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Advancing sustainable procurement and supplier selection

Qualitative case study on an indirect procurement organization

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ABSTRACT:

Philanthropic activities no longer suffice as organizations must embed sustainability into their operations. Procurement's role as a driver of corporate sustainability is strategical and increasingly gaining attention. As procurement covers the activities of sourcing, negotiation and purchasing, it is crucial for practicing managers to understand the issues related to SP for a holistic approach. Top management is cited as the main driver for sustainability transformation. Yet, we lack an understanding in how they support the sustainable procurement transformation. The sustainable procurement terminology is also fragmented, creating a challenge in identifying various triggers and barriers. Finally, there are limited studies combining behavioral management and sustainable procurement concepts. A gap exists in understanding how microlevel change agency and top management support can aid the adoption of sustainability practices into procurement. Moreover, the studies on sustainable procurement tend to focus on direct procurement, creating a gap. Additionally, the studies on sustainable procurement tend to focus on countries in Europe and Anglo-America, creating a geographical imbalance.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative case study in the indirect procurement organization of a listed multinational corporation. The study's interviewees reside in the Nordics, Europe, Middle East, Latin America and Africa. The interviewee cohort consists of people acting in top management and other roles related to indirect procurement. The study provides a theoretical synthesis offering an understanding of how internal and external triggers and barriers affect the sustainable supplier selections. The framework also positions change agents, to which top management can belong to, as enablers for removing internal barriers. To synthesize the sustainable procurement terminology this study proposes in total eight trigger themes and in total seven barrier themes to sustainable procurement. The findings show that change agents act as an important internal variable to both trigger sustainable procurement and remove internal barriers to it. However, macrolevel enablers in the organization are found to be necessary for change agents who are not top management. These enablers are company culture, leadership, policies, procurement metrics and sustainability & sustainable procurement focused trainings. Whilst change agents can remove other internal barriers and trigger sustainable procurement, the listed enablers are required for a systematic change. The findings also indicate that the role of a country is central in sustainable supplier selections. Though digital procurement was not extensively discussed with the interviewees, the responses indicate potential for digitalized procurement to act as an enabler for sustainable procurement. The findings suggest also changes to the supplier selection process, by adding two steps to it.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable supplier selection, sustainable procurement, top management, change agent, change agency, digital procurement, indirect procurement

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Organisaatioiden on enenevässä määrin sisällytettävä kestävä kehitys toimintaansa mahdollisten hyväntekeväisyystoimien lisäksi. Hankinnan strateginen rooli yrityskestävyyden liikkeellepanijana herättää yhä enemmän kiinnostusta. Varmistaakseen kokonaisvaltaisen lähestymistavan kestävä hankinnan kehittämiseen, johtajien on huomioitava kaikki hankintaan liittyvä toiminta. Ylin johto mainitaan usein pääasiallisena kestävyysmuutoksen liikkeellepanijana. Heidän tapansa tukea kestävä hankinnan muutosta on kuitenkin jäänyt vähemmälle huomiolle. Tämän lisäksi kestävä hankinnan terminologia on sirpaleista, mikä osaltaan tekee laukaisevien ja estävien tekijöiden tunnistamisen haastavaksi. Käyttäytymistieteitä ja kestävä hankintaa yhdisteleviä tutkimuksia on toistaiseksi rajallisesti. Erityisesti mikrotason muutosagenttien ja ylempien johdon tavat tukea kestävä hankinnan edistämistä ovat jääneet vähäiselle huomiolle. On myös huomionarvoista, että yleisesti tutkimukset kestävästä hankinnasta keskittyvät suoraan hankintaan. Tämän lisäksi kestävä hankintaa käsittelevät tutkimukset ovat rajoittuneet suurimmaksi osaksi Eurooppaan ja Anglo-Amerikkaan, mikä osaltaan luo maantieteellistä epätasapainoa tutkimustuloksiin.

Tämä laadullinen tapaustutkimus tarkastelee edellä mainittuja teemoja pörssiyrityksen epäsuoran hankinnan organisaatiossa. Haastateltavat ovat Pohjoismaista, Euroopasta, Lähi-idästä, Latinalaisesta Amerikasta ja Afrikasta. Haastateltavien joukko koostuu henkilöistä, jotka edustavat työnsä puolesta rooleja, jotka liittyvät epäsuoraan hankintaan, tai ylempää johtoa. Tutkimuksen teoreettisessa viitekehityksessä esitetään miten sekä sisäiset, että ulkoiset laukaisevat ja estävät tekijät vaikuttavat kestävä hankintajavalintaan. Viitekehityksessä muutosagentit, joihin ylin johto voidaan luokitella kuuluvaksi, esitetään sisäisten estävien tekijöiden poistamisen mahdollistajina. Tutkimus pyrkii yhdenmukaistamaan kestävä hankinnan terminologiaa: tuloksissa esitetään kahdeksan laukaisevaa ja seitsemän estävää tekijää kestävä hankinnalle. Tutkimustulosten perusteella muutosagenteilla on tärkeä rooli sisäisenä kestävä hankinnan mahdollistajana. Muutosagentit toimivat sekä laukaisevana tekijänä kestävä hankinnalle, että sisäisten estävien tekijöiden poistamisen mahdollistajina. On huomionarvoista, että muutosagentit, jotka eivät edusta ylempää johtoa, tarvitsevat tuekseen makrotason mahdollistavia tekijöitä. Tällaisina tekijöinä esitetään yrityskulttuuri, johto, viralliset menettelytavat, hankinnan suoritusmitaristo, sekä koulutukset, jotka käsittelevät kestävyyttä ja kestävä hankintaa. Systemaattinen muutos vaatii tuekseen näitä mahdollistavia tekijöitä. Tutkimustulokset viittaavat lisäksi maan rooliin keskeisenä tekijänä kestävässä toimittajavalinnassa. Digitalisoidusta hankinnasta keskusteltiin yleisesti haastatteluissa. Löydökset viittaavat digitalisoidun hankinnan toimivan myös mahdollistajana kestävä hankinnalle. Lisäksi tutkimustulosten perusteella esitetään muutosta toimittajavalintaprosessiin.

AVAINSANAT: Sustainable supplier selection, sustainable procurement, top management, change agent, change agency, digital procurement, indirect procurement

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Abbreviations

IP = Indirect Procurement
SSCM = Sustainable supply chain management
SP = Sustainable procurement
SSS = Sustainable supplier selection
MNC = Multinational corporation
CS = Corporate sustainability
OSO = Organizational sustainability orientation

1 Introduction

Companies are facing increasing internal and external demands to make sustainable decisions to support the development of optimized use of resources by current and future generations (Kabra et al., 2023; Tardin et al., 2024). It is found to be complex and often also under timely pressure (Mohrman & Lawler, 2014; Hoppmann et al., 2023). Adding the level of complexity are uncertainties as we do not comprehensively understand the multifariousness of sustainability issues and their forces on our societies and future (Hoppmann et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023; Tilley, 2019). Especially purchasing and supply professionals have a significant role in influencing the company's ability to contribute to innovative sustainability development of the natural environment, economies, and society (Carter & Easton, 2011; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Ageron et al., 2012; Zimmer et al., 2016; Seuring & Müller, 2008b; Rashidi, 2020). The work starts with sustainable supplier selection (SSS) as the integration of the sustainability concept requires collaboration across the supply chain (Panigrahi et al., 2018). SSS is part of sustainable procurement (SP) which according to Kabra et al. (2023) and the United Nations Development Program (2024) is key for meeting the external requirements of sustainable development. Moreover, SP emphasizes all three sustainability dimensions (economical, environmental, and social) which researchers have increasingly called attention to in sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) (Zimmer et al., 2016; Seuring & Müller, 2008a; Ageron et al., 2012; Carter & Easton, 2011). Carter & Rogers (2008, p. 368) define SSCM as

“The strategic, transparent integration and achievement of an organization's social, environmental, and economic goals in the systemic coordination of key interorganizational business processes for improving the long-term economic performance of the individual company and its supply chains”

Thus, SSS is a critical step for achieving SSCM (Salam & Ali, 2020). Despite the rapidly grown knowledge and understanding of sustainability dimensions and of the importance

of including them into supplier selection, studies (see Rashidi et al., 2020; Govindan et al., 2013) confirm that 'cost' and 'price' are still the top determining criteria used for supplier selection.

Consequently, as Kabra et al. (2023, p. 4387) state, "it is of considerable value to practitioners and academicians to understand the obstacles to improving sustainable procurement by organizations". One of the main barriers for SP found by Khan et al. (2021, p. 9) is the "lack of modern technologies" within a company. In accordance, Rashidi et al. (2020) explain that the technologies could both circumvent the need for additional resources and reinforce incorporating sustainability into supplier selection processes. The selection process is still mainly human-led, thus biased (Govindan et al., 2013). Consequently, focusing on transforming employees' engagement in sustainable decision-making (Buhr et al., 2023) is a pre-requisite for the change to SP. Sustainability as a topic is large, complex and constantly evolving with new knowledge. Hence, it can be described as an exhaustive topic to keep up with. Sustainability can be understood and viewed from various perspectives that are dependent on a person's background (such as education, experiences and beliefs) (Hoppmann et al., 2023). The pressure of incorporating sustainability to decision-making without proper guidance by the employing organization may build pressure on individuals, creating unconscious barriers to adopting new practices. On the other hand, personal values can trigger individual employees to drive sustainability within their employing organization. One of the main drivers of sustainability transformation recognized by academia is the top management's support & role modelling (Tardin et al., 2024; Tipu, 2022; Buhr et al., 2023; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Kabra et al., 2023 and Zimon et al., 2019). Understanding how the organization and leadership can support and encourage innovation for individuals is consequently crucial (Weigt-Rohrbeck and Linneberg, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to tap into this research opportunity by answering the following research question.

What triggers and barriers exist for sustainable supplier selection and how can these be influenced by top management support and change agency?

The study will be conducted by using a qualitative method with primary data collection from a case company that has identified challenges with incorporating sustainability practices into its procurement. The researcher is employed by the case company; thus, the researcher's bias will be taken into consideration. While e-procurement is not currently utilized on a sufficient scale to be incorporated into the research question, its potential can be discussed with the interviewees. This can expectedly reveal unconscious bias or barriers for increasing the usage of e-procurement within the organization. It may offer an opportunity to reflect empirical findings against statements by academia.

