

Article

Policy in Practice: Social Procurement Policies in the Swedish Construction Sector

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Abstract: Procurement has long been used to fulfil policy goals, and social procurement policies can mitigate issues connected to social exclusion, unemployment and segregation. The target groups for such policies are disadvantaged people such as immigrants, young people and people with disabilities. Due to its close connection to exclusion and segregation issues, the construction and real estate sector has often been seen by policymakers as an appropriate sector for social procurement. However, practices to implement such policies are underdeveloped, which creates uncertainty and hinders the transition towards sustainability in the construction sector. This paper investigates how construction clients and contractors perceive the implementation of social procurement policies in practice. Drawing on policy-in-practice literature and interviewing 28 actors in the Swedish construction sector, the findings show a misalignment between: (1) social procurement policies, (2) the sector and its existing practices, and (3) the target group and their skills and needs. Although this misalignment adversely impacts policy implementation and practice formation, it can likely be mitigated if actors co-create policy goals and practices that mesh with existing practices, and provide more resources to enable policy implementation. This paper shows how procurement can help fulfil social policies and the difficulties of achieving that in practice.



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1. Introduction

Social procurement has become increasingly common in policy internationally and is seen as a way to increase social sustainability in organisations and fulfil wider social goals [1–4]. McCrudden [2] describes how government actors attempt to participate in and regulate the market through their purchasing power in order to achieve social policy outcomes. This is accomplished, for example, by awarding contracts under certain conditions, qualifications of contractors, and contract award criteria. Arrowsmith [3] argues that procurement can be a more effective policy tool than sanctions, and that it should be seen as a type of policy tool to promote economic, environmental and social policies relating to, for example, disadvantaged groups.

Using procurement to fulfil social policies can be referred to as social procurement, and it can be defined as “generating social value through the purchase of goods and services” [4] (p. 4). Social procurement is often used to create more inclusive supply chains by contracting local, small or minority-owned enterprises, and also aims to mitigate issues connected to social exclusion, such as unemployment, poor education, segregation, poor housing and homelessness. The target groups for social procurement policies are usually disadvantaged people such as immigrants, young people or people with disabilities [4–8]. Social procurement policies are thus a subset of wider social policies, which can be implemented to mitigate many different social issues. With that said, social procurement policies are often operationalised as focusing on employment opportunities for disadvantaged people who are marginalised in the labour market, which will be the focus of this paper.

The increased use of social procurement policies has been driven by mass migration and fiscal constraints in recent years, which have led to many complex social issues such

as inequality gaps, unemployment and poverty being increasingly recognised in Western politics and media [4,9]. In Sweden, the use of social procurement policies started becoming prevalent in relation to the 2015 refugee crisis, in which many people migrated to Europe. The refugee crisis ignited widespread debates in Sweden about how to integrate refugees into Swedish society and the labour market [9]. Now in 2021, Denny-Smith et al. [10] argue that social procurement for employment creation is more relevant than ever considering the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in economic recessions and increased unemployment levels in many countries.

Using social procurement policies to fulfil social goals is not limited to any specific sector, but issues relating to social exclusion, such as housing, homelessness and segregation, are closely tied to the built environment [7,11]. In addition, as the construction sector makes such a substantial contribution to GDP worldwide, it has a unique opportunity to contribute to increased social sustainability [7,12]. One way for the sector to contribute to sustainable development is through the procurement process—especially amongst public construction clients that use their competitive purchasing mechanism to contract large building volumes each year [6,7,12]. This has led to the sector being one of the main sectors for social procurement policy implementation [2]. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has reportedly also increased construction activities that include social procurement policies [10].

Social procurement policies can be found in many different countries. The EU directives for public procurement (2004/18/EG) [13] include several chapters on the promotion of social procurement for employment creation. The UK has the 2012 Social Value Act, which mandates that all central government authorities must explicitly include social value in all new procurements [14]. In Australia, there are a number of different social procurement policies relating to different target groups, such as for example the Indigenous Opportunities Policy for increasing employment among the Indigenous population, or the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Policy, which focuses on women's employment opportunities [15]. The Canadian government's infrastructure authority recently introduced the Community Employment Benefit Policy to increase employment opportunities for under-represented groups in major infrastructure projects [16]. When it comes to social procurement in Sweden, the Swedish Public Procurement Act (2007:1091) [17] include several chapters on the promotion of social procurement for employment creation, which are inspired by the EU directives, and the Swedish Procurement Authority [18] has a whole section on its website promoting it. Also, Sweden's second largest municipality has a policy that 50% of all procurement must be social in some way or another [19], which in practice is often employment creation in the construction sector.

The aforementioned legislation thus evidences strong political and institutional forces for implementing social procurement policies. However, despite the prevalence of social procurement policies, there is no best practice in the Swedish construction sector to implement them [20,21]. Knowledge of how to practically implement social procurement policies is lacking in many countries, the practices that do exist are underdeveloped, social procurement is often seen as unfamiliar and complex by actors in the sector, and in general, social procurement is still relatively unexamined conceptually, theoretically and empirically both in research and in practice [4,6,8,22]. The lack of practice formation and knowledge regarding how to implement social procurement policies creates uncertainty and hinders the transition towards increased social sustainability and the fulfilment of wider social goals. Crosby [23] argues that more attention must be paid to how policy implementation is organised, and the current confusion surrounding social procurement suggests there is a divide between policy and practice that requires further study. There is thus a need to address issues relating to the implementation of social procurement policies in the construction sector, the lack of practices associated with social procurement policies, and the role of individuals in social procurement policy implementation. To address these issues and bridge the gap between policy and practice, the aim of this paper is to investigate social procurement policies from a practice perspective. The paper specifically asks:

“How do construction clients and contractors perceive implementation of social procurement policies in practice?”

