Sustainable Public Procurement in Local Governments: Mapping a Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

U.S. local governments purchase $1.72 trillion of goods annually, including vehicle fleets, construction materials, chemicals, electronics and office materials, which contribute to global climate change during their production and use. Local governments that utilize sustainable procurement principles (SPP) can mitigate these impacts swiftly and significantly while stimulating an increase in businesses' production of sustainable products and services. However, many local governments do not have SPPs, and others have failed to implement them fully, suggesting that there are significant barriers to implementing SPPs more broadly. These concerns have prompted the United Nations Environmental Programme and others to identify SPP as a critical factor needing to be addressed if governments are to promote a low carbon economy.

While SPP researchers have begun to identify some of the factors associated with local governments' SPP adoption and implementation, existing research tends to focus on either developing a justification for why governments should adopt SPP or exploring the mechanics of SPP implementation, such as the impacts of SPP implementation on other internal systems. What is missing is a broader discussion about how organizational factors (including capacity, leadership, technology, and centralization) are related to local governments' SPP adoption and implementation and a strong justification for exploring these factors further.

This research addresses these concerns by drawing on a unique dataset constructed from a national-level survey of more than 600 department directors in U.S. cities with at least 25,000 residents. It takes a broad approach by offering initial evidence of the multiple organizational factors that relate to SPP adoption, including organization capacity, purchasing criteria, information access, leadership and vendor roles all relate to SPP adoption. Further, it offers initial evidence that some of these factors also relate to SPP implementation success, namely capacity, information access, leadership and vendor roles. However, an organization's innovation culture also appears relevant to SPP implementation.

Our findings provide preliminary evidence of the importance of organizational factors to SPP adoption and implementation and a justification for future SPP scholarship to explore these relationships more deeply. Greater knowledge about these relationships is also important for governments to that wish to embed SPP more deeply within their procurement decisions, thus reducing their environmental impacts throughout their supply chain.