The contribution of this study is fourfold as it first will contribute to the scarce research on sustainable indirect procurement. Sourcing & purchasing items and services that are required for the company to operate is considered indirect procurement. Secondly, the study combines behavioral aspect with supply management studies. It answers the call of Kabra et al. (2023, p. 4386) who state that "future research should examine neglected issues such as the role of -- top management support, -- in enhancing sustainable procurement". Panigrahi et al. (2018, pp. 1027) propose that "sustainability and behavioral management concepts could be studied conjointly". Narrowing the field of behavioral management studies, Buhr et al. (2023, p. 4227) state that "individual change agency in the context of corporate sustainability is still an emerging research area". The study aims to provide insight into the call of Kabra et al. (2023) on how to improve the adoption of sustainability practices in procurement. Thirdly, the study answers the call of geographically balanced change agency studies on sustainable procurement. Buhr et al. (2023, pp. 4240) propose that "future [change agency] research can build on qualitative insights -- in countries outside the Anglo-American and European sphere" and Rashidi et al. (2020, pp. 14) note that SSS applying the triple bottom line "has received unequal attention across the countries". Finally, this study addresses sustainable supplier selection in indirect procurement holistically, including all three sustainability pillars. The case company recognizes a need to invest into embedding sustainability into their procurement

activities. Sustainability criteria are not utilized in supplier selection in a holistic manner, nor are technological aid exploited to a full extent. Consequently, this study aims to understand how top management support and change agents can support the adoption of sustainability practices. Since e-procurement is not exhaustively utilized to aid SSS by the case company the expected benefits of e-procurement for driving SP will be discussed in the thesis mainly from an academical perspective. Digitalized procurement is discussed on a general level from an empirical perspective.

The thesis is structured as follows. After the introduction, the study's two-fold theoretical framework is introduced in chapter two. The theoretical framework is planned to build on sustainable procurement, which includes sustainable supplier selection and technological assistance. The second theme is corporate sustainability transformation, which includes change agency and top management support as enablers. Chapter two ends with a theoretical synthesis. Chapter three discusses methodology and chapter four the findings from primary data collection. Chapter five ends the thesis with a discussion of theoretical and empirical contributions as well as limitations and proposals for future research.

2 Theoretical background

This chapter discusses the two theoretical streams selected for the research: sustainable procurement and corporate sustainability transformation. These form the theoretical framework of this study. The first two subheadings, 2.1 and 2.2, present and discuss the topics, scope, and main objectives of the theory. In the third subheading, 2.3, a theoretical synthesis is presented.

2.1 Sustainable procurement

Procurement's role as a driver of corporate sustainability is strategical and increasingly gaining attention corporate sustainability is strategical (Walker & Phillips, 2009; Etse et al., 2022a; Kabra et al., 2023; Ghadge et al., 2019). Purchasing and supply professionals have the power to make strategic decisions impacting the overall sustainability of a company (Panigrahi, 2018; Rashidi et al., 2020). The decisions made by procurement professionals reflect in the products & services produced by the company, their societal value, and their impact on the natural and business environment it operates in. Schneider & Wallenburg (2012, p. 243) assert that "each organization is only as sustainable as its upstream supply chain". Despite the shared understanding of the criticality of sustainable procurement there is a lack of consensus for defining 'sustainability' (Giunipero et al., 2012). Academia also lacks unified terminology for describing SP (Etse et al., 2022a; Kabra et al., 2023; Barbanti et al., 2021). Most studies focus on government green procurement, sustainable sourcing, sourcing, ethical sourcing, public procurement, buyer-supplier dyad relationships in SP, interorganizational sustainability analysis, and social and environmentally responsible procurement; creating a gap (Kabra et al. 2023, p. 4371). As procurement covers the activities of sourcing, negotiation and purchasing, it is crucial for practicing managers to understand the issues related to SP for a holistic approach.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2024) defines sustainable procurement as “making sure that the products and services UNDP buys are as sustainable as possible, with the lowest environmental impact and most positive social results. Procurement, therefore, plays a key role in contributing to sustainable development.” Another approach to the development of sustainable procurement is the ISO 20400:2017 standard, which can also be utilized for evaluating supplier sustainability (Barbanti et al., 2021): “Sustainable procurement involves the sustainability aspects related to the goods or services and to the suppliers along the supply chains” (ISO, 2017). The following definition is based on the definition of sustainable procurement by the Department for Environment of UK (DEFRA, 2006) and the UN Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable development (1987), which are both globally acknowledged. This study applies the following description of sustainable procurement.

Sustainable procurement is a process by which organizations meet their needs for goods and services in a way that provides value for money while minimizing harm to the environment and society. Sustainable procurement can be practiced in the assessment and selection of suppliers by defining appropriate criteria and conditions that contribute to the focal company's sustainable development strategy and objectives and which suppliers must respect in all their activities. Sustainable procurement involves identifying, assessing, and selecting suppliers on the basis of their environmental and social performance. (Kaasinen, 2023, p. 93—94)

Practitioners may benefit from practical guidance on how to tie the three sustainability objectives into the organization’s processes. Moreover, how it can be managed holistically. A holistic and balanced understanding of the sustainability paradigm is rare according to Seuring & Müller (2008a). They state that sustainability is considered in silos of three dimensions (economical, environmental, and social) of which environmental sustainability dimension has received considerably more attention. For example, according to Rashidi et al. (2020), the concept of green supply chain management does not necessarily consider both environmental and economical sustainability together. This leads to

the complete exclusion of the social sustainability dimension. Consequently, it is valid to clarify that in this study "sustainability" is considered from a holistic perspective combining all three dimensions. Another issue is the considerable geographical misbalance of SP studies. To date, academia has focused on developed economies/countries (Islam et al., 2017; Etse et al., 2022a&b). Focal companies, especially MNC, are likely to have operations in both developed and developing countries. While majority of the first-tier suppliers may not operate in developing countries, second, third etc., suppliers do. Understanding the potential differences in barriers, triggers and enablers for SP in developing countries facilitates true SSCM over superficial policies that aim to improve sustainability branding.

Once an organization embarks for the SP transformation journey it should acknowledge triggers and barriers related to the subject, as resistance is a natural part of any change. In the case of SSCM, Giunipero et al. (2012) claim that triggers and barriers have received less attention within academia. The approach is also siloed due to the fragmentation of SP terminology: Qazi & Appolloni (2022) for example conducted an extensive list of barriers for circular procurement (CP) which are partially applicable also within sustainable procurement. CP specifically concentrates on circularity instead of any environmental performance (Qazi & Appolloni, 2022). Consequently, it is worthwhile to study barriers for SP. As SSCM has been studied wider than SP the issue consequently is present also within SP. Kabra et al. (2023) summarize recognized triggers and barriers to date in their bibliometric review of SP. Table 1 presents the recognized triggers and Table 2 the recognized barriers.

Table 1. External and internal triggers for sustainable procurement (adopted from Kaasinen, 2023 p. 19-20; Seuring & Müller, 2008a, p. 1703; Kabra et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2012; Nsiah-Sarfo et al., 2023).

External triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive advantage • Client & another external stakeholder demands • Environmental & social pressure groups
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and other external regulations & incentive • Legal demands • Organizational factors • Reputational loss • Shared norms within the industry
Internal triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost reduction through green practices • Large purchasing volumes • Top management initiatives and supplier initiatives for sustainability

Barriers are equally crucial to be acknowledged when planning the transformation towards sustainability (Khan et al., 2021). Academia (see Ageron et al., 2012; Giunipero et al., 2012) considers the dominant barrier for SSCM to be economic uncertainty. Kabra et al. (2023, p. 4380) confirm financial limitations as the main barrier for SP. Conversely, some studies show that social and environmental sustainability practices and SSS can result in improved financial performance (Pullman et al., 2009; Birkin et al., 2009; Salam & Ali, 2020). Barbanti et al. (2021) further list cost reduction, improved reputation, reduction of stakeholders' pressure, innovation incentive, improved working conditions, improved transparency in exchange of communication and reduction in environmental impacts as results of SP. Organizations would benefit from highlighting these to their employees as a part of SP transformation initiatives, considering the internal barriers listed in Table 2.

Table 2. External and internal barriers for sustainable procurement (adopted from Khan et al., 2021, pp. 278; Seuring & Müller, 2008a, p. 1704; Giunipero et al., 2021, p. 262; Kabra et al., 2023; Etse et al., 2022b; Islam et al., 2017; Qazi & Appolloni, 2022, p. 349-351).

External barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers within the industry • Lack of standards and regulations • Lack of suitable suppliers/sources • Low availability of sustainable materials/products or services
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor supplier commitment • Weak supplier relationship
Internal barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of employee interest • Financial constraints & restrictions • Increased costs due to sustainability initiatives translating to declining economic conditions • Insufficient or missing communication and complex coordination • Lack of clear vision & skills/knowledge • Lack of consensus or prioritization of the topic at executive level / top management • Lack of resources • Misalignment of short- and long-term strategic goals • Sourcing strategy • Poor performance measurement systems • Resistance to change • Organizational culture

Concurring with Table 1, Luzzini et al. (2015) states that supply chain members' cooperation and communication is critical for a proactive approach to sustainability. That is, intra-organizational and external stakeholders. On the other hand, the experienced stress to incorporate sustainability into company practices is often passed onto the suppliers (Seuring & Müller, 2008a). These show as demands to showcase how the supplier performs from environmental, societal, and economical sustainability perspectives (Seuring & Müller, 2008a). As can be seen from Table 2, the lack of suitable suppliers, or suppliers' lack of interest in sustainability poses a significant barrier to the focal company to implement SP. Inter-organizational collaboration is key for shared value creation for SP (Walker & Brammer, 2012). Consequently, sustainable supplier selection is crucial for achieving the collaborative state for SP (Panigrahi, 2018; Barbanti et al., 2021).

The success factors that aid driving SP are summarized in Figure 1 from three discussed perspectives. The intra-organizational, supplier-buyer relationship and supplier's

perspective. Regulations and policies are recognized as one of the main factors that support SP. SP requires considerable restructuring of organizational systems and procedures (Etse et al., 2022b). Interestingly, organizational culture can be both a driver and a barrier. Leadership and the external societal & environmental culture are root causes for an organizational culture that acts as a barrier. This study discusses the intra-organizational success factors by focusing on top management and change agents.

