect decisions to be supported by accurate financial data. This is evident, for example, in the bid evaluation minutes of Org.#5, #7, and #8, where comparative tables and detailed cost breakdowns accompany purchasing decisions. Economic data thus constitute a crucial basis for comparing procurement alternatives.

Procurement options are also assessed in light of their implications for internal organizational resources (e.g. competences, time, personnel) and monitoring feasibility. As the Environmental and technical specialist from Org.#3 explained, purchasing choices need to be evaluated “*in terms of allocation of competences and people*”, while the Councillor from Org.#7 emphasized that “*one element we look at is whether the requirement can be effectively monitored during contract execution.*” This indicates that decision evaluation is centered on the internal organizational implications.

4.3.2 Public value-oriented decision framing. The public value-oriented decision framing configures procurement decisions as oriented toward collective outcomes beyond the organization’s boundaries, extending decision evaluation to societal implications. This framing is identifiable in Org.#1, #3, #5, #6, #8, #9, and #10. They consider procurement decisions as investments directed at long-term collective benefits, as noted by the Mayor from Org.#1: “*It’s an investment that’s made [. . .]. You have to see it in the long term, in terms of the impact it has both territorially and socially*”. In a similar vein, decisions are grounded in a sense of responsibility toward the community and in the organization’s public mission. This is corroborated by strategic planning documents from Org.#5, #6, #8, and #10, which emphasize commitment to collective interests and public mandate. Thus, the evidence indicates a tendency to conceive decisions through public purpose.

In addition, procurement decisions are valued for their environmental contribution, and environmental consequences are treated as integral to organizational choices, as indicated by the Environmental management and procurement technical specialist from Org.#1: “*When we evaluate purchasing options, we always ask ourselves what environmental impact they carry with them*”. This reflects the integration of environmental implications into decision evaluation.

Finally, in organizations exhibiting a public value-oriented framing, decisions are guided by a political vision that positions sustainability as central to the organization’s strategic direction. As the public works specialist from Org.#5 stated: “*The push toward sustainability started from the political component, which provided a clear direction.*” This is also emphasized in

programmatic documents from Org.#3, #6, #9, and #10, where sustainability is identified as a core strategic commitment. Decisions are thus shaped by sustainability-oriented leadership.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study set out to answer the question: how do public organizations address the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability through procurement decision-making?

Our analysis yields three interrelated findings. It shows how the contextual conditions of public procurement amplify the difficulty of balancing economic and sustainability objectives; how organizations respond to this tension through differing SPP decision-making approaches; and how these responses are shaped by underlying decision framings.

First, we find that public procurement operates within a context marked by specific market, regulatory, and social conditions that render SPP decision-making particularly complex (Xiao *et al.*, 2019). This complexity manifests in the difficulty of concurrently satisfying internal economic efficiency demands while delivering substantive environmental and social outcomes (Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020).

Second, we show that public organizations respond differently to this intensified tension through SPP decisions. They adopt three distinct decision-making approaches – cost-driven, values-driven, and ambidextrous – which reflect alternative ways of prioritizing economic efficiency and sustainability objectives (Saunders *et al.*, 2020). As such, these approaches can be understood in terms of the relative emphasis organizations attribute to each objective (Montabon *et al.*, 2016; Wu and Pagell, 2011).

Third, we find that these approaches are shaped by a rational decision framing (Cabantous and Gond, 2011) and a public value-oriented decision framing (Glac, 2009; Keeney, 1996). These framings function as evaluative lenses that define what counts as legitimate and relevant in procurement decisions, thereby influencing which objective – economic efficiency, sustainability, or both – becomes salient when tensions arise (Hahn *et al.*, 2014). In this way, decision framings help explain the observed variation in SPP decision-making approaches. Consistently, across cases, we observe a systematic alignment between the SPP decision-making approaches and the relative prominence of the two decision framings. This alignment reflects recurring configurations through which organizations interpret and respond to the economic efficiency-sustainability tension in procurement decisions (Table 6).

