

Innovative procurement policies for small, medium and micro enterprises empowerment and sustainable socio-economic growth in South Africa's construction sector



Authors:

Nonjabulo Ndlovu¹ 
Henry Wissink¹ 
Nyashadzashe Chiwawa¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Public Governance, School of Management, Information Technology and Governance, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Nyashadzashe Chiwawa,
chiwawan@ukzn.ac.za

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Background: Small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in the public sector construction are constrained by limited access to large-scale contracts, insufficient capital, and skills development barriers, this mostly being a result of traditional procurement policies that tend to favour established companies. This has limited SMME participation and exacerbated socio-economic inequalities.

Aim: This study explored how innovative procurement policies can enhance SMME participation in the construction sector, thereby promoting inclusive socio-economic growth and sustainability.

Setting: The research focused on the construction industry in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa, examining experiences of contractors and government officials involved in public procurement processes.

Methods: A phenomenological design was adopted using semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed through interpretative phenomenological analysis. The study was informed by innovation diffusion and inclusive growth frameworks to examine how innovative procurement policies enhance SMME participation in South Africa's construction sector.

Results: The study found that existing procurement policies create barriers for SMMEs due to complex compliance processes, limited access to finance, and the dominance of large firms. Findings indicate that innovative procurement approaches such as e-tendering platforms, preferential scoring, and mandated joint ventures, have the potential of improving SMME participation in public sector construction.

Conclusion: Innovative procurement policies can significantly enhance SMME participation and contribute to a more sustainable, inclusive construction sector. However, systemic barriers remain and require policy and governance reforms.

Contribution: The study offers practical recommendations for designing procurement policies that drive sustainable socio-economic growth through SMME empowerment in the South African construction industry.

Keywords: innovative procurement policies; SMME participation; sustainable construction sector; socio-economic growth; public-procurement; economic inclusion.

Introduction

The construction sector in South Africa is a vital contributor to national development and economic growth. However, it faces persistent challenges in fostering sustainable socio-economic development (Mbatha & Laryea 2021). Despite the sector's potential to drive job creation and support emerging businesses, the integration and advancement of small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) remain inadequate (Moyo 2023). The SMMEs in the construction sector are constrained by limited access to large-scale contracts, insufficient capital and skills development barriers, all of which are exacerbated by traditional procurement policies that tend to favour established companies (Schneider & Smit 2023). This situation limits the socio-economic benefits that SMME involvement in construction projects could otherwise deliver. Thus, there is a need for innovative procurement policies that facilitate SMME participation, promote inclusive economic growth and support a sustainable construction industry that benefits the wider economy and addresses social inequalities (Bond-Barnard & Steyn 2022).

The issue is further compounded by the fact that South Africa's unemployment rate remains high, with an official rate of 33.5% in the second quarter of 2024, disproportionately affecting black South Africans at 37.6% compared to 7.9% for white South Africans (Stats SA 2024). Amid economic volatility and high unemployment in South Africa, promoting SMME growth through construction projects can therefore foster resilient local economies and support skills development – both essential for long-term stability. Although a growing body of research recognises the strategic importance of SMMEs in driving socio-economic transformation, few empirical studies have systematically examined how innovative procurement policies can be designed and implemented to enable this transformation within the South African construction sector. Much of the existing scholarship (e.g. Bond-Barnard & Steyn 2022; Dlamini & Landu 2023; Maseko & Maritz 2022) focuses on describing policy frameworks rather than evaluating their effectiveness in addressing persistent participation and sustainability barriers. Consequently, a clear gap remains concerning the mechanisms through which procurement innovation can bridge systemic inequalities, strengthen SMME capacity and foster long-term sectoral sustainability. Addressing this gap provides the core rationale for this study, which investigates how innovative procurement practices can practically enhance SMME inclusion, promote equitable economic growth and ensure the resilience of South Africa's construction industry.

Concept of innovative procurement

Innovative procurement refers to procurement strategies and methods that go beyond the conventional approaches of simply sourcing goods and services, aiming instead to add value, drive sustainability and foster inclusivity in the supply chain (McCrudden 2022). Traditional procurement methods often focus on price competition and risk minimisation, while innovative approaches seek long-term benefits and collaborative relationships with suppliers (Baily & Farmer 2021). Among the key types of innovative procurement are green procurement, which emphasises environmentally responsible sourcing and life cycle considerations (Ambe 2022). Preferential procurement prioritises suppliers from designated groups, including small, medium and micro enterprises, to promote socio-economic goals (Basheka & Bisangabasaija 2022). E-procurement harnesses digital platforms to streamline purchasing processes, increase transparency and reduce administrative overhead. Unlike traditional procurement, these approaches utilise strategic partnerships, capacity-building programmes and performance-based standards to promote wider developmental impacts. They also align with policy objectives such as gender equality, rural development and fostering local industries.