Policy implementation is important to study as it provides a cohesive approach to the study of inter-organisational and multi-actor practices. Taking a micro-level implementation perspective in policy studies can enable a more interpretive view of policy implementation and a more detailed view of the role that “lower-level” actors play in operationalising ambiguous policies, as well as elucidating day-to-day work issues and how they impact individual actors [24]. Mosse [25] claims that construction projects are a good way of understanding the divide between policy and practice. Previous studies on social policy implementation often focus on the healthcare or educational sectors, so looking at how a non-welfare sector such as construction implements social procurement policies sheds light on and contextualises an unexplored area of policy implementation research. To study how policy is put into practice, this paper uses a practice perspective and policy implementation literature as a theoretical lens.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Policy as Practice

The present study examines social procurement policies to create employment for disadvantaged groups. A policy is a principle of action adopted or proposed by an organisation or individual. The term social policy relates to developing and delivering services to people for their wellbeing [26], but there is often a tenuous connection between policy and practice due to complex social problems and public policies [27]. The policy implementation process is therefore meant to transform policy into practices and behaviours. Policy implementation is, in its most basic form, about operationalising practice that is in line with the intent of policy [23]. This means that implementation is practices to “make policy happen”. Mosse [25] argues that, in a project setting, such as the construction sector, the relationships between policy and practice are socially managed, meaning that actors’ practices and interactions with each other and their environment are important to study. In other words, to study implementation of policies means to have a practice perspective. By extension, implementation in this paper refers to the practices actors create and partake in (or try to create and partake in) when attempting to fulfil a policy. Having a practice perspective enables us to see individual actors’ daily work and actions in relation to the policy.

Everyday, mundane routine practices of individual actors are the focus of practice theory [28,29], so a practice-based approach enables the study of what people actually do, such as when actors implement social procurement policies. Practices are situated in, dependent on, and affecting contextual conditions, and as individuals are carriers of social practice, they can navigate between different practices, create new practices and repeat old practices [28,29]. So, looking at policy implementation is a way to bridge the gap between policy and practice, as implementation is practices to make policies come into fruition. Policy implementation is often a messy, fragmented and non-linear process [23], and previous research focuses heavily on factors impacting policy implementation. These are presented next. As there is not an abundance of previous research focusing specifically on social procurement policy implementation, this section also draws on the policy implementation literature in general.

2.2. Policy Implementation

Vague or misaligned policies and policy goals: one major issue in policy implementation identified in previous research is that policies are sometimes misaligned with local needs or competing policies [30–32]. This can make it difficult for local actors to know how to prioritise between different policies and between national and local needs. It can also reduce incentives to prioritise certain policies over others or make the implementation of the policy seem irrelevant. In a study of social procurement in the UK, Carter and Fortune [33] find the construction sector has difficulty figuring out which aspects of different policies are most

important for their clients. Furthermore, in Brammer and Walker's [1] UK-based study, they find that a contractor's willingness or resistance influences the operationalisation of sustainable procurement policies into practice, which in turn depends on managerial support for the policy.

Misalignment can also be caused if the institutional context is not conducive to policy implementation [34]. Hudson et al. [35] and Kirk et al. [30] state how policy development should come after understanding the contextual prerequisites for fulfilling policy goals, so that actors can fully understand the problem and see that the policy is feasible. Loosemore et al. [36] find that disadvantaged people, such as people with disabilities or immigrants, have problems fitting into the traditional Australian construction workforce. This means that when policy implementation practices do not fit well with existing practices or ideas, implementation is hindered [37,38]. Similarly, in a study of using social procurement policies as a way to create jobs for unemployed Australian Indigenous people in the construction sector, Denny-Smith et al. [39] found that it is important to consider Indigenous people's perception of value, in order to create maximum social value output from social procurement policies.

Despite previous research emphasising the need for clearer policies and guidelines for how to implement them, Arrowsmith [3] proposes that social procurement policies should not be overly prescriptive, for example, by dictating exactly what unemployed workers should do in projects. Instead, this should be at the contractors' discretion. In other words, she suggests that social policies should focus on outcomes rather than process. Rouillard et al. [32] draw a similar conclusion, stating that more regulation of a policy can be harmful to its goals and that some flexibility is necessary. With that said, policies may be implemented successfully in terms of delivering the intended service or product, but they still may have no discernible impact on the policy problem. Successful implementation without tangible results could be due to the policy being poorly designed [26,40]. There can thus be many ambiguities and conflicts surrounding policies and policy implementation [31].

To mitigate vague or misaligned policies, previous research asserts that information campaigns and the promotion of best practice are conducive to policy implementation, as are clear policy documents, tactics and strategies [23,30–32,35]. Kirk et al. [30] emphasise better guidance on how to prioritise between different national policy goals, while Crosby [23] stresses that organisations implementing policy should be properly equipped to do so. The policy change should fit well with the organisation's existing activities, and it must be able to coordinate the implementation process and collaborate with other organisations. There must also be sufficient incentives in place so that the whole organisation is on board. Viennet and Pont [34] propose that a smart policy design, meaning that the policy is justified and offers a viable and logical solution to the policy problem, and a coherent implementation strategy, meaning that the implementation is concrete and operational on a local level, are important for successful policy implementation.

Collaboration and stakeholder engagement: effective inter-organisational and intra-organisational collaboration, communication and support are important for effective policy implementation [30–32,37], but this can be difficult in practice. Kirk et al. [30], Viennet and Pont [34] and Hudson et al. [35] all emphasise how policies should be drawn up and implemented in collaboration between practitioners and government, with key stakeholders being included in the policy design and implementation processes to ensure maximum effectiveness. In Loosemore et al.'s [37] study of collaborative work in social procurement employment policies in Australia, barriers such as managing dispersed collaborators, building commitment throughout the project and lacking shared goals all hinder the implementation of such policies.