Table 6. SPP decision-making approaches and associated decision framings

	How the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability objectives is addressed in SPP decisions	How procurement decisions are framed
Cost-driven approach Organization #2 Organization #7	Priority is given to internal economic efficiency in SPP decisions. Sustainable purchases are undertaken only insofar as they do not compromise economic performance	Rational decision framing
Values-driven approach Organization #1 Organization #6 Organization #9 Organization #10	Priority is given to the pursuit of sustainability objectives in SPP decisions. Sustainable purchases are undertaken proactively beyond minimum legal requirements, even when this entails sacrificing internal economic efficiency	Public value-oriented decision framing
Ambidextrous approach Organization #3 Organization #5 Organization #8	Simultaneous priority is given to both internal economic efficiency and sustainability objectives in SPP decisions. Purchasing choices are made to advance both concerns concurrently	Both Rational and Public value-oriented decision framing

Note(s): Organization #4 is not included in the table, as it does not actively experience the economic efficiency–sustainability tension and therefore does not address it

Source(s): Authors' own work

5.1 Theoretical implications

Our findings have implications for public procurement literature, SSCM research on sustainability-related tensions, and scholarship on ambidexterity in public organizations. First, we demonstrate that the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability in public procurement is not resolved uniformly but managed through distinct decision-making approaches. While prior SPP research has documented the structural and institutional conditions that generate this tension (Brammer and Walker, 2011; Plaček *et al.*, 2021; Preuss and Walker, 2011) and the challenges it poses for public buyers (Wontner *et al.*, 2020), organizational responses have remained underexplored. By identifying three decision-making approaches through which public organizations address the economic efficiency-sustainability tension, and uncovering how they are cognitively structured, our study extends the SPP literature toward a more processual understanding of organizational agency in responding to this tension.

Second, we contribute to research examining tensions and trade-offs in SSCM (Matos *et al.*, 2020) by advancing a decision framing perspective that extends the dominant institutional logics lens (Razmdoost and Alinaghian, 2024; Schumm and Niehm, 2024). We identify decision framings as generative mechanisms through which competing objectives are rendered salient and legitimate in procurement decisions. In so doing, these framings shape how the tension between economic efficiency and sustainability is addressed, thereby giving rise to distinct decision-making approaches. While SSCM research has documented a diversity of organizational responses to sustainability-related tensions (Saunders *et al.*, 2020; Wu and Pagell, 2011), such diversity has largely been explained through the perspective of institutional logics (e.g. Nath and Eweje, 2021; Sayed *et al.*, 2017). This body of work shows how multiple, and often competing, logics – such as economic and sustainability ones (Leon Bravo *et al.*, 2022) – affect organizational priorities in supply chain and procurement contexts (Schumm and Niehm, 2024; McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021). A case in point is social procurement, where Razmdoost and Alinaghian (2024) show how market and social logics define the conflicting institutional demands to which buying firms are subject. However, these studies primarily account for how competing institutional logics shape the broader set of values and priorities that organizations are exposed to, but provide limited insight into how organizations interpret, select, and mobilize these priorities within specific decision-making processes. Decision framings operate precisely at this level of analysis, denoting the cognitive structuring of decisions through which certain objectives and evaluative criteria become salient and legitimate (Hahn *et al.*, 2014; Glac, 2009). Prior research has shown that decision framings may reflect different underlying orientations in how decisions are evaluated, emphasizing calculative rationality (Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Alexander *et al.*, 2014) or value-based reasoning (Glac, 2009; Reuter *et al.*, 2012; Keeney, 1996). Consistent with these theoretical insights, we find that procurement decisions are underpinned by a rational framing, grounded in economic constraints and organizational feasibility (Plaček *et al.*, 2026), and a public value-oriented framing, centered on long-term societal benefits. By unpacking rational and public value-oriented decision framings, our study advances understanding of how tensions are worked through at the decision-making level, extending the focus beyond observable configurations of trade-off management to the underlying decision-making mechanisms that generate them.