The shift towards innovation is not merely a trend but a necessary evolution in procurement practices, particularly in dynamic markets (Zabala-Iturriagagoitia 2022). It encourages knowledge sharing across government agencies, private sector stakeholders and research institutions. Such collaboration ultimately leads to enhanced efficiency, cost

savings and a more sustainable supply chain. As innovative procurement grows in popularity, policymakers and practitioners continue to refine definitions and methodologies for measuring its success. This includes emphasising ethical sourcing, addressing social inequalities and incorporating environmental stewardship throughout procurement cycles (Demircioglu & Vivona 2021). While price remains an important factor, innovative procurement widens the scope of evaluation to include non-financial indicators. By recognising the multifaceted benefits of innovative approaches, both public and private entities can make more informed decisions that foster resilience and responsible growth (Chiappinelli, Giuffrida & Spagnolo 2025). Such decisions ultimately shape how goods and services are obtained, influencing both market structures and developmental objectives.

Globally, public-procurement policy innovation is gaining momentum, driven by growing demands for transparency and accountability in the use of public funds (Holzer & Jia 2021). Governments worldwide now see procurement as a strategic tool for achieving socio-economic objectives rather than a mere administrative procedure. In many developed nations, procurement policies include requirements for socially responsible practices, sustainability measures and support for small businesses. In South Africa, a similar transition is evident, reflected in legislation such as the *Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act (PPPFA)* and the *Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE)* framework. These policies encourage the inclusion of historically disadvantaged groups, promote local content and foster the development of SMMEs (Ntsonde & Aggeri 2021).

Internationally, policy shifts often focus on innovation-driven criteria, incentivising suppliers to propose sustainable solutions and invest in new technologies (Haupt, Hadebe & Akinlolu 2019). By embracing policy innovation, public procurement can also become a catalyst for economic transformation, creating jobs, enhancing skills and reducing inequality. For example, targeted procurement programmes in countries such as Brazil and India have successfully integrated small local suppliers into larger value chains. Such integration not only boosts local enterprise development but also enhances competition and quality in public projects. In South Africa, the use of innovative procurement policies has shown promise in sectors such as construction, where sustainability and inclusivity are key concerns (Ogbu, Ozowe & Ikevuje 2024). Nevertheless, challenges persist, including bureaucratic complexities, insufficient capacity and limited enforcement mechanisms. Overcoming these obstacles requires continuous policy refinement, stakeholder engagement and a monitoring and evaluation framework. This process highlights the importance of harmonising policy objectives with practical implementation strategies that are sensitive to local contexts. Policy innovations often emerge from collaborative efforts among government, academia, civil society and the private sector (Chiwawa, Wissink & Fox 2021). Ultimately, these concerted efforts shape procurement as a strategic lever for sustainable and inclusive development, both in South Africa and across the globe.

Mechanisms of procurement innovation encompass a range of strategies, including strategic partnerships, technology integration and policy incentives aimed at driving positive outcomes. Partnerships between public agencies and private firms can facilitate knowledge exchange, risk-sharing and co-creation of innovative solutions. These partnerships often involve collaborative contracting models where performance metrics and shared goals supersede traditional transactional relationships (Morley 2021). Technology integration, such as e-procurement platforms, increases transparency, reduces transaction costs and speeds up the tender process. Such digital systems also support data analytics, enabling real-time monitoring of supplier performance and compliance with regulatory requirements. Moreover, the incorporation of blockchain-based contracts can further enhance traceability and reduce corruption risks. Policy incentives, including tax breaks, subsidies or preferential scoring for green and socially responsible suppliers, encourage market players to align with developmental objectives (Ambe 2022).

Public authorities can also embed innovation clauses into contracts, compelling suppliers to dedicate resources to research and development or sustainability improvements (Sayyed, Hatamleh & Alaya 2023). The success of these mechanisms often hinges on effective communication and capacity-building measures, ensuring that suppliers understand and can meet evolving requirements. In South Africa's construction sector, such approaches play a critical role in nurturing SMMEs, improving efficiency and creating more sustainable industry practices. However, without consistent enforcement and support, these mechanisms may fail to deliver intended benefits, particularly for smaller suppliers lacking resources. Thus, continuous evaluation and iterative improvement of innovative procurement processes are necessary for sustained impact. Ongoing research and stakeholder feedback loops can further refine these mechanisms, fostering an environment where procurement serves as a catalyst for broader socio-economic and environmental goals (Baily & Farmer 2021). Ultimately, by combining strong policy frameworks, technological advancements and collaborative strategies, innovative procurement can transform how goods and services are obtained in a rapidly changing global market. In doing so, it enables governments and organisations to balance cost, quality, inclusion and sustainability objectives effectively.

In summary, innovative procurement extends far beyond cost efficiency; it represents a strategic approach for delivering social, environmental and developmental value. The following section explores how these policy innovations intersect with SMME empowerment, highlighting the opportunities and barriers that define inclusive procurement in emerging economies.