Having specific "policy champions" can facilitate policy implementation, collaboration and organisation [23]. Bracken and Oughton [41] and Kirk et al. [30] assert that professionals occupying strategic intermediary roles can use their expertise to help translate policy into practice "on the ground" and to secure resources for policy implementation.

Providing training and support to such policy champions helps increase competencies, build relationships and drive implementation [31].

Capacity and resources for policy implementation: a lack of capacity and resources can be a barrier to policy implementation, as can local actors who may not have the right expertise, competencies, finance or staffing [23,30–32,37]. If workloads are already high, this can negatively impact policy implementation. Much previous research reports that familiarity with the policy assists the operationalisation of policy into practice [1,31,42]. The same goes for organisational incentives and pressures in terms of whether the organisation is supportive of the policy [1,42]. Flynn [42] examines social procurement for employment creation in Ireland, through contracting local SMEs that provide employment opportunities, and investigates how SME-friendly procurement policies and their implementation are translated into practice. He asserts that the existence of SME-friendly policy is not enough to increase SME participation in the public market, as the policies need to be embedded in everyday practice.

Loosemore et al. [36] find that social procurement policy implementation in Australia is hindered by a lack of government support and suggest that, as the target groups often have lower productivity and need more supervision, monetary support to provide training would help. However, increased training for disadvantaged groups incurs large costs, so is seen as a problem by subcontractors. Previous research shows that the perception of social procurement policy implementation as costly is common, meaning that there can be a trade-off between other “cheaper” policies [1,3,36].

Previous studies emphasise how evaluation is important for successful policy implementation and avoiding negative outcomes [1,35,37]. Crosby [23] stresses that the organisation must be able to see future benefits of the policy change, as every implementation process costs resources. Evaluating policy implementation and outcomes also help to ensure learning [35]. The effects of policy implementation are, however, often difficult to measure [38]. McTigue et al. [31] find that the monitoring of policy implementation and outcomes is often uneven and seen as unimportant by the actors involved.

The practice perspective and three themes compose the theoretical lens applied in this paper. Practice theory is related to policy implementation in the sense that vague or misaligned policies and policy goals, collaboration and stakeholder engagement, and capacity and resources all affect the implementation of social procurement policies, or in other words, affect the practice of making social procurement policies come into fruition. Next follows the method, which details the data collection and analysis for the study.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

Werts and Brewer [43] argue that the key role of local actors in policy implementation is not always acknowledged in research, and they propose that policy implementation should be studied from the perspective of local actors and their lived experience. Therefore, adopting a qualitative research approach for this study is appropriate to capture social relations, individuals’ actions, their perceptions and the intricacies of their daily work life [44]. The study was inductively designed and empirically driven, and it did not start with a defined gap in research or theoretical research problem. Instead, the study departed from the empirical world and the experiences of individual actors. With that said, underlying the study was an actor-focused perspective informed by practice theory, but the policy implementation literature was not added until later in the data analysis process.

3.2. Interviews

The actors in focus in this paper are those who are given the task of implementing social procurement policies by government authorities, politicians, steering groups etc. These actors include (1) public and private clients, such as housing associations, who are under pressure to create employment opportunities and increase social sustainability output in their projects and operations. This also includes (2) large contractors that are

expected to contribute to sustainable development in general, and that are specifically contracted to provide employment opportunities in order to fulfil the contracted social procurement policies. And finally, there are different (3) support organisations that are tasked with facilitating the implementation of social procurement policies and often act as the link between the client and contractor, and that usually aid in the recruitment of the target group.

The interviewees had different management positions within their organisations, thereby making them able to provide an overview of how social procurement policies are put into practice. They were chosen due to their central positions in their organisations and their experience of implementing social procurement policies. The sampling criteria were thus based on experience with implementing social procurement policies, having a central position within the organisations, and in some way or another being responsible for implementing social procurement policies. The interviewees were first identified through their company websites, by searching for work roles that would typically be involved in social procurement policy implementation, such as procurement or sustainability managers. Contact was made either via email or phone, where the potential interviewees were told about the purpose of the study, what type of questions would be asked, and the type of interviewees considered for the study. Potential interviewees were then briefly asked about their experience with social procurement and if they felt like they would be interested and suitable to participate in the study. Those who felt like they could contribute to the study were interviewed, and those who declined or felt like they did not have enough experience were instead asked to provide details to someone they felt would be more appropriate to interview. This mode of interview requests ensured that those who participated in the study were motivated to participate and had experienced enough to provide insight into the practical implementation of social procurement policies. Additional interviewees were identified through snowballing, where interviewees recommended other people to interview—both inside and outside their own organisation. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h and were held at the interviewees' place of work. The interviewees are listed in Table 1, which details the types of organisations they worked in and their work roles.

Table 1. List of interviewees and their organisational belonging and work roles.

Type of Actor	Examples of Organisations	Examples of Work Roles/Titles
Client representative (1–15)	Local premises office, public and private housing organisation, public and private commercial property organisation, public housing corporate group, municipality.	Procurement manager, development manager, process leader, sustainability manager, CSR manager, sustainability specialist, project leader.
Contractor representative (1–8)	Contractor, architecture firm, subsidiary public housing organisation.	Sustainability manager, development manager, project manager, business manager, district manager.
Support function representative (1–3)	Public procurement organisation, employment agency, local college (Swedish language training organisation).	Project leader, employment unit manager, housing developer.

