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| **The art of ‘making-do’ in construction social procurement: a bricolage perspective**  This is the sixteenth fact-sheet about recent international peer-reviewed social procurement research.  It summarises a research project undertaken by Professor Martin Loosemore and Dr Suhair Alkilani from the University of Technology Sydney which builds on previous research into the challenges which social procurement professionals face in implementing social procurement into the construction industry.  The results summarised below provide insights into the extent to which social procurement professionals face resource constraints in meeting their social procurement objectives, the nature and cause of any resource constraints that exist and how social procurement professionals overcome these resources constraints to achieve social procurement objectives.  The detailed article which is the basis of this summary is yet to be published and will be available at some future date.  Please feel free to distribute this factsheet to anyone who may be interested.  Professor Martin Loosemore  University of Technology Sydney  <https://profiles.uts.edu.au/Martin.Loosemore> |
| **Why the study**   * There is very little international peer-reviewed research into construction social procurement. * The little that exists shows that social procurement creates significant institutional instability in the construction industry by challenging deeply imbedded supply chain relationships, organisational cultures, procurement norms and practices and traditional notions of what ‘value’ means. * Research shows that the ‘institutional work’ involved in implementing social procurement into the construction industry is being undertaken by a small but growing group of social procurement professionals. * These people come from a wide range of professional backgrounds and often work in isolation and with a high level of role overload, role ambiguity and role conflict. * Social procurement professionals have to navigate many tensions between old and new organisational practices to implement social procurement into their organisations and supply chains. * Social procurement professionals also suffer both vertical and horizontal interactional uncertainty and often lack the necessary resources to do their jobs effectively. * To succeed in this environment, social procurement professionals have to demonstrate ingenuity, creativity and innovation in overcoming these resource constraints.   **Aim**   * The aim of this research was to use theories of bricolage developed in cultural anthropology to offer new insights into how social procurement professionals overcome their resource constraints. * The concept of ‘bricolage’ can be traced back to the anthropological work of Lévi-Strauss who used it to describe how societies borrow and adapt resources and ideas from other societies and cultures for their own purposes. * A person who practises bricolage is called a ‘bricoleur’ and is a ‘jack-of-all-trades’ who can use the tools and resources they have at-hand, that may otherwise go to waste or be used for other purposes, to construct new artefacts with novel applications. * Underpinning the concept of bricolage is the art of ‘making do’ with existing resources by using them in new ways beyond their intended purpose. * The concept has been employed in a variety of organisational fields – especially for understanding entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship in resource constrained environments – such as those experienced by social procurement professionals in the construction industry. * Specifically, this research explored three main research questions:  1. To what extent do social procurement professionals face resource constraints in meeting their social procurement objectives? 2. What is the nature and cause of any resource constraints that exist? 3. How do social procurement professionals overcome these resources constraints to secure the resources they need to achieve social procurement objectives?   **What we did**   * Using concepts of organisational bricolage derived from the literature in this area, we undertook semi-structured interviews with 30 social procurement professionals who had worked with or within the Australian construction industry. * Interviews typically lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour. * Australia was selected as the geographical context to undertake this research because it is implementing a wide variety of ambitious social procurement policies at federal, state, local and government agency levels. * This has created a complex and overlapping policy environment for social procurement professionals to navigate, made more challenging by the high levels of resistance to such policies reported in the Australian construction supply chain   **What we found**  Research question 1: To what extent do social procurement professionals face resource constraints in meeting their social procurement objectives?   * There are were many external resources available to help in the implementation of social procurement. * There are a large number of organisations, grants and intermediaries which provide services to the industry on how to do social procurement. * These external resources and the organisations which produced them, were very difficult to find and highly disconnected. * While some governments were recognised as being highly proactive in developing progressive social procurement policies, they were criticised for not providing any guidance on policy implementation. * Social procurement is poorly understood in the construction industry and there is no established body of knowledge of best practice or experience to draw from in implementing these policies. * Poorly designed policies create their own resourcing constraints. Many considered the targets as being inflexible and unrealistic in terms of the industry’s and social sector’s capacity to respond, as responding to changing community needs and not being effectively monitored and enforced in practice. * Policies not only fail to optimise social value but created ideal conditions for people to engage in opportunistic behaviour (such as Black Cladding or rotating people between projects) which expose already vulnerable people to even greater risk. * Given the inaccessibility of external resources, social procurement professionals were almost entirely dependent on internal resources. * These are largely allocated to projects using a compliance-based approach. This meant that internal resources were