Procurement policies and small, medium and micro enterprises empowerment

Procurement policies and SMMEs are inextricably linked in driving inclusive economic development, yet much of the discourse remains fixated on surface-level outcomes rather

than engaging with deeper structural constraints (Mashaba & Dlamini 2021). Critical analyses reveal that while these enterprises contribute approximately 60% of the country's total employment, there are persisting concerns about the sustainability of their growth trajectories (Kota & Mbatha 2022). Scholars argue that reliance on SMMEs to address poverty reduction is often fraught with high failure rates and fluctuating institutional support, suggesting a mismatch between policy aspirations and actual market realities (Pillay & Govender 2023). Moreover, far from being mere vessels of job creation, SMMEs also serve as important incubators of grassroots innovation; however, the extent of their contribution is influenced by market access, resource availability and the larger procurement environment. Consequently, while SMMEs hold significant promise for local economic development, the literature cautions that this potential is contingent upon creating more responsive procurement frameworks that move beyond tokenistic support to tackle systemic barriers (Dlamini 2022). Fostering sound linkages between SMMEs and larger contractors is therefore not merely a policy aspiration but an imperative for leveraging entrepreneurial dynamism in a highly stratified economic context. Such linkages, if coherently championed, have the potential to catalyse self-sustaining growth among smaller enterprises, leading to more equitable participation in mainstream economic activities.

Critics maintain that the challenges faced by SMMEs in accessing procurement opportunities (financial constraints, limited capacity, bureaucratic hurdles, a lack of skills) are frequently underestimated in government discourse, resulting in policy measures that lack the depth required to address structural imbalances (Pihlajamaa & Merisalo 2021). High transaction costs, convoluted bidding procedures and the dominance of established firms collectively undermine the spirit of equitable procurement. Although preferential procurement has been lauded for opening doors to historically marginalised businesses, empirical findings expose the persistence of a skewed playing field, where capacity constraints and inadequate technical know-how limit the competitiveness of SMMEs (Lenderink, Halman & Voordijk 2022). Moreover, recent scholarship critiques the assumption that simple financial injections can rectify systemic obstacles without parallel investments in skills development and mentoring. Bureaucratic bottlenecks within tender processes, coupled with a lack of transparent monitoring mechanisms, further derail the efficacy of policies designed to uplift SMMEs. It is therefore insufficient to point to fragmented training initiatives when SMMEs continue to grapple with a hierarchical procurement environment that favours entrenched networks. An integrated approach is required to enhance managerial competencies, reduce procedural complexities and ensure that procurement authorities meet inclusive procurement targets.

When interrogating the legislative frameworks, regulations and guidelines promoting SMME inclusion (BBBEE, PPPFA, CIDB guidelines), a critical lens reveals that these policies, although well-intentioned, often fall short of transformational impact. The BBBEE framework is theoretically designed to

dismantle structural inequalities, yet its implementation has been criticised for perpetuating 'fronting' practices and benefitting a select few rather than broad-based beneficiaries (Dimand 2022). Similarly, the *PPPPFA* aims to redistribute economic opportunities by granting preferential scoring to SMMEs, but in practice, complex compliance requirements and inconsistent enforcement dilute its effectiveness. Additionally, the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) guidelines encourage graded pathways for emerging contractors, but the pace of progress is hindered by inadequate capacity-building mechanisms and limited oversight in ensuring that these guidelines translate into tangible gains for smaller businesses (Selviaridis 2021). Critiques argue that these legislative tools must evolve from fragmented measures to a cohesive strategy that intertwines procurement incentives, transparent governance and collaborative partnerships across the supply chain. Without a substantial overhaul that recognises the multiple dimensions of exclusion in procurement, the promise of policy-driven socio-economic upliftment through SMMEs risks remaining aspirational rather than transformative.

The constraints identified above reveal that effective procurement reform must also align with the broader sustainability agenda of the construction industry. The next section, therefore, examines how sustainable-construction principles complement innovative procurement and SMME-development objectives.

Sustainability within the construction sector

Principles of sustainable construction have evolved beyond mere environmental protection to encompass socio-economic considerations, yet critics argue that their practical implementation often reveals gaps in regulatory enforcement and industry commitment (Aghimien et al. 2020). Although concepts such as environmental management, green building design, renewable resource utilisation and efficiency in energy and material use are hailed as fundamental pillars, scholars point out that the dominant focus on reducing carbon emissions sometimes sidelines broader community development goals (Zhang & Wang 2021). This tension underscores the need for a holistic systems approach wherein resource efficiency strategies incorporate stakeholder education, economic feasibility assessments and measurable performance metrics (Kibert 2022). In practice, many projects adopt a ticking-the-box approach to environmental certifications, leading to superficial compliance rather than meaningful transformations in construction processes and outcomes (Rahman & Albdour 2023). Critics also highlight that standard frameworks such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) can inadvertently create financial barriers for small contractors, raising questions about inclusivity and equitable distribution of benefits. Consequently, maintaining rigorous oversight and providing appropriate incentives are vital to prevent these principles from becoming mere marketing tools and to promote genuine sustainability, transparency and accountability in project delivery.