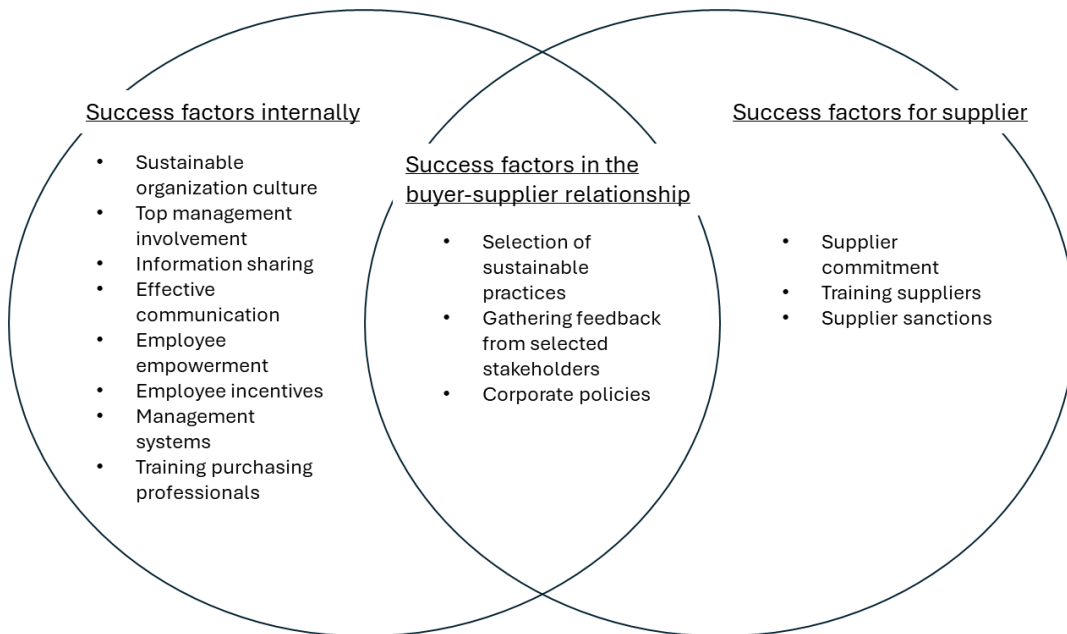


Figure 1. Drivers for successful implementation of sustainability practices in procurement (adopted from Khan et al., 2021; Zimon et al., 2019; Seuring & Müller, 2008a; Maignan et al., 2002)

This study suggests combining the list of items into themes as external and internal variables. Consequently, there are trigger themes and barrier themes. Viewing the items as a group that results into a theme may help to understand the underlying synergies of the items, as well as the themes. Based on earlier discussion within this chapter, four triggering themes are suggested in Table 2: industry demands & inquiries, external governance & economics, company reputation & market position, and corporate sustainability. In a similar manner, four barrier themes are suggested in Table 2: industry, supplier relations, external governance, and corporate culture, governance & economics.

Table 3. Themes acting as triggers and barriers to sustainable procurement

		TRIGGERS
EXTERNAL VARIABLES	Industry demands & inquiries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client & another external stakeholder demands • Environmental & social pressure groups • Economical pressure • Large purchasing volumes • Supplier initiatives for sustainability • Shared norms within the industry
	External governance & economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and other external regulations & incentive • Legal demands • Organizational factors • Cost reduction through green practices
	Company reputation & market position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive advantage • Reputational loss
INTERNAL VARIABLES	Corporate sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top management initiatives for sustainability • Company culture
Barriers		
EXTERNAL VARIABLES	Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers within the industry • Lack of suitable suppliers/sources • Low availability of sustainable materials/products or services
	Supplier relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor supplier commitment • Weak supplier relationship
	External governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of standards and regulations
INTERNAL VARIABLES	Corporate culture, governance & economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of employee interest • Financial constraints • Increased costs due to sustainability initiatives translating into declining economic conditions • Insufficient or missing communication and complex coordination • Lack of clear vision & skills/knowledge • Lack of consensus or prioritization of the topic at executive level / top management • Lack of resources • Misalignment of short- and long-term strategic goals • Sourcing strategy • Poor performance measurement systems • Resistance to change • Organizational culture

2.1.1 Sustainable supplier selection

Like Panigrahi (2018), Govindan et al. (2013) and Matos & Clegg (2013) agree that supplier selection is at the core of SP. Taking another perspective, van Hoek & Udesen (2023) explain that incorporating SP as a criterion into supplier selections advances the focal company SP. The supplier selection process (Figure 2) may be short whereas time wise it could be lengthy. This is often mostly dependent on the scenario in which the selection is made. De Boer et al. (2001) suggest that selecting a new supplier for a completely new service or item is the most complex one, because it contains several uncertain items. But the nature of the procured item or service may also increase complexity. Specifically, within the procurement of items and services for indirect needs. Indirect procurement (IP) refers to items and services that are required to support general business operations. As the need is determined by internal stakeholders, their external business relations oftentimes impact the supplier selection. Consequently, procurement professionals may need to spend more time on internal collaboration to convince the internal stakeholder on how to ensure a thorough supplier evaluation. Involving procurement from the 1st stage of identifying a need for a product or service is a key enabler for considering sustainability (Qazi & Appolloni, 2022). The siloed company functions often increase the complexity as the internal stakeholders may bypass the selection process steps 2-5 and risk management (Figure 2). Perner & Skjølsvik (2016, p. 6) describe indirect procurement to be “characterized by fragmentation, Maverick buying, and long-term relations”.

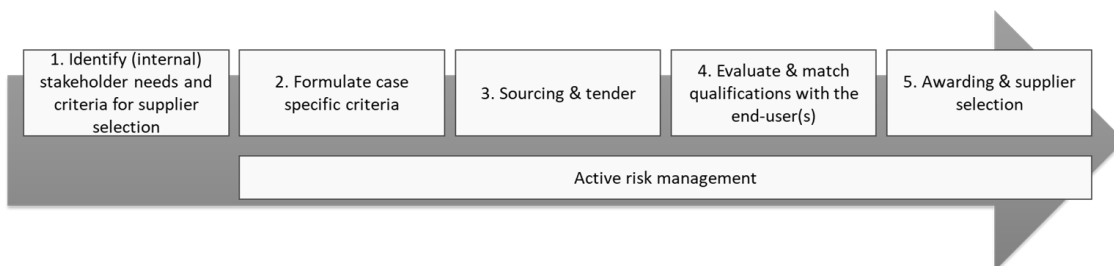


Figure 2. Sustainable supplier selection process description (adopted from Zimmer et al., 2016).

At the first step of the selection process the purchaser must first understand the needs of the end-user. Then, they jointly create case specific selection criteria. During the process the purchaser gathers and evaluates a large amount of data to ensure a well-informed decision. This may require considerable effort in comparison to the value gained if the purchase brings or is of low value for the company. When considering scenarios with known items or services to be purchased, companies tend to select first-tier suppliers. Moreover, companies prefer to centralize and restrict the number of suppliers for improved efficiency (Cheraghi et al., 2004). This exposes challenges to sourcing from a wider pool of suppliers in the market to evaluate the suitability of second-tier suppliers (Zimmer et al., 2016). It showcases the unfavorable power balance of prospect second-tier suppliers in relation to the focal company (Zimmer et al., 2016). Simultaneously the focal company is expected to ensure that all its suppliers are acting sustainably (Luzzini et al., 2015). This requires substantial resources from procurement professionals. They need to consider various criteria (Figure 3), source & evaluate high volume of information and simultaneously manage several on-going cases.

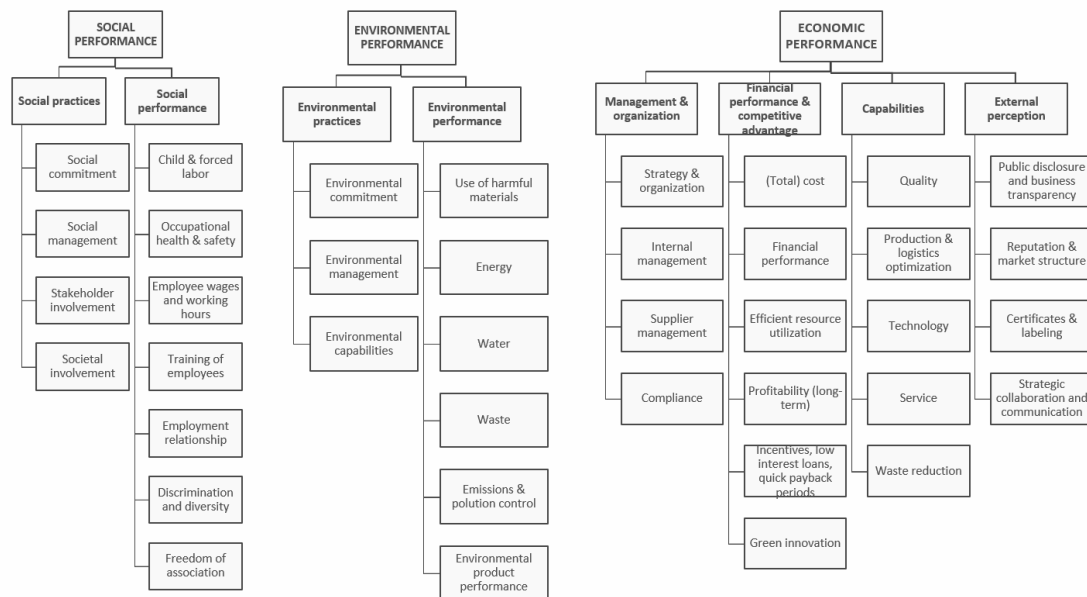


Figure 3. Itemized sustainability issues for sustainable supplier selection per social, environmental, and economical performance (adopted from Kaasinen, 2023; Zimmer et al., 2016; Zimon et al., 2019 and Panigrahi et al., 2018).

Many companies, as well as academia, refer to the purchasing portfolio matrix by Kraljic (1983) as a standardized tool to evaluate the purchasing scenario (De Boer et al., 2001; Luzzini et al., 2015). In practice it is a method of resource allocation to understand which suppliers should receive the most attention from purchasers. According to the Kraljic matrix, scenarios can be divided into four categories depending on two dimensions (axis): expected profit impacts and supply risk of the suppliers. The four categories are strategic, leverage, bottleneck and non-critical suppliers. Therefore, suppliers that deliver items or services with low profit impact and risk might not receive as much attention from purchasers. Pagell et al. (2010) note that the Kraljic matrix is unsuitable for SSCM. The Kraljic matrix compromises the prospect overall value that a supplier could add for the focal company, since it rather considers (total) cost and price. In other words, if resources are evaluated solely based on the expected costs and profits it is unlikely that purchasing professionals will incorporate sustainability dimensions in their weighing criteria of a supplier's performance. The suggestion is supported by Hörisch et al. (2014) who claim that the traditional view of making business driven decisions is based on financial growth. This would imply that incorporating sustainability views to the decision

process is a trade-off (Hörisch et al., 2014). Ashby et al. (2012) note that supply chain management specifically has been viewed as a business function that delivers savings and thus cost is the driving criterion for selecting suppliers.

In the same vein, academia has tended to centralize on studies about economic performance as a sustainability criterion in supplier selection (Rashidi et al., 2020; Zimmer et al., 2016; Brandenburg et al., 2014). In their literature review, Seuring & Müller (2008a) assumed that economic performance was included into management publications. Firms have similarly tended to focus on economic sustainability out of the three dimensions (Panigrahi et al., 2018). Especially 'quality' and 'price' have been the leading criteria (Cheraghi et al., 2004, p.92; Rashidi et al., 2020; Govindan et al., 2013). Interestingly, Cheraghi et al. listed also 'financial position' and 'management & organization' as important factors for supplier selection in their 2004 study. Still, they did not link these to economically sustainable performance. This shows how fast the importance of sustainability in the field of purchasing has grown. Zimmer et al. (2016, p. 1430) found that 'relationship' and 'flexibility' had increased their importance in sustainable supplier selection, when considering economic performance criteria in isolation. Nevertheless, price was found to be the third most common criteria. Varsei et al. (2014) call for a balanced evaluation of all three dimensions, specifically in profit-seeking organizations. Concentrating on only one of the three pillars or having a disproportionate weighing on the criteria is connected to the risk of choosing a supplier whose actual sustainability is not comprehended properly (Rashidi et al., 2020; Seuring & Müller, 2008b).