These mechanisms are instantiated through three distinct framing patterns, each underpinning a different decision-making approach. When procurement decisions are predominantly framed through a rational decision framing, economic justifiability and organizational feasibility operate as the primary evaluative criteria (Alexander *et al.*, 2014), rendering competing sustainability considerations less salient and legitimate in the decision process. As a result, internal economic efficiency concerns assume priority, leading to a cost-driven approach. This suggests the following proposition:

P1. When sustainable procurement decisions are predominantly framed through a rational decision framing, public organizations are more likely to adopt a cost-driven SPP decision-making approach.

Conversely, when procurement decisions are primarily interpreted through a public value-oriented decision framing, long-term societal benefits anchor the evaluation of alternatives (Keeney, 1996), foregrounding sustainability objectives over internal economic efficiency considerations. A values-driven approach thus takes hold. Accordingly, we advance the following proposition:

P2. When sustainable procurement decisions are predominantly framed through a public value-oriented decision framing, public organizations are more likely to adopt a values-driven SPP decision-making approach.

In turn, when both framings are mobilized together, economic feasibility and long-term societal benefits are activated concurrently as evaluative criteria that structure the decision process. This steers procurement decisions toward the simultaneous legitimation and pursuit of internal economic efficiency and sustainability objectives, thereby resulting in an ambidextrous approach (Hahn et al., 2016). We therefore put forward the proposition below:

P3. When sustainable procurement decisions are jointly framed through rational and public value-oriented decision framings, public organizations are more likely to adopt an ambidextrous SPP decision-making approach.

Overall, we illuminate how organizational responses to the economic efficiency–sustainability tension depend on how sustainable procurement decisions are cognitively framed. Figure 1 presents the research model, illustrating the patterns formalized in the three propositions.

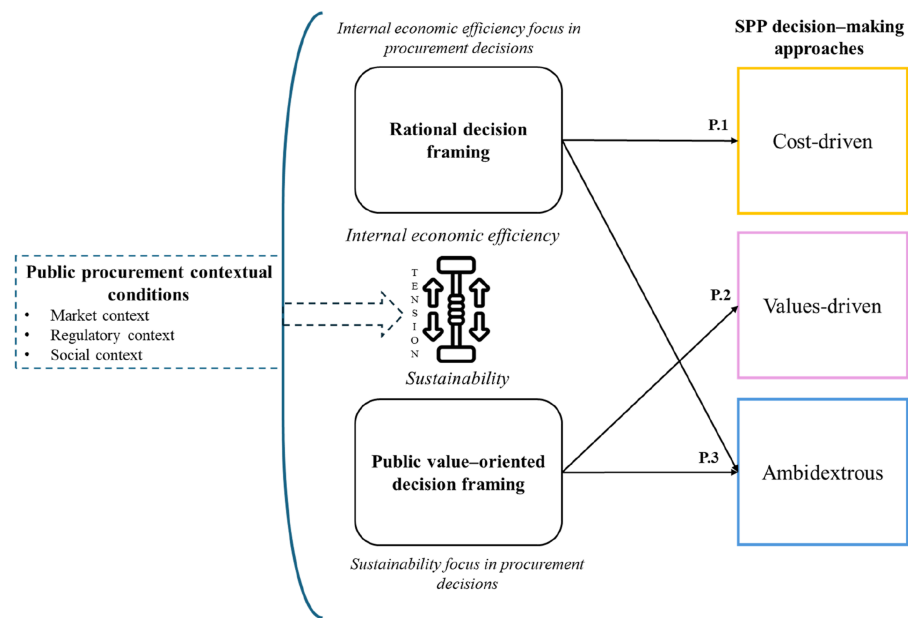


Figure 1. A research model of SPP decision-making approaches and underlying decision framings. Source: Authors' own work

Moreover, examining these mechanisms in the public procurement context, where the economic efficiency–sustainability tension is heightened by institutional constraints (Forster *et al.*, 2025), extends our understanding of how decision framings may operate in private-sector SSCM settings when sustainability-related tensions leave limited room for managerial discretion.