Global best practices and case studies of sustainability-driven construction procurement underscore both the benefits and complexities of transitioning to greener methodologies (Caravella & Crespi 2021). While some international efforts – such as integrated project delivery and circular economy models – demonstrate notable reductions in construction waste, the replication of these models in different socio-economic contexts has met with mixed success. For instance, industrialised nations often enjoy stable policy environments and financial support, enabling them to set ambitious green targets. However, the wholesale adoption of these frameworks without contextual adaptation in emerging markets may result in policy misalignment where institutional, regulatory, and infrastructural capacities remain underdeveloped (Chiwawa & Wissink 2024). The prevalence of fragmented supply chains, wherein subcontractors may lack the technical know-how or resources to adhere to sustainability guidelines, thus undermining the overall procurement goals and further complicating the matter. Moreover, despite the growing number of successful pilot projects, such as net-zero energy buildings, critics argue that many such initiatives remain heavily reliant on external funding and do not always translate into scalable, market-driven practices. The evidence suggests that global best practices can provide useful templates, but their success ultimately depends on localised policy integration, stakeholder engagement and an auditing mechanism that ensures compliance beyond the planning stage.

Sustainable construction practices specific to South Africa offer a reflection of the above global trends, shaped by local socio-economic conditions and policies. On the one hand, institutions such as the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA) and the CIDB have introduced guidelines and rating tools designed to encourage energy efficiency, water conservation and reduced waste across all stages of building projects. Yet, critics emphasise that persistent infrastructure deficits, regulatory ambiguities and skills gaps, particularly in marginalised regions, hinder the widespread adoption of such frameworks (Rahman & Albdour 2023). This gap highlights the need for capacity-building, better access to finance, and simplified guidelines tailored to smaller contractors in informal markets. Furthermore, while large-scale infrastructure projects have increasingly integrated climate resilience and green procurement strategies, questions remain as to whether these measures truly address underlying issues of social inequity and local economic development (Chiwawa 2019). In this light, the South African context reveals how sustainability in construction is inextricably linked to broader systemic factors, including governance quality and community empowerment. Consequently, any attempt to fortify the construction sector against climate and economic risks must go beyond technical fixes, prioritising inclusive policy frameworks and monitoring systems that align short-term construction activities with long-term sustainability objectives.

Recent literature acknowledges that procurement policies can act as a catalyst for socio-economic development by

creating employment opportunities and facilitating skill enhancement initiatives (Elwak, Dlamini & Glover 2021). However, critics argue that many procurement frameworks emphasise compliance and cost-effectiveness at the expense of long-term human capital development, thereby limiting their potential to reduce poverty (Maseko & Maritz 2022). In South Africa's construction sector, for instance, there is evidence that while tenders awarded to local firms have increased, the associated training and upskilling programmes remain inconsistently implemented (Dube, Moyo & Zuma 2023). This uneven implementation exacerbates inequalities and undermines the transformative promise of procurement policies intended to foster inclusive economic growth. Moreover, the fragmented coordination between governmental agencies and industry stakeholders often results in duplication of efforts and inefficient resource allocation, further constraining job creation outcomes (Mkhize & Nxumalo 2019). A critical lens thus highlights that the success of these policies is not guaranteed by mere legislative mandates but depends significantly on implementation structures and monitoring mechanisms. Scholars emphasise the need to move beyond tokenistic approaches, advocating for integrated policy frameworks that align short-term project goals with long-term skills development and poverty alleviation targets (Elwak et al. 2021). In this sense, innovative procurement is not merely about awarding contracts; rather, it should serve as a strategic lever to create new avenues for employment and sustainable livelihoods in marginalised communities.

Preferential procurement policies are lauded for their purported benefits to SMMEs, especially in emerging economies that grapple with high levels of inequality and limited market participation by historically disadvantaged groups. Yet, a critical examination reveals that these policies often produce mixed outcomes, as they may unintentionally foster dependency rather than genuine capacity development (Dube et al. 2023). While some SMMEs leverage their inclusion in procurement frameworks to improve competitiveness and refine operational processes, others struggle with restrictive contract conditions, late payments and limited access to finance, undermining their growth trajectories (Elwak et al. 2021). The rigid and sometimes convoluted criteria embedded in procurement regulations can also deter new entrants, thereby perpetuating existing market imbalances. Such contradictions call into question the effectiveness of preferential procurement in driving sustainable SMME development, prompting scholars to argue that policy interventions must be supported by complementary business support services, mentorship programmes and clearer regulatory guidelines. Therefore, while preferential procurement can be a conduit for greater market inclusion, its real impact depends on whether it addresses the systemic challenges that impede SMMEs from transitioning into viable, growth-oriented entities.