While Beckmann et al. (2014) claim trade-offs to be unavoidable in terms of sustainability and business, Ghadge et al. (2019) remind that sustainability dimensions alone should not result into compromising profit, or vice versa. Sharma et al. (2008) recommend tailoring the discussion situation and circumstance specific in order to understand actual trade-offs and measures that bring long-term value. On a strategical level, the financial goals of the company must be aligned with the expected grade of sustainability (Panigrahi, et al., 2018). An increasing amount of organizations share the understanding

of sustainability and economic interests existing simultaneously, enabling various solutions (Luzzini et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2008). Hörisch et al. (2014) encourage viewing sustainability and profit-seeking activities as an opportunity for synergy and long-term value creation. These apply for both the company managing the business, as well as to its operational environment and society. Supporting this view, Hellström & Parkkonen (2022) state that the competitive advantage of a company can originate from its social impact and the positive shared value impacting the eco-system in which the company operates. Carter & Rogers (2008) furthermore note the opportunity for strategic alliances, shared resource utilization and development of processes that are hard to mimic. Strategic utilization of external resources is also a way to manage and respond to volatile, uncertain, and complex environment (Carter & Rogers, 2008; Nasser & Abuzaid, 2014). Thus, instead of the sole exchange value of a transaction, purchasers should consider the value creation and innovation possibilities in supplier selection.

Salam & Ali (2020) note that SSS is particularly significant for companies in emerging economies. They argue that a company from emerging markets that fulfils the sustainability criteria of an MNC not only has competitive advantage (through differentiation). It also enables to demonstrate and encourage sustainability practices within their natural environment. Etse et al. (2022a) add that emerging economies in general perceive SP as something new and sustainability adoption rates at the time of this study tend to be low. On the other hand, China, Iran and India have produced most case studies on SSS studies (Rashidi et al., 2020). This indicates that it may not be of added value to examine countries in clusters because the level of acceptance may differ drastically between individual countries. Portugal, for example, had a low rate of companies publishing sustainability reports in 2017 although as part of Europe, it might be expected to have higher sustainability commitments from corporates (Rego et al., 2017). According to Ghadge et al. (2019) the increasing geographical diversity of supply chain exposes the focal company to risks in terms of sustainability. The lack of shared sustainability standards between cultures and countries creates a gap in awareness of sustainable practices. Ghadge et al. (2019) argue that MNC may face difficulties with SP as they often outsource activities

and consequently, are likely to source from emerging economies. Salam & Ali (2020) and Etse et al. (2022a) find that companies in emerging economies probably perceive sustainability practices positively due to lack of preconceptions. Eventually they tend to influence local public procurement in their natural environment and create societal awareness (Salam & Ali, 2020). The consequent impact could lead to a more sustainable business cluster, that can hold competitive advantage for the region. It can also create economic opportunities for the country/counties of operation. Moreover, sustainability is expected to become a globally shared norm in the future (Pagell et al., 2010).

2.1.2 Digital procurement in sustainable supplier selection

In their 2004 study, Cheraghi et al. conclude that Internet had and would continue to revolutionize purchasing. Only 20 years later we can confirm that digitalization has enabled efficiency gains, cost reductions, improved means for communication and transformed the way supply chains are built and managed (Motaung & Sifolo, 2023). Industry 4.0 positively impacts SCM by for example creating the required transparency between supply base tiers of the focal company (Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018) which itself aids SSS.

Procurement as a company function has a unique position to access information from internal and external stakeholders (Foster, 2020). Digital procurement can aid in analyzing that data for strategical management and sustainability (Dudić et al., 2024). Consisting of advanced analytics, mobile and cloud technology, big data, machine learning, social media and integrated solutions, digital technologies are predicted to revolutionize procurement (Gupta & Jain, 2024; Motaung & Sifolo, 2023). AI could narrow down prospect suppliers in each market to enhance the decision-making process (Varriale et al., 2023). Big data and analytical tools could predict and identify risks for supplier sustainability (Jain & Gupta, 2024). This offers the company considerable economic efficiency because per Panigrahi (2018) compliance, monitoring and auditing are crucial to SSS but require significant human resources. A study by Walker & Brammer (2012) confirm that e-procurement – a network system utilizing commerce technologies (Jain & Gupta, 2024)

– specifically could facilitate SP. The organization of the case company studied has taken e-procurement into use. The adoption rate is still not high enough for the success factors of e-procurement adoption to be studied. On that account this study discusses digitalized procurement aiding SP from an academic perspective.

E-procurement platforms often enable e-auctioning, contracting, purchase order & delivery management and payments processing. E-procurement also enables automated or partially automated supplier selection. In comparison to traditional procurement methods such as calling and e-mailing, e-procurement ensures more transparent data management. The importance of adopting e-procurement amongst other tools related to an organization's digitalization journey is widely acknowledged by academia (Jain & Gupta, 2024) as well as practitioners (Foster, 2020). As digitalization evolves, an increasing number of organizations are expected to transition (Jain & Gupta, 2024). Early adoption of digitalization would allow companies to react in an agile way to customer requirements and identify suppliers who are willing to innovate with them (Foster, 2020). There is clear synergy between digital procurement and sustainability (Dudić et al., 2024). Still, a knowing-doing gap (van Hoek et al., 2024) blocks several companies from taking the leap. Both digitalization and sustainability are complex topics that evolve at a high speed, expectedly in a continuum. Combined, they can be viewed as too burdensome to grasp. Besides, there are recognized ethical issues related to modern technologies that track, store and use sensitive data. Whilst digital technologies can aid with risk management, it also exposes the supply chain to safety risks (e.g., cyber security) (Dudić et al., 2024).

Overall, digitalization is disruptive and involves a risk of failure (Foster, 2020). Companies must understand that risk taking, and failure are natural parts of the process for digital procurement. Dudić et al. (2024, p. 1) recommend a conscious "risk-aware approach" with the intention to prepare and mitigate risks. The whole organization involved in the implementation benefits from accepting failure (Rashidi et al., 2020). Adapting a lean approach allows faster test and failure, facilitating efficient validation of the technologies (Foster, 2020). The implementation of state-of-the-art technologies also requires

considerable investments (Varriale et al., 2023). Consequently, it is important that the selection is made correctly by understanding the realistic deliverables. Available e-procurement platforms today are still inflexible and consequently cannot match the agility of many supply chains (Jain & Gupta, 2024). Certain tasks can be managed by technologies which organically affect resourcing as the number of tasks requiring human intervention is reduced. Employees' awareness of this is likely to result in lower user commitment. Consequently, data quality may be low preventing visibility, transparency and cooperation with buyers and suppliers – the main role of digitization in procurement (Dudić et al., 2024). A structured approach to data governance is crucial.

The practical measuring of sustainability differs amongst organizations (Panigrahi et al., 2018). Corporate decision making relies typically on reports, thus the sustainability dimensions should be incorporated into these reports – not kept as a separate metric. The United Nations' (n.d.) Sustainable Development Goals are increasingly incorporated into corporate strategies (Stocker et al., 2022) as well as frameworks suggested for achieving SSCM (see e.g., Zimon et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2023). Although academia has also introduced various SSS methods there is an imbalance between countries and industries represented (Rashidi et al., 2020). Practitioners must first understand which sustainability measurement indicators meet the strategical needs of the company or operations (van Hoek et al., 2024; Varriale et al., 2023). Any framework will require considerable modification by the organization to embed it as a part of its procurement processes. This is because the processes are tailored to consider the strategical targets on unit and company level of the individual organization. Bai & Sarkis (2010) highlight that it is crucial to use tailored selection criteria for SSS to ensure that the digital evaluation can be trusted as a basis for decision-making. Participation to the digitalized procurement from both buyer and supplier organizations is imperative (Dudić et al., 2024). As discussed earlier, not all companies are willing to embark on the digitalization journey. Walker & Brammer (2012) find that specifically SME are reluctant to use e-procurement: it had a negative impact on their sustainability. Simultaneously, SME suppliers are important for creating socio-economical value (Walker & Brammer, 2012).

Digital procurement requires considerable investments (Zimon et al., 2019) in matters of time, finances, and human resources. The practical changes concern, for example, company policies, tools, metrics, reports, ways of working and ultimately, the culture and practices. These types of changes cannot be made without the support of top management. According to Motaung & Sifolo (2023), academia is yet to identify key triggers that drive the adoption of digital procurement. The change is nonetheless essential for maintaining competitiveness and achieving SP. van Hoek et al. (2024) recommend starting with high spend category suppliers, as they are more likely to find interest in joint innovation for SP. Digital procurement positively impacts the transformation of buyer-supplier relationship to partnership as goals become strategic and shared (Dudić et al. (2024)). As discussed in chapter 2.1.1, this is expected to aid the company competitive advantage. Naturally, prospect suppliers' organizations are also digitally savvy (Motaung & Sifolo, 2023). Another important aspect which is claimed to be often missing from procurement organizations is a dedicated change management office (van Hoek et al., 2024)

Dudić et al., (2024) and van Hoek et al. (2024) stress the importance of leadership focus on purchasing professionals' training for a successful digitalized procurement. By knowing how to best exploit technology, more time is released for tasks requiring soft skills, problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity (van Hoek et al., 2024). Lack of talent, change resistance, undeveloped processes, costs and security are barriers for digital procurement (Motaung & Sifolo, 2023). A change in mindset may be also required: purchasing professionals often tend to see themselves as gatekeepers whereas digitalized procurement requires joint value creation and innovation (van Hoek et al., 2024). Interestingly, van Hoek et al. (2024) note that while many companies measure environmental sustainability performance (for example, compliance to regulations and sanctions) those tend to support the gatekeeping mindset over innovativeness. This argument supports the earlier discussed holistic approach to SSS where sustainability is not evaluated separately from other criteria. Criterion measuring sustainability ought to be juxtaposed to

traditional criteria. Artificial intelligence and machine learning can be deployed to pick and mix optimal criteria.

2.2 Corporate sustainability transformation

Today, most companies are expected to adopt sustainability practices and conduct various sustainability reporting (Ashrafi et al., 2018; European Commission, n.d.; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). There are various policies governing corporate sustainability: the UN 2030 agenda and its SDGs (United Nations, 2015), the Paris agreement (UNFCC, 2015) and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (European Commission, 2022). Yet the definition of corporate sustainability (CS) is under debate (Rego et al., 2017; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). CS is commonly linked to the UN Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1987). CS is often used as a synonym with corporate social responsibility (CSR), however the latter does not consider long-term views which are essential for sustainable development (Ashrafi et al., 2018). Certain academics argue that while CSR creates space for employees to discuss sustainability, it does not trigger revolutionary transformation within or for corporations (Zhuravleva, 2022). Corporates must engage in revolutionary transformation to truly impact global sustainability (Zhuravleva, 2022). Historically, CSR has been shown to have a consistently positive impact on the financial performance of profit-seeking organizations (Maignan et al., 1999). As listed in Table 2, financial concerns and lack of commitment to long-term strategical goals were recognized as barriers for the success of SP. Porter & Kramer (2011) suggest creating shared value (CSV) as a business model with the justification that it considers long-term gains in all three sustainability dimensions. CSV enables first and second tier suppliers to maintain and develop the social and environmental sustainability performance (Carter & Easton, 2011; Panigrahi, 2018). Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos (2014, p. 123) though recognize CSV as "[an]other term" to describe CS.