A total of 28 practitioners were interviewed. All the interviewees represent one of the three categories of organisations listed above, and all interviewees have worked with implementing social procurement policies. The study and the interviews were informed by practice theory by focusing on individual actors' experience of working with social procurement policies, how social procurement policies affected their everyday work, what practices they engaged in in relation to social procurement policy implementation, and their ability to engage in those practices. Interview questions included (but were not limited to):

- How has the work with social procurement impacted your daily work? Do you have to work differently than before? Has your role (for example as a sustainability manager) changed as a result of being tasked with implementing social procurement policies?
- How is the social procurement policy implementation process organised in your organisation? Do you perceive that the policy implementation has run smoothly—why or why not? What formal or informal practices have been created or altered in relation to the policy implementation?
- Do you and your organisation have the right competencies for implementing social procurement policies? What competences are needed? What types of resources/support are you provided with in order to implement social procurement policies?
- What has worked well and less well in relation to the implementation of social procurement policies?

As the interviews were semi-structured [45], the interviewees were given freedom to freely provide the narrative they felt was important, and follow-up questions and clarifying questions supplemented the pre-defined questions in the interview guide.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis of the interviews unfolded in several steps. Because the study was inductively designed, and to allow for unexpected themes to emerge, the chosen data analysis method for the study was a thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke [46]. A thematic analysis is a central approach when analysing qualitative data, and it is useful for identifying, describing and organising rich and detailed patterns in the data material. The coding process was also inspired by the Gioia method [47], an inductive coding method which enables the aggregation of empirical codes to a more general theoretical level by conducting multiple coding rounds.

The first step of the analysis was to become familiar with the data by transcribing the interviews verbatim and importing the transcriptions into the software program NVivo to facilitate a more structured sorting of the data. The interviews were read through, and here it became clear that the interviewees struggled considerably when trying to put social procurement policies into practice, and that there was a tension between the policy and the context the interviewees were working in. With this tension in mind, excerpts about the interviewees' practical work with implementing social procurement policies were extracted. The excerpts were given short descriptions to contextualise them. After this, the excerpts were given a more general label signifying what they were about on a more general level. Up until this point, the analysis had been inductive and based on the empirical material. After the labels had been formulated, some more aggregated themes started to emerge. It was at this point that a review of the policy implementation literature began, and the analysis became more abductive. The abductive analysis enabled a more focused identification and refinement of the themes, and helped elevate the inductive labels to more aggregated, theoretically informed themes.

By going back and forth between the data material and the literature in an abductive manner, both the findings and the theoretical framework grew and mutually reinforced each other, one guiding the other [48]. This abductive refinement of the themes resulted in the three main themes that structure the Theoretical Framework, Findings, and Discussion sections. Table 2 provides an example of the coding structure. The final three themes were reiterated multiple times until the themes accurately represented both the findings and theoretical framework. This type of multi-stage coding process helps build rigour in inductive qualitative research by maintaining an openness towards new knowledge [47].

The empirical data and the practice perspective were thus used as a starting point for the thematic analysis, and this was then supplemented by considering the literature on policy implementation, which helped explain and put into words what was found in the empirical data. Overall, this was a rather organic, iterative and intuitive process.

Table 2. Example of the coding structure.

Excerpt/Quote (Inductive)	Description (Inductive)	Label (Inductive)	Theme (Abductive and Theoretically Informed)
“Sometimes social procurement becomes more of a buzzword [. . .] I wished we, both us contractors and the clients, and the municipality, would have had a better, shared view on what we wanted to achieve”	Unclear what social procurement policies are meant to achieve, and the goals of the client and contractors may differ	Unclear goals	Vague or misaligned policies and policy goals data
“The municipality has less than 5% unemployment, so we didn’t find any candidates. Those who were brought to us often had found employment before we even had the time to look them up”	The local labour market is not conducive to social procurement policies; there may not be enough potential interns or the interns lack the right set of skills	Ill-fitting policy	
“Early on, we did not really know what we wanted, instead we just said that this is something which we have to shape together along the way, to discuss what is possible or not, in dialogue with the contractor”	Because there is a lack of knowledge, actors want to work together to “figure things out” and come up with joint practices	Co-creation	Collaboration and stakeholder engagement
“Sometimes there is just one person who has an internal driving force, who thinks it’s really important and drives the issue on their own, but that becomes very unstructured”	Sometimes the work with social procurement policies is not structured in the organisation but relies on individuals driving the work based on their own interests	Engagement	
“In a large project, they have many more general tasks, so I can imagine that large projects can take in more people who do not have any construction experience”	Different projects have different possibilities to take in interns	Capacity for implementing social procurement policies	Capacity and resources for policy implementation
“Then I realised, there is no one following up, after six months you just hear some rumours . . . ”	Because resources are generally lacking, even less resources are allotted to create follow-up routines	Resources for fully engaging in social procurement policy implementation	

3.4. Notes on the Target Groups of Social Procurement Policies

To preface the Findings of the study, it is useful to provide some more background on the people targeted by social procurement policies. Implementing social procurement policies can entail offering internships or temporary employment, but as internships are the most common employment form in Sweden, this paper will refer to people from the target group as interns. The people of the target group have many different backgrounds, but are all stigmatised in the labour market, often have undocumented and/or inconsistent schooling, and often lack education and/or work experience in construction or facilities maintenance work. In addition, refugees and those newly immigrated to Sweden often have poor Swedish language skills. In Sweden, the most common type of person from the target group is immigrants or refugees, rather than young people or people with disabilities.