From a socio-political viewpoint, effective procurement policies are increasingly portrayed as instruments for

community empowerment and the reduction of persistent inequalities. Nonetheless, critical scholars caution that procurement-led development often assumes that local communities have the institutional and cultural capacity to manage and benefit from construction projects (Dube et al. 2023). In many instances, tokenistic engagement strategies—such as nominal subcontracting to local cooperatives—have replaced substantive community participation, leading to superficial empowerment outcomes that do not meaningfully address structural inequities (Elwak et al. 2021). When policy design neglects to embed monitoring and transparent accountability mechanisms, corruption and mismanagement can thrive, further undermining the potential for genuine community upliftment. Critics argue that truly inclusive procurement frameworks must incorporate social impact assessments, ongoing stakeholder consultations and capacity-building initiatives geared towards community-based organisations. By integrating these elements, procurement policies can transition from being transactional to transformational, ensuring that the benefits, such as improved infrastructure, enhanced local skills and equitable resource distribution are realised in a way that directly mitigates systemic disparities. Ultimately, an integrated approach to procurement, grounded in rigorous oversight and collaborative policymaking, is essential to unlocking its full potential as a mechanism for sustainable socio-economic growth.

Integrating procurement innovation, small, medium and micro enterprises growth and sustainable development

The reviewed literature indicates strong but often fragmented linkages between procurement innovation, SMME participation and sustainable-construction outcomes. Scholars such as Elwak et al. (2021) and Dube et al. (2023) observe that, while each stream of research is mature in isolation, comprehensive frameworks that integrate all three remain limited. This study positions itself within this intersection, proposing that innovative procurement can serve as the connecting mechanism through which economic inclusion and sustainability objectives converge. By synthesising insights from public-procurement reform, SMME-development theory and sustainability practice, the research advances a holistic model for policy and industry transformation in South Africa's construction sector.

Research methods and design

This research employed a phenomenological approach, using non-probability sampling with purposive selection criteria to target SMMEs registered with the CIDB in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. The CIDB register provides a comprehensive listing of contractors eligible for public sector projects, classified by Grade (1–6) based on their capability and experience. This classification allowed the study to focus on a diverse range of SMMEs, ensuring the inclusion of varying company sizes and levels of expertise within the construction industry. In total, 20 participants were selected for this study, including 14 contractors (two from each Grade) and six officials

from government departments involved in bid committees, as they hold critical roles in public procurement decisions.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews to gain insights into the lived experiences of SMMEs navigating the public-procurement process and the impact of existing policies on their growth potential. This method allowed the researcher to explore both the challenges and opportunities perceived by SMMEs in the current procurement environment. Additionally, bid committee members provided valuable perspectives on the barriers and limitations within current procurement frameworks and the potential of innovative policies to support SMME growth and sustainability. A pilot study was conducted to refine the research methodology and identify preliminary trends, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of the results. Key performance indicators, namely contract accessibility, revenue growth, job creation and skills development, were used to measure the effectiveness of procurement policies on SMME growth and sustainability. These indicators were primarily self-reported by participants during the semi-structured interviews, reflecting their lived experiences and perceptions of business performance. To enhance reliability, self-reported data were triangulated with available external sources, including CIDB registration records, tender award documentation and company profiles, where participants consented to provide such supporting evidence. This mixed verification approach ensured that both subjective experiences and objective references were considered in assessing SMME performance outcomes.

The raw data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in line with Dodgson's (2023) recommendations for exploring lived experiences. This approach entailed multiple readings of each transcript, followed by a detailed coding process that captured key insights related to SMME participation in public procurement (Creswell 2014). Initial open codes were grouped into higher-level categories to reveal patterns, contradictions and nuances that cut across participant experiences (Kabir 2016). The pilot study undertaken prior to the main data collection provided a preliminary view of recurring themes – such as compliance barriers and the dominance of established companies – and allowed for refinement of the interview questions. Throughout the analysis, the researcher remained reflexive, continually revisiting and cross-referencing the transcripts to ensure that emergent themes genuinely reflected the participants' accounts rather than preconceived biases (Dodgson 2023).

The semi-structured interview guide was developed to align with the study's objectives and consisted of three parts: background and demographic information (e.g. role, CIDB Grade and years of experience); experiences with procurement processes (including access to tenders, compliance challenges, mentorship and digital tendering); and perceptions of innovative procurement policies (such as preferential scoring, joint ventures and e-procurement). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to

elaborate on their experiences, while follow-up probes enabled deeper exploration of key themes. The instrument was pilot-tested with two SMME contractors and one government official to ensure clarity and relevance, after which minor adjustments were made to improve flow and question phrasing.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) (No. HSSREC/000008316/2025).

Results

Data analysis and findings

The study's findings presented in this section emerge from a detailed phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of SMMEs and public officials operating within the KwaZulu-Natal construction sector. The findings are contextualised through participants' demographics, highlighting variations in CIDB grading, organisational capacity and administrative responsibilities. By detailing the lived realities of both contractor and government stakeholders, the discussion aims to illuminate systemic challenges, identify promising reform opportunities, and frame the trajectory for more inclusive, sustainable procurement practices. Presented next is an overview of participants' demographics to underscore the diversity of insights captured and to situate the analysis within the broader socio-economic landscape.

Table 1 provides a demographic snapshot of the 20 study participants, distinguishing between 14 contractors (across CIDB Grades 1–6) and 6 government officials. Notably, contractors were evenly distributed among lower (1–2), mid-range (3–4) and higher (5–6) CIDB Grades, indicating a balanced representation of varying organisational capacities. An additional two contractors hailed from mixed or unclassified CIDB Grades, bringing the contractor subtotal to 12 (60%) plus 2 (10%), and government officials comprised the remaining 6 participants (30%). This broad spread underscores the diversity of procurement experiences, as contractor challenges and opportunities often differ significantly based on each firm's grade and resource base.