Shared value creation across the supply chain is however predicted to become a central part of the role of purchasing & supply management (van Hoek et al., 2024). The case company code of conduct is utilized by many procurement professionals as the ethical framework for their sustainable decision making in supplier selections. Certain studies (e.g., Etse et al., 2022a, p. 527) define SP as to “comply with ethical standards”. Despite of its ethical guidance, a code of conduct does not directly guide sustainable development nor assure SP (van Hoek et al., 2024; Seuring & Müller, 2008a). Instead, Seuring & Müller (2008b) determine that supply chain policies, processes and measures must incorporate sustainability to give practical guidance. This is challenged by Etse et al. (2022b) arguing that regulations set rules but do not guarantee compliance. Hellström & Parkkonen (2022) state that a company culture grounded on organizational learning allows stronger development of genuinely responsible decision-making rather than policies and guidelines. Grandia (2015) and van Hoek et al. (2024) concur, underlining importance of knowledge & learning as an enabler for SP. Tilley (2019) suggests that academia identifies the blend of the earlier mentioned and other factors to influence the inclusion of sustainability in an individual’s decision-making. She presents a synoptic model (Figure 4) combining all factors recognized by academia, visualizing how the factors exist in different levels of the environment, organization, individual and within the decision (influencing the individual).

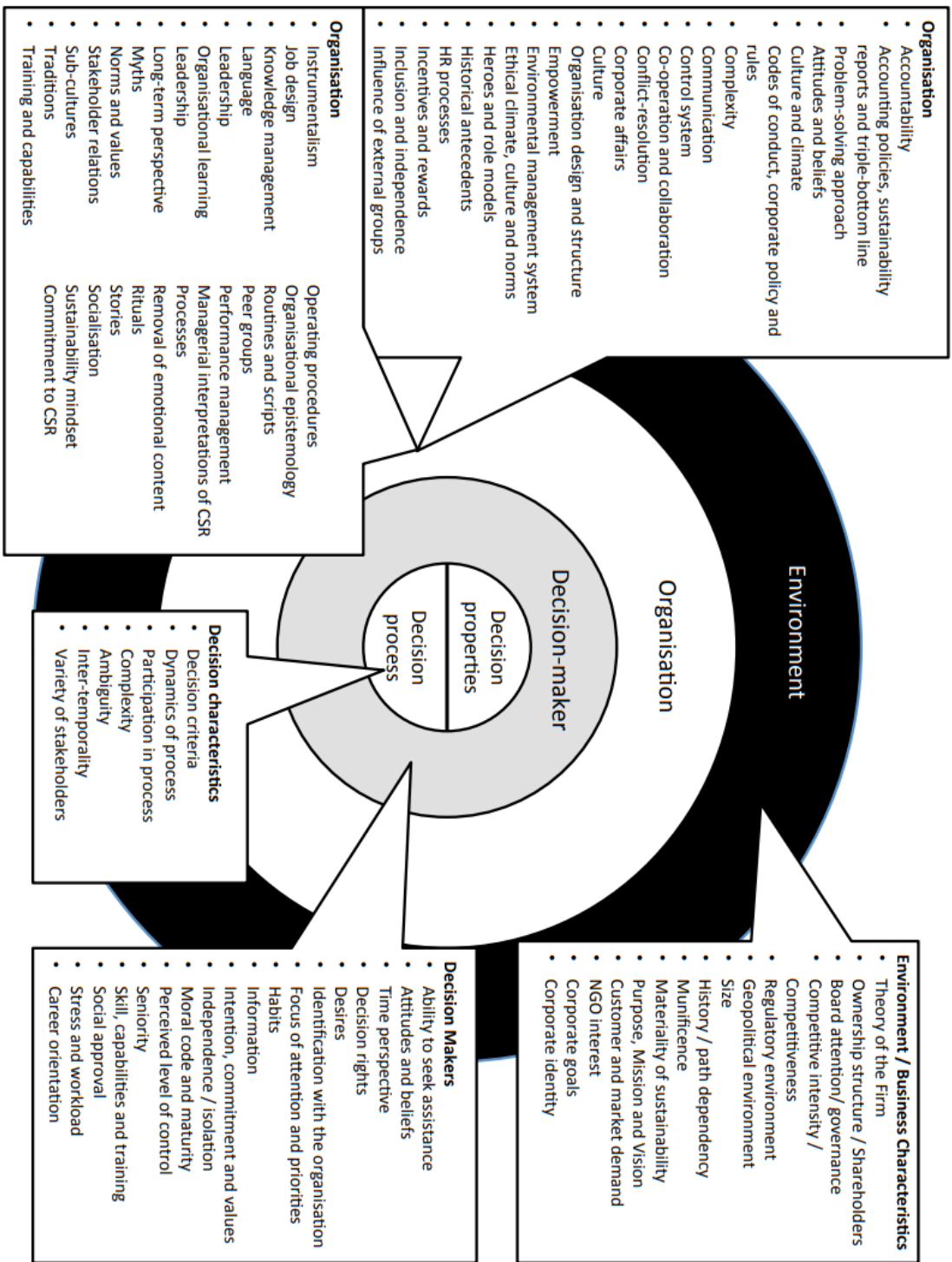


Figure 4. The 107 factors influencing the inclusion of sustainability in decision-making as presented originally by Tilley, 2019, p. 24.

As can be understood from Figure 4, sustainability transformation on macro- and micro-levels requires extensive efforts within the environment, organization, group & individual level. Adaptation requires organizational change for sustainability (Thakthathi et al., 2019). The case company has emphasized sustainability in their products, activities and various processes – consequently the current organizational sustainability orientation is expected to be high. Therefore, organizational change management is not considered as a main theory stream. It is unclear how organizational sustainability orientation could impact the supplier selection process (Tardin et al., 2024). Tilley (2019) finds that the organizational framing and reframing of sustainability influences behavioral structures such as cognitive frames. In accordance with Luzzini et al. (2015), Tilley (2019) advises that intra-organizational cooperation, social processes (such as leadership and culture) and formal structures enabled implementing sustainability strategies. According to Buhr et al. (2023), the influence towards sustainability is two-way: individuals are influenced by the company, but also by inter-organizational actors.

According to Hoppmann et al. (2023) the challenge with sustainability is that natural environment also influences an individual's perception of sustainability. Thus, experiences outside of working context impact the individual's decision-making also in professional context. Certain academics claim that company employees determine how well sustainability is adopted within company operations – if at all (Schaltegger et al., 2024). It could be of company interest to understand which triggers and barriers on individual level impact driving a sustainability transformation (Buhr et al., 2023; Touboulic & Walker, 2015; Ashby et al., 2012; Lozano, 2013). Touboulic & Walker (2015) consider a shift of mindset as a requirement. For the shift to happen, individuals within the organization must alter their cognitive frames and possibly even their experienced role identity (Hoppmann et al., 2023). Cognitive frames are “a well-learned set of mental associations that excludes some interpretations of environmental stimuli and reinforces others” (Porac & Rosa 1996, p. 35) and role identity is “an individual's self-view of their role within an organization” (Hoppmann et al., 2023, p. 539). This would imply that embedding sustainability on the

organizational level is not sufficient to achieve thorough shift to true corporate sustainability.

2.2.1 The role of change agents for sustainability transformation

“The more we know how to do something, the harder it is to learn to do it differently” (Kaplan, 2017, pp. 25).

Based on social cognitive theory, Bandura (2006) presents change agency theory where individuals make a conscious decision to develop their (social) environment towards a desired outcome through adjusting their own behavior. In essence, change agents believe that they can change and impact (others or a phenomena) (Bandura, 2006). They use the information given to them by their environment and if they personally cannot action for the outcome, they aim to influence people with the necessary capabilities (Bandura, 2006). In this study’s context, change agents can be employees who either make supplier selections or can influence the person(s) making the supplier selection. The change agent’s eventual goals are multifarious as they often target an individual or a group within their social environment, while the indirect effect may impact numerous factors presented in Figure 4. Etse et al. (2022a) find that when sustainability has not yet been adopted as a practice, understanding professional procurement perceptions of SP can act as a driver for change. Perner & Skjølvik (2016) note that “less is known about how actors at the microlevel cope with conflicting institutional demands”. Change agents can aid sustainability within an organization by influencing individuals in their social groups. Less is known for example about how they develop their own competencies and how they communicate formally and informally within their professional network when advancing a specific sustainability topic, such as sustainable procurement and supplier selection (Schaltegger et al., 2024). Consequently, it is of value to develop our understanding of how change agents contribute to sustainability in procurement.

While there are several studies on individuals' ability to drive sustainability management and corporate sustainability, the role of change agents for sustainable procurement has been studied little (Grandia, 2015). Buhr et al. (2023) note that the field is not coherent in terms as for instance change leader/champion/agent are used as synonyms. Change agents can "initiate, scale, and establish a radical change" in their respective organization (Schaltegger et al., 2024, p. 150). However, various definitions exist without consensus: examples are gathered in Table 4 to support a holistic view of the expected actions taken by a change agent. A misalignment exists also in the understanding of 1) the required formality/informality of change agency as a role, 2) if change agents should be in a managerial/leadership position, and 3) if solely internal employees can be change agents, or also external support apply (van den Berg et al., 2019; van der Heijden et al., 2012; Schaltegger et al., 2024). In this study the term change "agent" is emphasized. This is because "champion" and "leader" imply an official role of a manager which is not necessary for driving change (van den Berg et al., 2019). It is still to be noted that authorized power in an employee's role enables change in execution. Change agency is recognized as part of both organizational change (van der Heijden, 2012) and organizational behavior (Buhr et al., 2023). While the term implies change, agents eventually aim to influence others' beliefs and behavior.

Table 4. Review of change agency definitions (Gerwing, 2016; Buhr et al., 2023; Schaltegger et al., 2024).