In other countries where social procurement policies are used, such as for example Australia or Canada, the target groups are often composed of the Indigenous population. Although language is not an issue in those cases, such as for example in Sweden where the target group has been mainly immigrants, Indigenous people have other prerequisites in the form of traditions and values which are unfamiliar to the construction sector [39]. Nevertheless, what the different target groups have in common, no matter if they are immigrants, Indigenous, young people or people with disabilities, is that they are marginalised in the labour market and often lack construction training and experience.

4. Findings

4.1. Vague or Misaligned Policies and Policy Goals

The interviewees, especially those working in public client organisations, spoke extensively about their organisational mission and their role in society that goes beyond just owning and maintaining housing: *“There are ambitions and the will to take responsibility, to be a part of the municipality’s development”* (client representative 8). However, despite the compatibility between organisational missions and wider social policies, it was difficult to implement social procurement policies because the goal of the policies was often unclear. Many of the interviewees said they were not certain about what social procurement was meant to achieve; they were unsure whether it was supposed to provide permanent jobs, a way for the unemployed to build their CVs, or a way to teach immigrants Swedish in a Swedish workplace setting. Some interviewees were worried that the policies may become toothless due to the lack of clear goals: *“Sometimes social procurement becomes more of a buzzword [. . .] I wished we, both us contractors and the clients, and the municipality, would have had a better, shared view on what we wanted to achieve”* (contractor representative 6).

Another misalignment was trying to combine the institutionalised ideas of the sector, which emphasised cost-cutting, with finding the time and resources to implement social procurement policies. The interviewees said that it was difficult to align these oftentimes conflicting realities. One interviewee representing a large contractor explained it thus: *“The tricky thing is getting the subcontractors on board and having them see the benefits, because some subcontractors only see problems [with implementing social procurement policies]. It takes a lot of time and effort for us, so we have to constantly balance [spending time to convince them]”* (contractor representative 6). These conflicting realities also became clear when considering the many parameters to keep in mind when implementing social procurement policies, such as following strict construction laws, environmental laws, safety precautions, labour laws etc. One interviewee explained it thus: *“Seeing all the different perspectives, this is nothing less than god damn administrative rock ‘n’ roll. There are so many parameters to take into account”* (support function representative 1). Because of the complex institutional environment, which is highly regulated and has strong ideas focused on costs, the implementation of social procurement policies was described as a messy process: *“This is typical political steering. Nobody chooses to fully commit. The ball is set in motion and then someone else is just supposed to catch it”* (contractor representative 5).

The implementation of social procurement policies may not have any tangible results at all in relation to wider social goals, depending on how policies are formulated in practice: *“The politicians say that 80–90% of all our procurements should fulfil social procurement policies, and in our case that only means having a dialogue about it [with the winning contractor], but then we often arrive at the conclusion that it’s not relevant. So, we’ve fulfilled the policy, but it’s unfortunate if social procurement becomes a paper product that looks good but delivers nothing concrete”* (client representative 15). Many of the interviewees claimed that the practical challenges of social procurement policies were not acknowledged in policy formulations and that there were no clear guidelines on how to actually implement social procurement policies in practice, which made them worry they were not fulfilling the social procurement policy goals: *“The practical challenges aren’t clear. What do I do? How do I make it fair? What type of employment terms should we have and how do we find the right people?”* (contractor representative 7).

Sometimes, the issue was not that the goals or practices of social procurement policies were unclear, but rather that they were ill-fitting with certain projects. One issue was when projects were so complex that there was a lack of low-skilled tasks, which in effect meant the interns needed to be trained and experienced in construction or facilities maintenance work, which was rarely the case. On this issue, one interviewee said: *“We told the municipality early on that we couldn’t take on just anyone. If the intern was supposed to do carpentry, then the person must actually know some basics, how to use tools and so on. We can’t just take on a layperson”* (contractor representative 8). Also, those interns who were newly immigrated often had poor language skills, which became problematic considering the high demands on safety: *“There has been a lot of talk about safety, when we work with cranes and large vehicles. We can’t have an accident because we didn’t understand each other. It’s very important that we can communicate”* (contractor representative 8). This meant that the interns, who often lacked appropriate education, experience and language skills, could not fully fulfil the demands of the internship.

Secondly, many of the interviewees explained that it could be difficult to find motivated interns who actually wanted an internship. This was said to be because internships were not seen as “real” jobs, and often the interns only received their welfare benefits and not a “real” salary. It was also said that temporary employment provided no guarantee of long-term employment: *“One issue that is really important is that many people don’t want an internship—they’re not interested if it’s not a proper job”* (client representative 8). Some from the target group were said to be uninterested in construction work, or were just so far from the labour market that managing a full-time job was difficult for them. This meant that recruiting people from the target group often proved very difficult in practice.

Lastly, different places may have different needs and problems, making social procurement policies more or less appropriate to meet local needs. For example, in one project, a municipality demanded that the project should hire ten interns. The problem was that there were almost no eligible, unemployed people living in the municipality due to the municipality’s low unemployment rates: *“The municipality has less than 5% unemployment, so we didn’t find any candidates. Those who were brought to us had often found other employment before we even had the time to look them up”* (contractor representative 8). Social procurement policies were, then, not relevant in certain localities.

4.2. Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

The implementation of social procurement policies requires collaboration between a range of organisations, such as a client, a contractor and a recruitment agency (usually the Swedish Employment Agency). Many of the interviewees acknowledged how practices for implementing social procurement policies were not formalised or cohesive throughout the sector: *“Out of ten different projects, seven of those have had different routines, because they’ve all been different”* (contractor representative 8). According to the interviewees, especially those representing large contractors, there was no cohesive way in which clients work throughout the country, which made it difficult for contractors to create organisation-wide routines for implementing social procurement policies. Creating new practices and routines to support implementation was, however, an issue for organisations across the board. One interviewee explained it thus: *“A goal for us moving forward is to establish internal routines, to make sure our practices work”* (client representative 15).