When linked to Table 2, the participants' demographics (Table 1) help to explain why themes such as Systemic Capacity Constraints and Bureaucratic Complexity resonate across diverse CIDB Grades. Lower-grade contractors face more acute financial and mentoring hurdles, while mid- to higher-grade enterprises encounter complex tender processes that limit their scalability. Government officials, for their part, highlight accountability gaps within existing frameworks. As a result, Opportunities for Innovative Reform are not uniform but must be tailored to the varying capacities and needs of SMMEs at each grade level. By examining both tables in tandem, it becomes evident that targeted policy interventions

and their effectiveness will depend on the specific challenges associated with each demographic category. While Table 1 highlights the broad spectrum of voices contributing to the research, Table 2 presents the key themes and subthemes emerging from their interviews and experiences.

Three overarching themes emerged from the data. As shown in Table 2, the Systemic Capacity Constraints theme highlights challenges such as limited access to financing and mentoring, which directly impede SMMEs' ability to secure and efficiently manage contracts. Similarly, Bureaucratic Complexity reveals the administrative and regulatory hurdles that inflate the costs of bidding and disproportionately affect smaller businesses. Yet Table 2 also illuminates opportunities for innovative reform, suggesting that digitalising tender processes, simplifying compliance requirements and incentivising collaborative ventures between large firms and SMMEs may substantially enhance competitiveness and sustainability within the sector. These themes, outlined in Table 2, form the basis of the individualised discussion that follows, in which each theme is examined in depth to illustrate the lived realities and potential policy solutions uncovered through this study.

Systemic capacity constraints

Participants highlighted that limited access to capital, a lack of managerial expertise and insufficient mentorship opportunities remain significant barriers for SMMEs vying for public sector contracts. One contractor observed:

'We struggle to secure bridging finance while waiting for government payments to be processed, which often takes several months. Without that financial cushion, our businesses cannot maintain day-to-day operations or sustain project work until the funds arrive.' (Contractor 9, CIDB Grade 2, 2025)

TABLE 1: Participants' demographics.

Participants' category	CIDB Grade	Number of participants	Total %
Contractors	Grades 1–2 (2 each)	4	20
-	Grades 3–4 (2 each)	4	20
-	Grades 5–6 (2 each)	4	20
Subtotal (Contractors)	-	12	60
Additional contractors	Various Grades	2	10
Government officials	Not applicable	6	30
Total	-	20	100

CIDB, construction industry development board.

TABLE 2: A summary of the key themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Description	Key issues	Possible interventions
Systemic capacity constraints	Pertains to limited access to capital, inadequate managerial expertise and insufficient mentorship for SMMEs.	- Late payments and prolonged invoicing cycles - High compliance costs - Scarcity of sustained mentorship programmes	- Expand targeted financing and bridging loans - Formalise mentorship and technical assistance - Develop continuous capacity-building initiatives tailored to smaller contractors
Bureaucratic complexity	Encompasses rigid procurement frameworks and administrative hurdles that inhibit SMME competitiveness.	- Overly complex tender documentation - Inconsistent monitoring and accountability - Overlapping regulatory mandates	- Streamline and simplify tender processes - Introduce transparent, real-time monitoring systems - Ensure coherent, user-friendly procurement guidelines
Opportunities for innovative reform	Highlights the positive potential of revised procurement policies to foster SMME growth, skills development and equity.	- Fragmented uptake of digital tendering - Limited collaborative models with established firms - Weak financial support	- Institutionalise technology-driven platforms (e-tender systems) - Encourage joint ventures and subcontracting to larger firms - Establish dedicated SMME support funds and incentives

SMME, small, medium and micro enterprises.

This aligns with findings by Dlamini (2022), who argues that while government initiatives are often theoretically sound, the absence of tangible, sustained financial and technical support perpetuates the vulnerability of smaller contractors. Moreover, several respondents noted persistent skills deficits and knowledge gaps in project management, with one participant remarking:

'Even when I manage to secure a contract, it's hard to develop a clear project budget or coordinate the necessary resources. Simply balancing incoming and outgoing cash flows becomes a monumental task when margins are already tight.' (Contractor 13, CIDB Grade 5, 2025)

This resonates with Maseko and Maritz's (2022) contention that capacity-building programmes must be integrated with procurement reforms to effect meaningful change.

Despite these constraints, participants also acknowledged sporadic improvements driven by local training initiatives and sporadic mentorship from larger firms, an approach that echoes the call for systematic upskilling as a driver of sustainable growth. In this vein, one SMME representative voiced optimism, stating:

'We benefited tremendously from a short budgeting workshop, which provided the practical skills to forecast expenses and manage income streams. As a direct result, we were able to honour our commitments on the most recent project without going into debt.' (Contractor 11, CIDB Grade 3, 2025)

However, the overall sentiment suggested that such interventions remain piecemeal and inconsistent. As Dube et al. (2023) highlight, fragmented or ad hoc support ultimately undermines SMMEs' resilience and hinders broader socio-economic objectives. These insights confirm the literature's emphasis on capacity constraints as an urgent policy priority requiring integrated and sustained interventions.