generally confined to government funded projects with mandated social procurement requirements. * However, even then, resourcing is still often at the project director’s discretion which means resources have to be acquired from elsewhere. * Despite widespread frustrations about lack of resources, respondents were generally fatalistic and recognised that every construction professional worked in a resource-constrained environment. Hard-price contracts were more poorly resourced than collaborative type contracts. * The ability to innovate in securing resources in other ‘non-official’ ways was therefore key to social procurement success. * There is a hierarchy of resources with respondents agreeing that if the right people, time and trusting relationships were available, then other necessary resources (financial, physical, intellectual and cultural) would tend to follow. * Despite social procurement potentially costing more (because of the need to unbundle contracts into small packages etc.), respondents widely agreed that financial resources were least important. * All respondents agreed that the most resource-efficient approach was making social procurement BAU by integrating it into everyone’s roles. * Time was widely considered a critical resource because of the lack of clear guidelines, procedures and processes for implementing social procurement. Respondents widely described their roles as limitless and as typically requiring a lot of time-consuming discovery, discretionary effort and relationship-building (both internal and internal). * In terms of physical resources, technology was widely seen as the most important resource in fostering collaboration and in storing, organising and disseminating what respondents described above as a disorganised field of knowledge. * Respondents also consistently stressed the importance of well-designed government policies and regulations as a powerful mechanism to leverage other resources. This meant that’s resources varies significantly between different regions in Australia according to the nature of policies being implemented. * Contracts were another valuable legal resource frequently mentioned but it was widely agreed that without adequate enforcement they were largely useless.   Research question 2: What is the nature and cause of any resource constraints that exist?   * Despite social value targets being stipulated in many contracts, respondents described how they were competing for resources against more highly prioritised targets such as time, cost, quality, safety and environmental sustainability. * This common dilemma was largely attributed to the poor understanding of social procurement, lack of senior management support, target ambiguity and the general lack of accountability for any outcomes produced. * A common theme was that social procurement was seen as a risky distraction from mainstream goals which disrupted existing supply chain relationships and undermined a number of central principles procurement. * Respondents professional backgrounds varied greatly and many came from outside the industry. This had significant implications for access to potential resources. * While those from outside the sector brought an understanding of social procurement and external connections into the social economy which construction industry respondents did not have, they often complained of being seen as outsiders and having to work harder to be understood, trusted and given the same credibility as insiders. While some respondents had invested considerable time working in the construction industry to build credibility and resources across both domains, many cautioned that this takes a lot of time. These people had to rely on industry sponsors or partners to fill their credibility gap while the opposite was true for those with a construction background. * Our results revealed a wide range of organisational positions for social procurement roles. While some were stand-alone roles dedicated to social procurement or social value, others were imbedded in general diversity and inclusion roles while some were part of a traditional project-based role. * This also had significant implications for access to potential resources. The stand-alone role was considered to be at most risk of isolation and having least access to easy resources while on the other hand it provided greater organisational visibility and enabled the development of more specialised knowledge and expertise which differentiated it from other functions. The imbedded role got easiest access to resources since they were able to leverage a more well-resourced and recognised role. However, this created the risk of hiding social procurement and subjugating it to more recognised competing priorities. The combined project-based role resulted in the least level of knowledge and expertise since it was generally performed on top of an existing role. But if championed properly this had the advantage of being easiest to implement since this role afforded most access to the supply chain into which social procurement is being implemented. * Most respondents talked about the political, social, cultural and logistical challenges of fitting into existing systems and structures where social value is already being created – often in informal and undocumented ways. Negotiation and potential conflicts and overlaps with existing organisational functions where social value was already being created was therefore a common challenge. * Some questioned the need for a social procurement role and argued that it should be subsumed under a broader social value role which would “connect the dots” and maximise social value opportunities across all areas.   Research question 3: How do social procurement professionals overcome these resources constraints to secure the resources they need to achieve social procurement objectives?   * The best place to create resources was during the planning and tender stages of projects where there is a desire to win work and where key decisions had not yet been made. * There was often the risk that resources included at planning and tender stage would often not be available during the delivery stage. The reason was that once the project commenced it was rare for people to be held accountable for commitments made during the tender stage. * Given the relatively disempowered positions of social procurement professionals, many relied on leveraging resources through the influence of others in more established and better resourced business units. * This required an in-depth understanding of different business units, how social value was relevant to their deliverables and an ability to navigate the organisational structure to leverage resources from these areas. * A number of respondents described their roles as ‘intrapreneurs’ and argued that it was often necessary to be willing to work outside the rules to get things done. * Senior leadership buy-in was seen as especially important, especially at a project level given the project-based nature of resourcing and matrix structure of the construction industry. * While formal leadership support was important, so too was informal support from like-minded people (often referred to as “allies”) from across an organisation. To do this, many respondents created internal communities of practice and specialist working groups to create social procurement champions in specific areas. Again, this was often without permission to do so. * Respondents described social procurement as a relational practice which involved constant networking and collaborating with others. * Respondents described social procurement actors creating new value and resources by connecting previously disconnected parts of the social value ecosystem (externally and internally). * Given the need to build credibility by being seen to create competitive advantage for a business, the challenge for many respondents was how to create unique resources from these networks which would differentiate them in the market. A range of strategies were used to do this such as the hub-based approach and capacity-building approach which essentially restricted and deepened relationships with a few select partners (a core collaborative group) to build relational trust, loyalty and co-creative cultures beyond their competitors. This was resource-intensive and much more difficult for small businesses. * Given that social procurement was poorly understood, education was a common mechanism to influence others and build resources in their organisations. * Of particular importance was educating people about the meaning of social procurement, how to mitigate any perceived risks (such as cost), what it could achieve (measuring and communicating value) and why they should engage. * While all respondents recognised that a compliance-based approach to social procurement was a minimalistic approach, most were also pragmatic and recognised that the need to comply with social procurement targets set by clients and government policies was a powerful tool to leverage support for their function. * While most respondents preferred to use softer strategies (such as telling stories and other ways of engaging people emotionally) to influence people to support their role, when faced with resistance, respondents often reverted to a policy or regulation as a coercive mechanism to influence change. * An important element of social procurement is the ‘direct’ employment of social enterprises and minority businesses in supply chains in place of existing subcontractors. However, most respondents found them difficult to access alone and relied on intermediaries which provide specialist data bases and certification systems to source and ratify the social business being used. * Some respondents saw these intermediaries as competing, unreliable and lacking independence. There was also strong perception that many intermediaries did not understand the construction industry which was reflected in the resources they recommended. * One solution proposed by a number of respondents was for government to take play this intermediation role, providing a one-stop independent repository of information which the private sector could trust to procure from. Governments could then control the eco-system which supported their policies and the quality of the products and services produce. * While most respondents engaged in ‘direct’ social procurement by employing social enterprises and other target minority businesses in their supply chain, there was widespread agreement that one could dilute the supply chain too much with these types of businesses without adversely affecting competitiveness. Furthermore, there are a very limited number of social businesses at the moment that could compete for work in the existing supply chain (although this could change in the future through capacity-building). * Therefore, respondents felt that to maximise social value they also needed to leverage the existing subcontractors and suppliers by using ‘indirect’ social procurement. This involved incorporating social clauses in their subcontracts. However, there was widespread agreement that this posed numerous challenges because most subcontractors see these target groups and social businesses as a risk rather than an asset. Interestingly, design consultants were singled out as the most resistant. * Many also considered the industrial relations landscape as unsupportive because of union opposition to social procurement policies which target non-unionised workforces and potentially undermine award wages in the industry. * Another common theme across the interviews was the need to be strategic about what social value one wants to create and how to create it. Many respondents emphasised the dangers of spreading limited resources too thinly, and of the importance of building trust, credibility and authenticity with key stakeholders by not trying to do too much or be everything to everyone. This meant building on existing initiatives, strengths and resources (not reinventing the wheel), building on areas of strength where there is a history of success, focussing on issues which are close to key stakeholders’ hearts, pacing one’s self (building awareness before building competencies), being realistic within existing resource constraints and by starting with simple with quick and easy wins by focusing on low risk spending categories (often with a compliance mindset on what needs to be done first). * Respondents repeatedly stressed the importance of providing a value proposition and demonstrating one can deliver value. Key to this was being clear about what one is trying to achieve, making sure it is in one’s power of influence that, understanding the organisational levers to create it, monitoring and measuring social outcomes in a systematic rational, evidence-based and logical way and then communicating its effectively to key stakeholders. While some argued that stories were important to emotionally engage people, the majority warned against being emotional and of sticking to facts and figures. * Respondents also emphasised the importance of building a reliable and high-quality supply chain of