Because of the scattered practices and lack of routines, and the general lack of knowledge of how to implement and integrate social procurement into existing operations, many interviewees suggested that social procurement practices should be co-created by different organisations. One interviewee explained their view thus: *“Early on, we did not really know what we wanted, instead we just said that this is something which we have to shape together along the way, to discuss what is possible or not, in dialogue with the contractor”* (client representative 14). Implementing social procurement policies was therefore said to be a team effort that required shared responsibility. As one interviewee put it: *“The EU commission has stated that one purpose of social procurement policies is to raise awareness about sustainability [. . .]*

You need to breathe it in your pores [. . .] We all have a responsibility to society, it cannot depend only on public organisations” (client representative 2). However, despite social procurement policies being seen as a shared responsibility, and despite several interviewees describing how they spent a lot of time researching social procurement before implementing it, they rarely collected input from those most affected by the policies, i.e., those working at the project level closely with the interns or those in the target group.

The interviewees often emphasised the importance of having good relationships between government, clients and contractors. The interviewees representing public clients were all concerned about how to better include private contractors when implementing social procurement policies in a fair way. Contractors do not have a formal obligation to fulfil wider social employment policies: *“You can push the contractor very far, but there have been many occasions where I felt like I won’t do that, because their motivation to not implement social procurement has been perfectly adequate. You can’t just say that ‘this is how things are’ and then don’t give a damn about what happens, because then what type of relationships would we be creating with our contractors?”* (client representative 8). The contractors often felt that striving for good relationships, while important, also stole focus from social procurement policy goals and social values: *“It is our lack of time that constrains how many we can take in, and we also have to get along with our client. Sometimes, it feels like we are placating the municipality to have a better chance of getting land allocations, but we want to get away from that and instead emphasise the good we do for the country”* (contractor representative 6). In practice, contractor implementation was focused on pleasing the client, rather than providing the most innovative policy implementation.

Much of the work with social procurement policy implementation was very personal to many of the interviewees, and many described how they themselves had chosen to work with social procurement above and beyond any regulatory demands. On the one hand, these individuals’ dedication was important in promoting social procurement policies: *“Now we have a contact person in our region, who is really good at this stuff, and then it works really well. She knows how to do this, she has the contact with the Employment Agency, the Social Insurance Agency, with schools, and everything else, who knows how [social procurement policy implementation] works”* (contractor representative 7). On the other hand, the issue with social procurement policy implementation being driven by individuals is that the work becomes informal: *“Sometimes there is just one person who has an internal driving force, who thinks it’s really important and drives the issue on their own, but that becomes very unstructured”* (contractor representative 2).

4.3. Capacity and Resources for Policy Implementation

There are local models for how to implement social procurement policies, as well as a national model for social procurement implementation that some of the interviewees helped develop. The effects of this national process model have not been investigated in this study, but many interviewees complained about a general lack of national support: *“It’s unfathomable that there is such a poor national support system when [social procurement policies] are said to be such a gigantic issue”* (contractor representative 4).

Although the national model may provide needed support and guidance for actors trying to implement social procurement policies, it may not be enough, as explained by one interviewee who worked in a municipal project where social procurement was implemented in the construction of a pre-school. The municipality in question used a process model for implementing social procurement that had been developed by another, larger municipality, but this model was only added at the last minute to the construction contract. Because implementing social procurement policies is quite complex, the process model needed thorough consideration and integration to be able to work, which is something the municipality had not taken the time to do: *“We haven’t had any direct contact with [the large municipality], more questions over email [. . .] I’ve mainly read [about the model] on their website”* (client representative 15). The result was that the contractor could not fulfil the demands in the contract, because the fit was so poor with the project: *“The municipality found a text*

somewhere that they just copy-pasted [into the contract], thinking that they were doing a good thing. But they did not see the consequences of their demands" (contractor representative 7).

The interviewees talked extensively about the resources and expertise needed to handle interns from the target group—especially those with low Swedish language proficiency. Many of the interviewees explained that their organisations did not have the appropriate resources or expertise to deal with this added complexity. Many from the target group lacked construction training and experience, which limited the type of tasks they could engage in and the number of interns each project could take in. One interviewee explained: *"In a large project, they have many more general tasks, so I can imagine that large projects can take in more people who do not have any construction experience"* (contractor representative 8).

According to the interviewees, the social procurement policy implementation and its outcomes were rarely evaluated. One reason for this was said to be that it was too complex or required resources that were not available. One interviewee representing a large contractor said: *"I think it's necessary to be explicit. For the sake of legitimacy, I think evaluations are important [. . .] to show that what we do has at least some effect"* (contractor representative 2). There were also uncertainties about who should be responsible for the evaluation, i.e., either the client initiating the policy implementation or the contractor performing it. There were very few routines to follow up on the implementation, and the evaluation that did occur was often informal: *"Then I realised, there is no one following up, after six months you just hear some rumours . . . "* (support function representative 3). The interviewees all said that evaluation was important, but also admitted that it was not a priority.

5. Discussion

5.1. Vague or Misaligned Policies and Policy Goals

The findings show that clients and contractors felt that social procurement policies aligned well with their organisational mission and ambitions, but that the goals were unclear. This means that, on paper, the ethos of the social procurement policy was fitting for many organisations in the sector, but in practice implementation was difficult due to the ambiguity of the policy goals and how they were to be achieved. Arrowsmith [3] argues that procurement policies should focus on outcomes rather than processes, but in the case of social procurement policies, neither outcomes nor processes seem to be clear. Viennet and Pont [34] propose that the implementation strategy should be concrete and operationalise the policy on a local level, but this has not been enabled in the case of social procurement policies, as can be seen by the perceived lack of guidelines.