The persistence of systemic capacity barriers highlights the urgent need for an integrated procurement ecosystem that combines accessible financing, targeted mentorship and practical policy support. While isolated interventions have shown promise, they remain insufficient without coherent implementation across institutional levels. Addressing these constraints holistically will be essential for empowering SMMEs to participate competitively and

sustainably in the South African construction sector, aligning with broader socio-economic transformation objectives.

Bureaucratic complexity

Bureaucratic hurdles were repeatedly cited as a major obstacle, with participants describing time-consuming tender processes and overlapping regulations. One contractor lamented:

‘Gathering the myriad documents required for tender submissions often takes so long that I miss critical deadlines or am forced to pay late fees for expedited services. In the end, these extra costs strain my already-limited budget and reduce profitability.’ (Contractor 1, CIDB Grade 1, 2025)

Such experiences mirror the critique of rigid public-procurement systems by Mashaba and Dlamini (2021), who argue that convoluted administrative requirements frequently tip the scales in favour of well-established firms with greater resources. Furthermore, participants expressed frustration at the perceived lack of transparency. A government official conceded:

‘We urgently need transparent oversight and evaluation processes so that all bidders have confidence in how contracts are awarded. If monitoring isn’t improved, many small contractors will continue to suspect that the system is skewed in favour of larger, more established firms.’ (Official 4, public-sector bid committee, 2025)

This observation aligns with Maseko and Maritz’s (2022) finding that accountability shortfalls can diminish the impact of preferential procurement policies designed to empower SMMEs.

The data further suggest that even initiatives meant to level the playing field, such as preferential scoring or designated subcontracts, can become bogged down in excessive red tape. Such systemic inefficiencies echo Kota and Mbatha’s (2022) warning about the mismatch between policy intent and practical execution, where even well-intentioned regulations can produce unintended barriers. Indeed, one participant described:

‘We lose valuable hours on administrative tasks like collecting certifications and signatures just to meet procurement requirements. That time would be far better spent supervising actual construction work and ensuring our projects finish on schedule.’ (Contractor 5, CIDB Grade 2, 2025)

This suggests that the broader economic costs are tied to bureaucratic overload. Consequently, a critical reading of the findings supports Elwak et al.’s (2021) call for streamlined processes and integrated policy frameworks to ensure the equitable participation of SMMEs in large-scale construction projects.

Bureaucratic inefficiencies continue to undermine the inclusivity of South Africa’s procurement landscape. The findings of this study demonstrate that overly rigid administrative processes and accountability gaps deter SMME participation and distort the equity goals of public-procurement. Simplifying compliance procedures, integrating

transparent digital systems, and improving inter-agency coordination would not only enhance efficiency but also strengthen stakeholder trust and participation. Streamlined governance is therefore a cornerstone for achieving equitable and sustainable construction sector development.

Opportunities for innovative reform

Despite these challenges, the interviews revealed considerable optimism about the potential of innovative procurement to enhance SMME participation and stimulate broader socio-economic benefits. Several contractors found the positive impact of digital platforms that reduce paperwork and accelerate tender notifications. As one participant reported:

‘Switching to the e-tender platform has allowed us to track open contracts in real-time and submit documents online instead of relying on physical paperwork. This improved accessibility and speed has already doubled the number of tenders we’re able to pursue each month.’ (Contractor 3, CIDB Grade 6, 2025)

This viewpoint resonates with Holzer and Jia’s (2021) argument that technology integration can foster transparency and efficiency, especially in markets where smaller enterprises lack administrative capacity. Moreover, the potential for improved partnerships between SMMEs and larger firms surfaced as a consistent theme, echoing one participant’s emphasis on mentorship and knowledge transfer. One contractor succinctly observed:

‘We believe that mandated collaborations between SMMEs and established contractors could massively accelerate our professional growth and credibility. This arrangement would not only broaden our exposure to new techniques and networks but also help us secure larger contracts in the future.’ (Contractor 7, CIDB Grade 4, 2025)

Participants also expressed strong support for incentives such as bridging finance, preferential scoring for green or social impact initiatives and the simplification of compliance requirements, suggesting that procurement policy can indeed act as a strategic lever for inclusive growth (Mkhize & Nxumalo 2019). As one official asserted:

‘There are already strong procurement laws on paper, but the challenge is tailoring these provisions to meet the practical needs of small contractors on-the-ground. With a bit more flexibility and localised adaptation, we could genuinely unlock the transformative potential these regulations promise.’ (Official 2, Provincial bid committee, 2025)

This sentiment aligns with the holistic approach advocated by Dube et al. (2023), who argue that policy coherence, consistent enforcement and built-in capacity development remain crucial for systemic transformation. When combined with monitoring and the active involvement of stakeholders throughout the supply chain, these opportunities underscore the potential of procurement reforms not merely to address immediate disparities but to foster sustained socio-economic empowerment in South Africa’s construction sector.