social businesses (in target areas) to meet demand which can operate credibly in the construction industry. In the words of one respondent who neglected the supply side. * Respondents employed a number of strategies to build supply chain capacity which included making all compliance systems and procedures publicly available, running information and training sessions and boot camps for prospective suppliers (using mainstream staff from across the business – procurement especially) and a more resource-intensive incubation hub model where intensive training and backbone administrative support was provided to assist suppliers tender for work. * Despite the competitive tensions which social procurement policies created between our respondents, there was a general willingness to coordinate and share responsibility for capacity building activities. Some respondents had developed collaborative initiatives with “trusted competitors” (a form of co-opetition) to collectively build supply chain capacity in some common areas. Most respondents did not think that social value should be a competitive tension and saw a collective responsibility and benefits for sharing information. * Finally, our respondents all agreed that it takes a rare combination of experience, competencies, knowledge and personal attributes to implement social procurement effectively. These included in order of frequency: * Strategic thinking - knowing where the power, influence and resources are how and when to best connect into those things; * Systems thinking – an ability to see the bigger picture and the value adding connections - nothing exists in isolation - its complex and understanding interdependence is key; * Influencing skills – an ability to persuade and change key stakeholders’ minds; * Commercial acumen – an ability to build a value-proposition, describe value-for-money and speak the language of key decision makers and procurement professionals; * Resilience – being able to persevere and bounce back stronger after resistance and backlash; * Listening skills - listen to all your different stakeholders so you can understand their needs and differing perceptions of social value; * Tenacity and determination - don’t give up if someone says you can’t do something.. when you are pushing the envelope you have to be really tenacious; * Creativity and problem solving - because the solutions are not there – you are cutting a path - social procurement is ill-defined you need to be creative and be a lover of ambiguity, you need to be creative in finding new ways to push through; * Networking skills - keep networking and learning because everyone is learning together; we are not owners of knowledge.. we are custodians of knowledge.. its out job to connect people; * Policy awareness – policies are powerful, the need to be across the policies and government agenda and requirements; * Collaborative skills - you can’t do any of this alone so how do you work with others to make this happen - It’s not about one person … it’s the ability to facilitate and bring people together and create new value; * Communication skills – you need to be able to make a pitch - knowing the right language for the audience.. sometimes its head (numbers), sometimes its heart (emotions) and sometimes its hand (practicalities of doing social procurement); * Courage – you sometimes must take risks and do things without permission, an appetite for a little bit of risk – being a bit of a misfit and someone who doesn’t follow the path and is a bit of a disagreeable; * Rationality – its easy to get too emotional and turn people off – stick to the facts and don’t go in with the cape ..you have to be able to read the language in their organisation, their team, what motivates them; * Emotional intelligence – procurement is quite regimented and we are not.. so sometimes we do have a bit of a clash.. and not everyone knows how far to push the burn.. you need emotional intelligence; * Adaptability - being willing to change and adapt - to break what I do to fit them and not expect them to break to fit me; * Community capacity building skills - bringing people together and create communities of practice; * Humility – You can’t trespass on other peoples’ knowledge domains and responsibilities – you have to be nice.. otherwise no one is going to invite you .. being arrogant won’t work .. you are no better than everyone else; * Problem solving - because the solutions are not yet there, so we need to think about this differently; * Supportive - You have to be able to support people.. volunteers burnout..   **What this means**   * If field of social procurement is to progress, the variabilities in resource availability we found need to be eliminated through greater development, systemisation and standardisation of social procurement professional’s knowledge, competencies, networks and practices. * Governments also need to improve policy design and provide more monitoring, accountability and guidance to support policy implementation. * There is also a potential role for new types of independent intermediaries (such as Universities) to collect and disseminate this information – perhaps through the development of new education programs and associated qualifications. * While policy makers are correct to have high aspirations, they need to acknowledge that not all the industry can move at the same pace and that it may take time for the industry to shift to achieve ideal policy goals. * There are important parallels with the normalisation of environmental sustainability in construction over the last two decades and the policy implementation lessons learnt here could be valuable in advancing social procurement implementation in a realistic and achievable way. * The findings raise new questions about the development of the social procurement profession. For example, how do we develop the many identified skills, knowledge and attributes needed to effectively implement these strategies into the construction industry? * Our findings raise new questions about who such programs should be aimed at, what educational pre-requisites would be needed and where in the organisational structure qualified social procurement professionals should sit. * Finally, the findings show that it is highly unlikely that there is one super-hero type person who can do all this alone. Rather, it is clear that the effective implementation of social procurement requires a collaborative approach which involves a team of different types of social procurement champions and professionals from across an organisation and its supply chain. |