Author/s	Definition
Beckhard, 1969, p. 101	"Change agent' refers to those people either inside or outside the organization who provide technical, specialist or consulting assistance in the management of a change effort"
Hutton, 1994, p. 6	"Someone whose role is to support the president and the top management team in bringing about a purposeful transformation of the organization"
Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971, p. 35	"Professional who influences innovation decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency"
Armenakis et al., 1999, p. 8	"Anyone involved in initiating, implementing, and supporting change can be considered a change agent"

Cawsey et al., 2012, p. 286	"Pulls people to change through the use of a powerful change vision"
Warrick, 2012, p. 517	"An organization change champion is a person at any level of the organization who is skilled at initiating, facilitating and implementing change"
Gerwing, 2016, p. 26	"The change agent, in his/ her area of responsibility, is anyone skilled in initiating, facilitating and implementing organizational change and enables others to deal with these change efforts"
Moran and Brightman, 2000, p. 66	"Encourage people to collaborate, take risks, take responsibility and be accountable for the change process"
Frahm and Brown, 2007	"Sense maker of the active dialogue that creates the organization"
Siebenhüner & Arnold, 2007, p. 343	"Change agents are individuals in organizations that initiate innovations and keep innovation processes in motion"
van der Heijden et al., 2012, p. 537	"The catalysing role of change agents as initiators and intermediaries"
Waddock et al., 2015, p. 994	"Actors who can be found anywhere within the large system undergoing change, who are attempting to move an organization or institution in a different direction than it is currently moving, whether through policy, personnel, resource, technological, financial, or other means"
Schaltegger et al. 2024, p. 146	"The notion of corporate "Change Agent for Sustainability" applies to any corporate member that deliberately pursues and effectively contributes to the necessary radical change of an organization towards achieving a society that functions within the safe and just operating space of Earth system boundaries, i.e., planetary boundaries, meeting the UNSDGs and beyond"
Buhr et al., 2023, p. 4236	"Individual change agents for sustainability are action-oriented people with strong sustainability beliefs and a wide repertoire of competencies, which they apply effectively to create sustainability transformations on individual, organizational and systems levels."
Caldwell, 2003, p. 139–140	"An internal or external individual or team responsible for initiating, sponsoring, directing, managing or implementing a specific change initiative, project or complete change programme"

In specific, an individual's personal "strong moral, ethical or sustainability beliefs and value" (Buhr et al., 2023, p. 4232) drives them to implement sustainability practices and innovation in a professional context. Change agency consists of the individual's beliefs, actions and competencies in managing events and information within their natural environment (Bandura, 2006). The following competencies are recognized by academia

- Future-orientation & lifelong learning
- Intentionality
- Entrepreneurship (or intrapreneurship in corporate change agency context)
- Systems thinking
- Forethought (foresightful behaviour)
- Enhancement of sustainability knowledge
- The ability to recognize cognitive bias and self-reflect
- The ability to question assumptions
- Creativity & ability to innovate
- Implementation skills and self-reactiveness
- Collaboration & accepting worldviews opposite their own

(Buhr et al., 2023; Schaltegger et al., 2024 ; Bandura, 2006 ; van den Berg et al., 2019)

In practice, the change agent forms future-directed plans and strategies which they proactively employ within their environment (natural, organizational or supply chain) to reach desired outcomes while iteratively evaluating their actions and plans critically. Their role should be hands-on, removing obstacles and resistance, assisting in learning, supporting and facilitating change towards SP (Grandia, 2015). This study builds on the change agency archetype model by Schaltegger et al. (2024) as it suits the study context and the case company. The model acknowledges both formal and informal sustainability change agents. The informal change agents are individuals who are not managers and who may not have sustainability officially included in their title, role description or official targets.

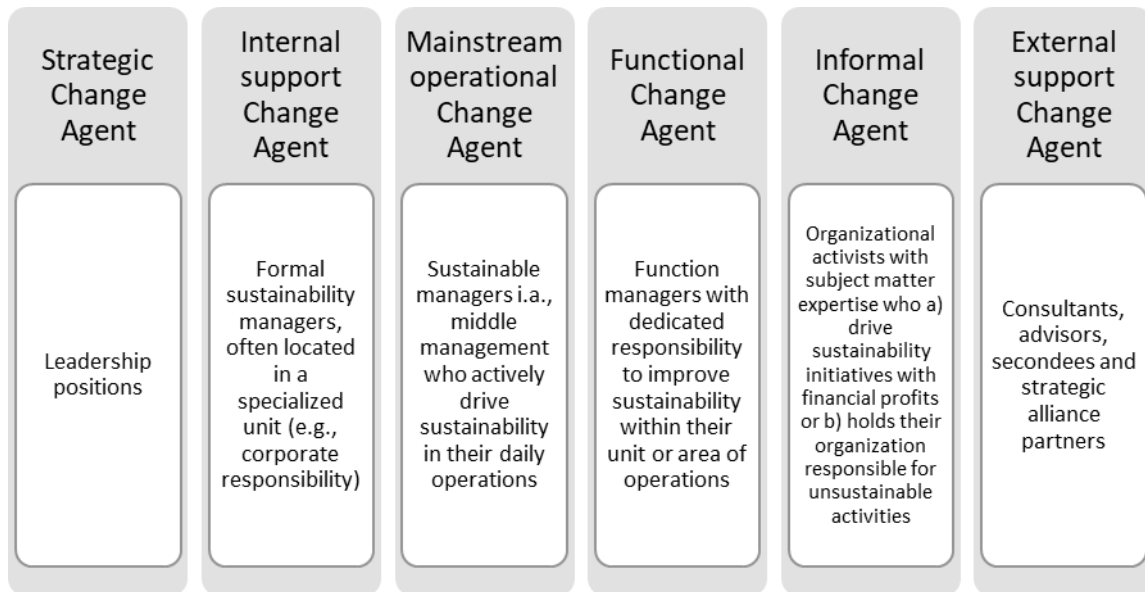


Figure 5. The six archetypes of corporate change agents for sustainability by Schaltegger et al. (2024).

van der Heijden et al. (2012) find that change agents actively identified opportunities for incorporating sustainability into processes within their own operations. In other words, they made sustainability tangible, stimulating its adoption within their company environment. The findings concur with Schaltegger et al. (2024) claiming that official sustainability professionals often lack the ability to adapt their innovation and language to the respective business operations. As a result, sustainability remains a complex issue, and employees find it difficult to embed it into processes. Whilst large scale change is required for true sustainability, change agents must acknowledge that smaller changes are more realistic – and still impactful (Grandia, 2015; Schaltegger et al., 2024). Sustainability is emergent, unpredictable and nonlinear. Therefore, small changes that are consistent with strategical goals are likely to have a larger impact when viewed in a longer time span. Opportunities arise from initiatives created by top management: this group is identified as the main enabler and driver for CS, SSCM & SP (Lozano, 2015; Tardin et al., 2024; Tipu, 2022; Buhr et al., 2023; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Kabra et al., 2023 and Zimon et al., 2019).

2.2.2 The role of top management in sustainability transformation

According to Zimon et al. (2019, p. 22) “top management commitment is normally cited as the most important internal driver [for SSCM]”. Kabra et al. (2023, p. 4386) find that the studies on “top management support, coordination, and collaboration in enhancing SP” are sparse. This establishes a considerable challenge for practitioners since leadership is a significant factor for procurement organization to implement SP (Walker & Brammer, 2011; Nsiah-Sarfo et al., 2023). Miemczyk et al. (2012, p. 203) point out the need to “explore the relationship between sustainable procurement and other factors, such -- management commitment on sustainable procurement implementation”. Study by Perner & Skjølvik (2016, p. 13) confirmed that procurement professionals considered top management support “absolutely necessary” when discussing about supplier selection with internal stakeholders.

The reason for top management significance as an enabler (or barrier) for sustainability transformation is the inimitable power they hold. Top management can realign strategy, set policies & regulations, assign resources, and give their support to topics (such as sustainability) through examples and communication (Liu et al., 2019). Thus, top management gives direction and influences human behavior that aims to foster their desired organizational culture. Bansal & Roth (2000) find that individuals with considerable power often initiated the corporate-wide adoption of sustainability. Leadership that motivates change towards sustainable performance fosters an organic shift within the culture. Organizational culture has been mentioned earlier as one of the main enablers for SP, digitalized procurement and compliance with regulations. Etse et al. (2022b) find compliance to policies and regulations to differ within organizations due to different reasons. They however confirm that organizational leadership has a positive impact on regulations enabling SP (Etse et al., 2022b). It can be argued that the role of top management ought to be studied more. This study considers the heads of a local company or organization as top management. Within the case company they hold power to make decisions concerning the respective business unit, support function or local company,

while ensuring full alignment with corporate strategy and governance. Simultaneously, they must consider the external triggers for sustainability. A potential external prompt for the decision could be political governance, business enablers (e.g., banks), customers – or suppliers.

Sustainability leaders can be described as “people who are compelled to make difference by deepening their awareness of themselves in relation to the world around them. In doing so, they adopt new ways of seeing, thinking and interacting that result in innovative, sustainable solutions” (Visser & Courtice, 2011, p. 3). Indeed, Lahtinen & Yrjölä (2019) found that the natural tendencies related to a manager’s personality guided management’s way of driving CS. Top management with formal sustainability assignment consider it important for everyone in the organization to have an opinion, to accept failure, and to innovate for a successful transformation (Lahtinen & Yrjölä, 2019; Quinn & Dalton, 2009). Islam et al. (2017) describe the positive attitude of top management to be an enabler for SP. They explain positive attitude as dedication, strong affective commitment and the acknowledgement that sustainability is key for business success. This finding reinforces the earlier discussed role of mindset playing a central role in sustainability transformation: individuals’ sustainability perceptions must be influenced to successfully complete the transformation.

2.3 Theoretical framework

“The challenges of identifying sustainable suppliers are still under-explored” (Salam & Ali, 2020, p. 316).

This study does not intend to micromanage a solution to sustainable supplier selection. Visser & Crane (2010, p. 4) underline the importance of “doing research [related to sustainability] that is useful to practice” because sustainability has grown into an industry and impacts all organizations. This study pursues to comprehend how individuals in the

organization can drive the incorporation of sustainability into existing processes, practices, and support innovation. Top management can be considered also as change agents described in Figure 4. Their role is separated from other change agents due to the considerably higher power that they officially hold. Organizational behavior is suggested to be combined with SSCM & SP streams to understand how individuals can impact sustainability transformation (Panigrahi, 2018; Buhr et al., 2023). The research fields of sustainable procurement, corporate sustainability and change agency are combined in this study. The theoretical framework of the thesis examines the concept of sustainable procurement and the trigger and barrier themes (Table 3) impacting the process of sustainable supplier selection. Based on the motivations of chapter 2.1.2, technology is added as a barrier since the lack of modern technologies can hinder sustainable procurement.