A perceived lack of guidance may become especially detrimental given how social procurement policies are so administratively and legally complex (c.f. [36]). The complexity of these policies is not surprising considering the multifaceted issues they are meant to address, such as exclusion, employment, housing, segregation, homelessness, immigration and marginalisation. So, despite efforts to create guidelines, such as the national implementation process model [30–32,34,35], it seems such efforts have not yet had the desired effect, as there is still a lack of practice formation and routines in place. One reason for why social procurement policies lack detailed implementation guidelines is likely because social sustainability and its outcomes can be fuzzy and difficult to measure, thereby creating uncertainty around how to formulate guidelines and expected outcomes.

The findings show that there is a risk of not actually fulfilling social procurement policy goals due to how contracts are phrased. In this study, the contracts enforcing social procurement policies were often vague and sometimes had no concrete demands for how many interns from the target group should be hired, but rather that a dialogue should be held about the possibility of implementing social procurement policies. This meant that as long as the contractor agreed to have a conversation about possible intern opportunities—even if no one was ultimately hired—the social procurement policy was fulfilled. The policy, then, could be implemented successfully, but still have no discernible impact on the problem the policy was made to address [26,40]. Without clearer goals

and contractual obligations, there is a risk that social procurement policies can become a buzzword, just like the interviewees feared. However, despite the risk of social procurement policies becoming vague and toothless, Arrowsmith [3] and Rouillard et al. [32] argue that implementation should not be overly descriptive or contracted in detail, but rather at the contractor's discretion. The question then becomes whether contractors in the Swedish construction sector have enough incentives to actually fulfil social procurement policies under current conditions.

The findings show that social procurement policies were ill-fitting due to the lack of low-skilled tasks in the sector and requirements for language proficiency. There was thus a misalignment between the requirements of the sector and the skills of the target group. Previous research suggests policy implementation is adversely affected if existing ideas and practices are not compatible with those of the new social procurement policies [36,38]. This seems to be the case in this study, as can be seen from how the target group had problems fitting into the traditional construction workforce [36]. Much like Denny-Smith et al. [39] who found that the Australian Indigenous population's perception of value is important to take into account in social procurement policy implementation, this study adds to their findings by concluding that when implementing social procurement policies, the needs of the target group, in this study composed mainly of immigrants, must also be considered. The misalignment between social procurement policies, the prerequisites of the sector, and the needs, skills and proficiencies of the target group is substantial and, by extension, makes implementation of social procurement policies difficult. As such, it seems that the feasibility of social procurement policies in the sector was not thoroughly considered [30,34,35], and that many contractors might not be appropriate implementors of social procurement policies [23].

The findings also show that many people from the target group were unwilling to take on an internship, either due to a lack of interest in the work tasks, or because social procurement policies often do not result in proper jobs. So, much like those working in client and contractor organisations need incentives to implement social policies [23,32,37], people in the target group may also need to be incentivised.

Social procurement policies can also be ill-fitting due to local circumstances, as was the case in the municipality with low unemployment, which limited the number of interns available for hire. The relevance of such policies is thus sometimes low for certain areas [23,30], and in this example the poor fit between the social procurement policy and the municipality meant the contractor was unable to fulfil its contractual obligations. Widening the search for target group interns, for example, to include nearby municipalities with higher unemployment rates, could certainly create better social value outcomes. However, in such cases, clients in low-unemployment municipalities may prioritise other policies more relevant to their local needs as suggested by Rouillard et al. [32], meaning that the legitimisation of social procurement needs to be stronger in those instances.

5.2. Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

The findings emphasise that practices related to social procurement policy implementation are more effective when they are co-created by actors in the sector. However, the findings also show that practices associated with implementation are still scattered throughout the country, making it difficult for contractors to create organisation-wide routines. Loosemore et al. [37] confirm that it can be difficult to manage and build commitment among dispersed parties and create shared goals. Much like the interviewees in this study, previous research emphasises how co-creation is key for effective policy design and how including stakeholders in the implementation is important to avoid administrative silos [23,30,34,35]. However, the interviewees in this study rarely collected input from those working at the project level or from people in the target group, thereby neglecting important opportunities for co-creation, or at the very least not recognising it as a strategic issue related to the target group. If input had been collected from the target group, then silos could have been avoided and the policy design could have emphasised creating

temporary or permanent jobs rather than internships, by extension making recruitment of interns easier.

The interviewees often emphasised the importance of having good relationships between government, clients and contractors, and public sector actors had varying degrees of incentive to implement social procurement policies, whereas private contractors had no formal obligation. For some contractors, the incentive was to please the client, rather than maximise social value output and innovation. It thus seems difficult to both prioritise between different social policies [30–32] and figure out which aspects of different policies were most important for construction clients [33]. This suggests that clients were not able to adequately relay their goals of implementing social procurement policies to their contractors, as well as failing to inspire innovation.

In many of the organisations where the interviewees worked, social procurement policy implementation was often driven by individuals, where certain people had chosen to work with social procurement above and beyond any regulatory demands. These people were very important in making the implementation process manageable for their organisations. It is therefore clear that the implementation of social procurement policies was reliant on dedicated people rather than formal structures. These individuals can be seen as “policy champions”, who are important in facilitating social procurement policy implementation [23,30,41]. Although both the findings of this study and previous research emphasise the importance of policy champions, the findings also show that social procurement policy implementation is hindered by a lack of structure and practice formation, which suggests policy champions are not enough if they do not also have routines and resources to rely on. McTigue et al. [31] report that providing training and support to those implementing social procurement policies helps increase competencies, build relationships and drive implementation, and that these intermediary actors help secure resources [41]. That said, actually getting access to sufficient resources can be difficult in practice, as discussed next.