Finally, by uncovering how decision framings shape distinct decision-making approaches in public procurement, we shed light on the emergence of an ambidextrous approach, offering new insights for research on ambidexterity in public organizations (Cannaerts *et al.*, 2020; Gieske *et al.*, 2020). Ambidexterity refers to the “ability to perform differing and often competing, strategic acts at the same time” (Simsek *et al.*, 2009, p. 865). Prior studies have examined how public organizations may achieve ambidexterity through organizational arrangements, such as structural differentiation (Cannaerts *et al.*, 2020) or external collaboration (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2019), but they overlook how it occurs within decision-making processes. Our findings show that, when the economic efficiency–sustainability tension is experienced in SPP decision-making, ambidexterity unfolds through the combination of rational and public value–oriented decision framings, enabling economic constraints and long-term societal benefits to be legitimized and mobilized concurrently. This suggests that ambidexterity in public organizations can be understood as the capability to sustain multiple evaluative orientations within the same decision process. By illuminating this mechanism, our study helps explain why some public organizations are able to reconcile internal economic efficiency with sustainability ambitions, whereas others gravitate toward more one-sided approaches.

Taken together, these contributions respond to the call by Roehrich *et al.* (2025, p. 1979) for “robust, context-sensitive frameworks that align operational performance with long-term environmental and social value creation”. By developing such a framework in the distinctive and institutionally demanding context of SPP, our study addresses a setting where this alignment is particularly difficult to achieve, yet consequential for both organizational and societal outcomes.

5.2 Implications for policy and practice

Our findings provide practical insights into how the tension between internal economic efficiency and sustainability ambitions can be recognized and handled in SPP decision-making. For public managers, the three decision-making configurations offer a diagnostic lens to reflect on how procurement choices are structured within their organization. Making explicit whether decisions are predominantly grounded in economic concerns, sustainability considerations, or both can increase awareness of which objectives tend to be prioritized, subordinated, or integrated in practice. Rather than prescribing a single “optimal” approach, our framework encourages public managers to examine how trade-offs are articulated and which evaluative criteria are legitimized in their organization.

For policymakers, our findings show that even within similar regulatory frameworks, public organizations address the economic efficiency-sustainability tension in markedly different ways through procurement decisions. This suggests that regulatory mandates shape the formal boundaries of procurement decisions, but do not determine the evaluative orientations through which competing economic and sustainability considerations are addressed in practice. Policy interventions should move beyond imposing further procedural requirements and instead support organizational decision-making capacities. Providing clearer guidance and practical tools for life-cycle and multi-criteria evaluation can reduce the perceived incompatibility between economic feasibility and sustainability ambitions.

5.3 Future research

Our study opens several avenues for future research. First, our framework invites broader empirical validation. Future research could examine whether the three decision-making approaches recur across larger samples and different institutional contexts. Comparative cross-country research could therefore assess whether and how variations in legislative frameworks, accountability regimes, and market maturity influence both the salience of the efficiency–sustainability tension and the ways it is addressed.

Second, future studies could investigate the antecedents of decision framings. While our analysis identifies rational and public value–oriented framings as key mechanisms shaping procurement decisions, it does not fully explain when and why one becomes dominant. Configurational studies could help clarify which factors shape decision framings and how they interact.

Third, our cross-sectional design captures SPP decision-making approaches and underlying framings at a specific point in time. Longitudinal and process-oriented research could examine how these framings and approaches evolve over time, for instance in response to external shocks.

Finally, future research could link SPP decision-making approaches to measurable procurement outcomes. Quantitative analyses of tender criteria, award weighting schemes, supplier participation patterns, or contract performance data could assess whether different approaches systematically produce distinct economic and sustainability outcomes, thereby strengthening the empirical basis of our framework.

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Corresponding author

Duccio Tosi can be contacted at: duccio.tosi@santannapisa.it