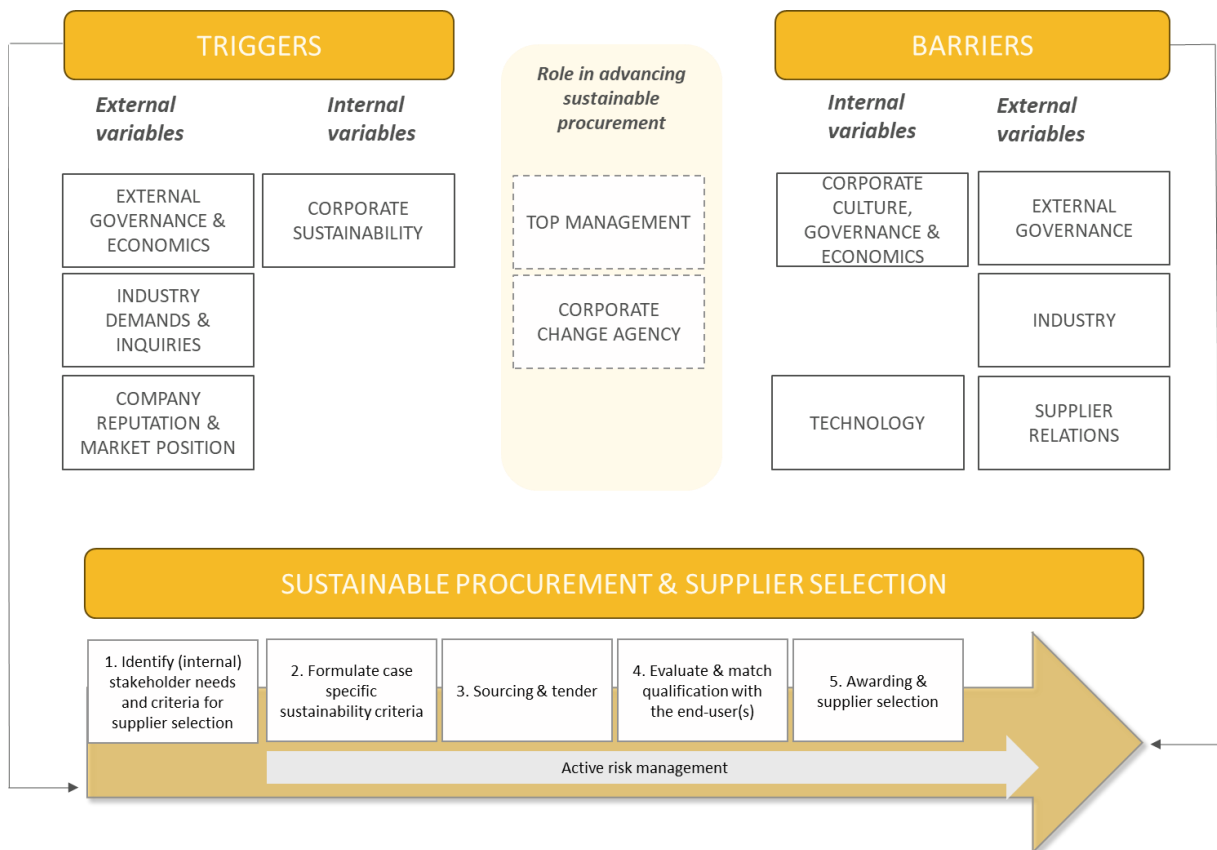


Figure 6. Theoretical framework of the thesis

3 Methodology

This chapter discusses methodology in subchapter 3.1 and the case company in subchapter 3.2. These aim to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the fit between the chosen research methodology and the case company, resulting in the validity of the earlier presented research question. Data collection and methods are described in subchapter 3.3 and a qualitative content analysis is provided in subchapter 3.4. Validity and reliability are discussed in chapter 3.5.

3.1 Qualitative case study

This study attempts to answer managerial challenges in scaling sustainability transformation within procurement by using qualitative data as its primary data source. Consequently, a case study is well-suited (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gibbert et al., 2008; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Because the target is to understand how certain social actors' behavior influences a specific event, this study takes an inductive research approach. Inductive research does not set hypotheses as those cannot fully consider the variables caused by individual's interpretation of their social environment (Saunders et al., 2019). According to Eisenhardt et al. (2016) a qualitative, inductive methodology facilitates the study of a complex subject and new idea generation. Singular case study is employed due to two reasons: the researcher's access to the data through employment and time constraints.

The assumptions and delimitations of this study concern the purchasing categories, parts of the organization, as well as researcher's bias. Whilst the criticality of sustainability dimensions varies significantly across purchasing categories, the role of top management and change agency is expected to influence all supplier selections. Assessing the differences on all purchasing categories would exceed the intended scope of a Master's thesis. Therefore, this study focuses on creating a high-level understanding of the opportunities from empirical research. To facilitate a manageable study size, the

research is narrowed to indirect procurement only. The findings are expected to be generalizable also to direct procurement.

It is acknowledged that the researcher's official role within the organization and professional relationship with the interviewees may hinder objectivity. Consequently, interpretivism is applied as the guiding research philosophy. Interpretivism facilitates the professional role of the researcher in relation to the interviewees. According to Gehman et al. (2018) interpretivism allows subjectivity from the researcher to view the data through their own understanding of the data context.

3.2 Case company

The case company is a listed MNC operating in the fields of energy & technology with its headquarters in the Nordics. Due to confidentiality reasons neither the case company nor interviewees' names are disclosed. The company has adopted sustainability in its strategy, reporting, products, culture and operations for several years. Sustainable innovation is actively encouraged within internal communication and case company actively fosters an innovative culture for its stakeholders. Dedicated resources for advancing sustainability have been allocated. Still, the studied procurement function has recognized an implementation gap for SP. Many MNC face an implementation gap despite attempts of top-down CS initiatives and adopting sustainability dimensions to company strategic goals (Schaltegger et al., 2024). The procurement function is split in two, direct and indirect procurement. The indirect procurement is a centralized function and is spread across Asia, Africa, North America, South America, and Europe. Supplier selections are often made locally. Therefore, understanding how local top management can aid SP transformation is found interesting. As well, the earlier discussed challenge of how sustainability is perceived in different countries depending on political, economic & societal factors, prevails.

The studied procurement organization has identified improvement opportunities in their processes and practices to improve the adoption of sustainability. Procurement function

has aligned their strategy and goals according to company strategy and targets, which are heavily impacted by sustainability. The company has a code of conduct and an online questionnaire for suppliers to evaluate their environmental & social sustainability. The need for change towards SP has been communicated formally within the procurement organization by management. Official sustainability professionals in the studied procurement organization were appointed at the time of this study.

3.3 Data collection

Following the recommendations of Gioia et al. (2013) for good quality research, the research questions and case are well defined, and multiple data sources were utilized. Interviews with internal employees are the primary data sources. Per the suggestion of Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), interviewees from different organization levels, geographies, and functional areas were selected to limit bias. The interviewees were also different in ages, backgrounds and gender. The interviewees were selected by theoretical sampling. In theoretical sampling the interviewees are confirmed to be able to give insights into the examined process prior to interviews (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). Their official roles did not have to include sustainability, but they were required to have been advancing sustainability within the company. The division of interviewees is presented in Appendix 4.

As described by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), a semi-structured interview model with open questions allows flexibility with the discussed themes. Two different interview models were prepared to facilitate a different approach for interviewing change agency representatives and top management representatives (Appendices 1 & 2). The interviews were conducted in English and Finnish and took place in September – October 2024. The interviews took place through a Teams call, except for one where the interviewee and interviewer were collocated. Permission for recording was requested from all interviewees.

The study employs also multiple secondary empirical data sources. The utilized empirical data sources are public company reports, business press articles, field observations & personal notes, internal discussion forums, internal and external communication with stakeholders, PowerPoint presentations, company guidelines and policies, procurement strategy, and internal reports.

3.4 Qualitative content analysis

Data analysis and structurization followed the Gioia methodology. In the data analysis, first-order categories were identified from reading the interviewees' transcribed answers. First-order terms and phrases were highlighted by interviewees' answers. The answers were matched to the interview themes, allowing the identification of new themes. Partially due to fast theoretical saturation, emergent second-order themes started to formulate soon. The themes were reflected against the theoretical framework to understand if they matched existing concepts or whether new concepts could be identified. These theoretical insights were finally combined into aggregate dimensions as per the methodology's data structure (Gioia et al., 2013). The data structurization is presented in Appendix 5.

Interview recordings were automatically transcribed. Transcriptions were manually corrected soon after the interviews to ensure all observations were analyzed in the correct context. Interview recordings, transcriptions and researcher's own notes were destroyed after thesis finalization. Following an inductive method and interpretivism, certain observations were confirmed with the interviewee during the interview. Other observations concerning the body language, facial expressions, tones and expressed feelings of the interviewees were written down during the interview.

Secondary data was employed in multiple ways. As Farquhar (2012) proposes, secondary empirical data sources were used to gain a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon in the company context. Certain secondary data elements were also utilized in guiding

the conversation during the interviews, as well as when analyzing the primary data contents.

3.5 Assessment of the quality of the data

The quality & strength of a case study is argued with construct, internal & external validity and reliability (Saunders et al., 2019). To increase the construct validity, that is, an objectively conducted data collection, a clear chain of evidence is provided for the reader to understand the process from presenting a research question to establishing findings. Additionally, multiple empirical data sources were applied, as presented in the previous chapter. This study aims to improve internal validity by constructing the theoretical framework variables from several recent studies. External validity, referring to the opportunity to generalize the study, is arguable. The practical implications of this study may not necessarily be directly transferable to other organizations. There are several context variables which are expected to influence external validity: case company, industry, external implications, interviewees' experiences and the considerably high pace of development of sustainability and digitalization. To increase external validity, this study adopts analytical generalizability (Gibbert et al., 2008). It attempts to develop theory on change agency and sustainable procurement through its empirical findings.

To increase the study's reliability and minimize participant errors, all interviewees received a description of the key interview themes (Appendix 3) and interview themes (Appendices 1 & 2) prior to the interviews. The applicable interview structure was followed through in each interview. These procedures aim to minimize error if the interviews to be replicated by another researcher with the same materials. To add reliability, the study clearly indicates a list of all sources and documents interview materials per suggestion of Gibbert et al. (2008). Participants were informed that the materials would be treated as confidential and their answers presented as anonymous. This was to encourage transparency and honesty in their answers. Flick (2018) argues the importance of privacy as part of study ethics. According to Flick (2018), another essential part is to

ensure that the data used is of high quality. The study applies subject specific, academic research that has been recently published. This aims to ensure that the academical framework and theories reflect the latest findings in the field. In the role of a practitioner-researcher, awareness of the potential impact of familiarity and status to the study is critical. Unconscious and conscious bias to interpreting the answers, the researcher error, was minimized. This was done by orally summarizing the interviewee's answers on a regular basis during the conversation by the researcher to ensure an accurate understanding and interpretation.

4 Findings

4.1 Sustainable procurement and supplier selection

All interviewees, regardless of their area of operations and responsibility, acknowledged the importance of SP. The role of IP in advancing corporate sustainability was unanimously appreciated by all participants.

"Naturally, absolutely indirect procurement has a role." Interviewee 5

"We can guide the supplier. So I would say our role is to check and when I say our role, I mean strategic purchaser, category managers, they have to be aware of what could be a possible problem." Interviewee 11

Simultaneously the indirect procurement status quo was brought up. Whilst SP is understood to be of essential importance in advancing corporate sustainability, a knowing-doing gap was confirmed to exist. Business representatives expressed underlying expectations and readiness to act to advance the situation.