5.3. Capacity and Resources for Policy Implementation

The interviewees highlighted a general lack of capacity and resources to implement social procurement policies, which is not an uncommon problem [23,30–32,37]. The introduction of the national process model is a step towards creating cohesive practices for policy implementation, but the model’s effect on local implementation processes may still be limited. Just knowing *how* to organise implementation practices will likely not be enough unless practices are embedded in the organisation and local actors are provided appropriate resources [1,42]. Local adaptations are equally important, as could be seen by the example of the small municipality who adopted an implementation model without making adaptations. However, providing such resources incurs costs in both the procurement and building phases, which can be met with resistance from actors and diminish the likelihood of implementing social procurement policies in the first place [1,3,36]. The need to always cut costs in the sector thus clashes with the resource necessity of policy implementation.

Despite contractors having no legal obligation to fulfil social policies, they are still expected to fulfil a social policy they may not have the capacity to fulfil. This issue became clear in relation to handling the target group’s individual needs in terms of work experience, educational background and language proficiency. Dealing with this increased the stress, pressure and workload of those working with social procurement policy implementation, which in turn could have affected the propensity to prioritise other policies and tasks over social procurement [31]. Providing additional training for those working with policy implementation and for those in the target group may mitigate this issue, but will also incur costs that the sector is hesitant to bear [36].

One way of normalising spending resources on social procurement policy implementation could be to showcase its beneficial effects, which then requires evaluation. However, there are currently few established evaluation practices—something McTigue et al. [31] report is a common problem—as well as disagreement on who should perform evaluations

in the first place. Without any formalised evaluation or follow-up of implementation and its outcomes, there can be no way of knowing if there are any sustained positive effects of the policy. As Crosby [23] suggests, if no positive effects of the policy can be shown, then the likelihood of organisations providing resources for its continued implementation is surely low. There is thus a mutually reinforcing relationship between resource allocation and evaluation—the former is needed for the latter and the latter legitimises the former. The lack of evaluation is remarkable considering how most interviewees claimed it was very important, but in reality, evaluation was not important enough to spend resources on. This is a missed opportunity for learning [35], which could have led to better policies and policy implementation processes that could in turn have increased the longevity and acceptance of social procurement policies.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to investigate social procurement policies from a practice perspective. The paper sought to understand how construction clients and contractors perceive the implementation of social procurement policies in practice. The paper shows how there is a misalignment between: (1) social procurement policies, (2) the sector and its existing practices, incentives and prerequisites, and (3) the target groups and their skills, incentives and needs. Although this misalignment adversely impacts policy implementation, formation of new practices and routines, and fulfilment of wider social goals, it can likely be mitigated if actors co-create shared policy goals and practices that mesh with the existing practices of the sector, and if implementation capacity is increased by providing more resources.

This paper makes several contributions. Firstly, for policy research the findings illuminate the tensions between policy and practice, and how these can be misaligned from a micro perspective. The paper thereby takes a step towards bridging the gap between policy and practice by contextualising and providing details and empirical explications of what it means to implement policy from a practice perspective. By doing so, the paper provides an interpretive and detailed view on policy implementation and how individual actors try to operationalise ambiguous policies, as well as their day-to-day struggles and how this impacts individual actors. In addition, studying how a non-welfare sector such as the construction sector implements a social policy provides nuance to policy implementation research, where social policies have mainly been implemented and studied in welfare-related sectors such as, for example, healthcare.

Secondly, the paper contributes to social procurement research by emphasising the need to consider labour market conditions before implementing social procurement policies, and how organisations implementing social procurement policies must carefully consider the prerequisites of the sector, the local labour market, and the prerequisites of the people the social policy is targeting. Furthermore, the target group's unwillingness to partake in internships can make social procurement policies especially ill-fitting with certain projects, although formulating routines and shared goals will likely mitigate these difficulties. When these three aspects are misaligned (the policy, the local context and the target group), policy implementation is hindered. This conclusion is equally relevant for policy research in general and for practitioners in the construction sector who wish to implement social procurement policies as a way to increase their social sustainability output. The paper also contributes to social procurement research by providing a micro perspective on social procurement, and thereby shedding light on the everyday struggles of the actors who work with social procurement, as well as for the target groups.

Thirdly, for procurement research in general the paper provides an empirical example of how procurement can be used to fulfil wider social policy goals, for example relating to social exclusion and unemployment, but also how that can be difficult in practice.

Lastly, for practice theory, the conclusion that there is a need to consider the local conditions of the labour market, the sector and the target group in order to practically

implement policies provides an empirical example of situated practice, where practices are situated in, dependent on, and affecting contextual conditions.

This paper takes only the perspective of clients and contractors that are tasked with implementing social procurement policies, and neglects the perspective of policymakers and legislators, which is a gap that should be addressed in future research. Another suggestion for future research is to see what type of procurement strategy, e.g., public–private partnerships, partnering, or early contractor involvement, is most conducive to translating social policies into practice, as well as how the temporal nature of construction projects impacts social procurement policy implementation. Lastly, the intention of this paper was to discuss social procurement policies in relation to the practice of implementation, rather than relating to the content specifics of social procurement policies. With that said, the fact that social procurement policies deal with immigrants, refugees, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups that are marginalised in the labour market makes the setting very interesting, complex and sensitive. Future research would therefore be well-served by relating more to the literature relating to these specific groups, to get a more comprehensive view of social procurement policies and their impact on the construction sector (or other industrial sectors, for that matter).

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