The exploration of innovative procurement reform reveals a strong foundation for systemic transformation. Digital platforms, joint ventures and context-sensitive financial incentives can unlock SMME potential and promote inclusive growth. However, to achieve lasting impact, such innovations must be institutionalised through consistent monitoring, capacity-building initiatives and localised policy adaptation. Ultimately, innovation in procurement represents not just a technical reform but a strategic pathway towards socio-economic empowerment and sector-wide resilience.

Collectively, the findings underscore the paradox of well-intended procurement legislation that, in practice, often fails to address the entrenched structural barriers facing emerging contractors. While participants recognised incremental improvements in local job creation and skill transfer, they lamented the absence of cohesive strategies to consolidate these gains into long-term economic empowerment. The data further reveal that innovative procurement is most effective when policy directives are aligned with sound monitoring and evaluation frameworks, as well as flexible, context-sensitive implementation guidelines. In this regard, government officials stressed that sustained stakeholder engagement, particularly with SMME representatives, is crucial to refining procurement legislation into a truly development-oriented tool. Overall, the phenomenological lens illuminates the gap between policy ambition and lived reality, suggesting that meaningful reform must engage not only compliance aspects but also the deeper cultural and institutional dynamics that shape procurement outcomes.

Stakeholder and future research recommendations

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of aligning policy aspirations with on-the-ground realities to enable South Africa's construction sector to drive inclusive socio-economic growth. Although existing procurement frameworks reflect a strong policy commitment to SMME empowerment, structural barriers such as financial exclusion, administrative rigidity and inconsistent mentorship structures continue to constrain transformative outcomes. Yet, the evidence also affirms that innovative procurement strategies can substantially enhance SMME participation and sectoral sustainability when supported by coherent implementation, oversight and collaboration.

Practical mechanisms such as e-procurement platforms, preferential scoring models and mandated partnerships between large firms and emerging enterprises can bridge systemic gaps and foster equitable participation. Equally vital are streamlined compliance processes, transparent monitoring systems and mentorship frameworks that ensure SMMEs evolve beyond survival to sustainable growth. When integrated, these measures can reposition the construction sector as a key driver of employment creation, skills transfer and economic inclusion.

For policymakers, simplifying compliance frameworks, institutionalising digital procurement systems and embedding accountability mechanisms should be top priorities. Industry practitioners should foster mentorship-driven partnerships and integrate sustainability criteria into procurement processes. The SMMEs are encouraged to adopt cooperative strategies, digital platforms and capacity-building opportunities to enhance their competitiveness and resilience. By jointly implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can strengthen the construction sector's role as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable economic transformation in South Africa.

Future research should explore longitudinal and comparative analyses across provinces to evaluate the long-term outcomes of procurement reforms. Quantitative studies could complement qualitative insights to measure the direct socio-economic impacts of innovative procurement policies on employment, enterprise growth and local development.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings emphasise that for South Africa's construction sector to realise its full potential as a driver of sustainable socio-economic transformation, procurement reform must evolve beyond compliance and preference to embrace innovation, collaboration and empowerment. Only through coherent policy alignment, institutional accountability and inclusive stakeholder participation can innovative procurement translate into tangible, long-term developmental impact. This study demonstrates that innovative procurement policies can play a transformative role in advancing SMME empowerment and achieving sustainable socio-economic growth within South Africa's construction sector. The findings reveal that while existing procurement frameworks express strong policy intent towards inclusivity, entrenched structural barriers such as restricted financial access, administrative rigidity and insufficient mentorship continue to limit meaningful participation by SMMEs. However, innovative approaches, including digital procurement systems, preferential scoring mechanisms, and joint ventures between established firms and emerging contractors, show significant potential to overcome these barriers when effectively institutionalised.

Crucially, the study underscores that procurement innovation is not merely a technical reform but a strategic development tool. By integrating inclusive procurement with sustainability principles, policymakers can create a dual pathway that simultaneously drives enterprise growth and enhances environmental stewardship. The incorporation of transparent monitoring systems, accountability frameworks and targeted capacity-building will ensure that SMME participation evolves from compliance-based inclusion to genuine economic empowerment. In doing so, procurement policies can foster a construction sector that not only delivers infrastructure but also stimulates employment, promotes skills development and advances equitable socio-economic transformation.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable development by highlighting the symbiotic relationship between procurement reform and inclusive growth. The evidence suggests that when public procurement is aligned with innovation and empowerment imperatives, it can serve as a catalyst for reducing inequality, stimulating local economic activity and enhancing resilience within marginalised communities. This holistic understanding positions procurement as a critical enabler of South Africa's broader developmental agenda, particularly in addressing unemployment and promoting long-term sustainability.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Nonjabulo Ndlovu: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Henry Wissink: Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation. Nyashadzashe Chiwawa: Data curation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Writing – review & editing.

All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Nyashadzashe Chiwawa, upon reasonable request.

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