"IP is today acting as a pure support function. Without having the full understanding of the reasons behind our request. Maybe it's a lack of communication from both sides." Interviewee 2

The role of Indirect Procurement in supplier selection

In general, IP tends to have a broad category portfolio of products and services that they are responsible for. To add complexity, the company operates in markets where sudden requests can be anticipated from company clients. The company clients' needs become internal stakeholder needs, impacting the demands towards IP. Understanding the markets and company clients' needs can mitigate risks and help IP to examine internal stakeholders' needs in a wider context. In other words, intra-organizational cooperation with stakeholders working at the customer interface is important for IP. One interviewee considered IP even as a part of the sales function. All participants understood SP to add

value throughout the value chain: from suppliers to company clients. Whilst added value of SP would not be sold to the clients, the sales functions would benefit from understanding the indirect and direct impact for the value chain. Expectedly this would aid changing the way IP is viewed. Involving IP from the early start supports risk management and ensures sufficient resourcing to the procurement case. It became clear from the interviews that this should be the company norm. The category portfolio of IP is extensive in comparison to direct procurement. Consequently, a non-IP professional could not be expected to apply suitable and realistic sustainability criteria to the case. Instead, the IP professional could be expected to do this given that they had sufficient time to prepare the criteria. It also gives IP the time needed to prepare for sourcing – or to re-evaluate the purchasing need, as suggested by interviewee 8.

"Most of the cases it's not because they don't want, it's because the customer also is not understanding the need of engaging us earlier and sometimes the customer does not have that information. - We need to agree with our salesperson how to convey the message. At the end of the day there are savings to our customers because there are savings to us that we can split with our customers. If they plan properly, it's huge savings." Interviewee 10

"Really works really well for sustainability, is asking, is questioning the need. Is this really needed? That's the very first question. It is the very same logic as for rubbish. The very best rubbish is the one that does not exist." Interviewee 8

Often the internal stakeholder would, however, decide on the supplier without IP's involvement. From a process perspective the internal stakeholder bypasses the steps of identifying needs, criteria, sourcing, and evaluation of potential suppliers. This acts as a barrier for sustainable procurement as it creates a gap for thorough supplier assessment. It also has consequences for resourcing, such as increased data management, rework, supplier management and decreased buyer bargaining power. There are practical differences between strategic sourcing and purchasing process. Strategic sourcing may be more complex, due to which the internal stakeholder recognizes the need for a professional purchaser. Yet, SP is applicable for all purchasing.

"If we do a bigger request for proposal, we always have set goals where it is and there we can in a way influence and we can put in sustainability as one of the goals. If it's then that some person has done against our policies and directly communicated with the supplier, and then comes and hey, I need this supplier to be added into the supplier base, then we can't influence that much." Interviewee 7

"I would say that the power there is a little bit still not [as] strong as it should be, and that is because we do have our end-users and colleagues that are picking out supplier - and by that, I mean they just look at, OK I want this." Interviewee 9

One interviewee described that they sometimes experienced IP focusing on price in supplier selections. When being asked to set their usual supplier selection criteria in an order of importance, none of the non-procurement interviewees considered price to be the leading criterion. Interestingly, one procurement professional shared that in their experience internal stakeholders' main interest was in high quality service with a low price and a great contract. Although these perceptions cannot be generalized, it underlines misalignment. The extensive long-term value that IP brings in supplier selections should be made more visible to internal stakeholders.

Applying sustainability criteria in supplier selection

Similarly to with its customers, IP is expected to have a strong supplier network. The current relationship with many suppliers was described as transactional. This expectedly creates challenges in identifying and building realistic sustainability criteria. Although for many it may be possible to set default criteria, fostering true value creation and advancing sustainability beyond tier 1 suppliers requires open communication and commitment from both parties.

"You buy, you deliver, you go, bye bye. - There is a partnership that should be built."
9

"You know those fast-track activities that need to happen. If you don't have that connection, good luck to get something from somebody that you have never talked to." Interviewee 3

Another issue that was raised by many interviewees was the substantial number of suppliers in IP. In practice this hinders the possibility to ensure sufficient supplier relationship management. The relationship acts as the baseline for building and communicating about SP. One concrete solution brought up in some interviews was narrowing down the supplier pool. This cannot be fully achieved without internal cooperation. IP can only reduce and limit new suppliers to a certain extent if simultaneously, internal stakeholders were to select suppliers on their own. Having internal stakeholders aware of and committed to the goal ensures long-term success. Commitment can be advanced by both top management and change agents influencing the corporate culture. As brought up by interviewee 5, achieving the desired level of SP is not given but requires sufficient resourcing in terms of time and knowledge from procurement professionals. A limited supplier pool also has an impact on environmental sustainability that today is less discussed about: the server carbon footprint.

"For example, services are a very complex type of supply to measure sustainability wise because you also have this idea in services that you may subcontract when you're in touch with a main supplier. The subcontracting himself might even subcontract to another party, so having the full real traceability, sustainability traceability on all these counterparts is really huge work." Interviewee 8

"So instead of having too many suppliers to handle every year, right now we can lower this number. So that means less hours to work on, less servers, because we need less data to be available and archived. And then no one will send emails from their own mailbox. Everyone can do the whole process within the platform, so we limit the number of well servers. All the data or archive the data, so I think these aspects make it more sustainable then if we guide them properly." Interviewee 11

"Companies who have managed to fundamentally reduce the [amount of] suppliers and these so-called key suppliers, they are better qualified. - Do we have competence slash opportunity to make hard decisions. You don't always have. Sometimes there are not many options and then you have to navigate. Sometimes of course there may be more options, but that is always extra work." Interviewee 5

Another concrete solution suggestion brought up was applying a minimum set of sustainability criteria. The interviewees underlined the importance of starting small, accepting that there would be gaps. Consistency was of greater importance. This would signal

commitment internally and externally. Simultaneously, it offers procurement professionals to iteratively build knowledge and understanding of the available options. Since sustainability is an emerging theme with a certain sense of urgency to it, an approach with moderate incremental changes requires courage and trust in the process.

"[Referencing to another company] We made sure that in every category strategy or subcategory strategy they had to at least consider whether sustainability is an issue or not. Whether it's a business requirement, whether it's an opportunity. Whether it's a threat, whether it's a risk. Whether it's something that we should consider because of brand." Interviewee 4

"And there should not be too many either. Preferably more later to make the template work. Sometimes there's a tendency to make a very broad and comprehensive because everyone else is doing so. And if it because of that then is left half-way, well then there is not much added value. So preferably make less criteria and make them properly. And then once the organization and supplier has learnt that these kind of criterion then you add them. - Balancing may be of course difficult because you are forced to prioritize. So what are the types that can be started with and is there courage to leave something out that feels important. Within the field of sustainability, it's always so that everything feels important when being asked about it separately." Interviewee 5

De-selecting suppliers

One of the interviewees raised the question of de-selecting suppliers based on their lack of compliance or underperformance in relation to sustainability. Subsequently, this topic was raised as a discussion point with the other interviewees. For the majority the answer was clear: yes.

"Absolutely. - I totally believe that you can do both. That you can act very sustainably and make it into a competitive advantage and thrive. But it requires some flexibility and innovative thinking. - We must de-select suppliers because of their behavior and I think we will start seeing that very soon in the in the near future". Interviewee 4

It should be noted that delimiting the supplier pool will only provide a short-term solution. The primary focus ought to be on applying sustainability related criteria during the selection process. This requires reviewing the process, ways of working, tools and

change management – both within IP and with internal stakeholders. A thorough, long-lasting change was considered to require a shift in mindsets. Involving sustainability aspects in negotiations and supplier management requires the ability and knowledge to challenge the current state. A couple interviewees were more cautious about de-selecting suppliers, one expressing hesitation. They considered that a collaborative, even educational approach would be better. As an MNC, the case company could be expected to support their suppliers in embedding sustainability in their operations. Then, after establishing a shared understanding of the standards and requirements it would be natural to discuss whether the supplier is willing to further develop to meet the demands.

"We shall go for the local suppliers rather than suppliers coming from other countries, but then? I believe we are not challenging ourselves too much." Interviewee 2

"Strategic of course we can replace, but they are our partners. Critical. They are difficult to find, you know. - It takes a lot of investment time to develop a supplier to be sustainable, you know, so we should not let go or leave their hands like that." Interviewee 10

4.2 Triggers & barriers for sustainable procurement

This subchapter discusses themes that were recognized as new or with considerable changes to the initial theoretical framework of triggers and barriers.

4.2.1 External governance, macroeconomics & politics

Sustainability has evolved from voluntary actions to regulatory practices. The demands currently tend to focus on the focal company over individual suppliers. There is an increasing number of policies, laws and agreements influencing organizations, regardless of the industry. The case company has been voluntarily reporting various sustainability related performance and initiatives for several years. Still, the lack of internationally aligned regulations and the imbalance of regional maturity for sustainable supply chain

create a challenge for MNC as those tend to have international supply chains. Considerable effort is required to ensure compliance with each applicable regulation and stay up to date all while confirming the demands are understood and evaluated in daily decision-making by operations. Macroeconomics, political instability & political conflicts increase the complexity, hindering corporate and SSCM agility. Geopolitical tensions and macroeconomics were mentioned to impact the possibility or pace to transform towards SP by four interviewees.

“There are countries where we have to work in a completely different way because of obvious reasons. I mean, civil war, security. So, we cannot even think about implementing IP processes and we cannot even think about sustainability when we talk about those countries. I have not seen any IP strategy that could consider all these different macroeconomic situations.” Interviewee 2

4.2.2 Industry demands & inquiries

Customer demands were brought up several interviewees when discussing triggers for SP, or how sustainability shows in the case company. The company clients are a clear priority and there is genuine determination to ensure that clients receive high-quality products and services.

“I think that our values drive that. I could say that we are only now being driven to that because our customers are appreciating that and creates additional value. These differentiators from our competitors. So I think that the focus on our customers is one of the most important aspect to support us implementing or looking for sustainability actions. I think that this is the main driver for the upper management, to regional management as well.” Interviewee 10

When discussing further the factors that facilitate innovation, industry demands and inquiries as well as business cluster innovation were brought up. One interviewee brought up the professional and personal relationships that should be utilized in a positive manner when seeking innovation opportunities. The opportunity to influence, but also to be *influenced* should be embraced. Various networking events were also mentioned. A common thread was what could be compared to theatre improvisation where the key is to accept what the other actor says, with a willingness to further develop from there.

"We don't have to invent everything ourselves. We can do a clever thing that let's say [another company] has done and they would probably be just happy that we are also doing it because it's not really a direct competitive thing. So I think that's, you know, I would approach this very much from a positive angle and an opportunity rather than a negative angle." Interviewee 4

Despite the motivation and excitement expressed by all interviewees, shared value creation was not found to exist within the IP relationship with their suppliers. Interviewees concurred in their reflections that there is room and opportunity to increase actions that focus on shared value creation. The case company market position and reputation were expected to create a positive starting point for the discussions and work with suppliers.

"It's a lot of talk about it, but I have not seen it in practice in the - corporations I've worked in the last 10 years." Interviewee 7

"It's also bringing challenge for those who would really love to work with us because we're one of the leaders of the market and business wide. Why it would make sense for them to work with us. So according to the money value that we represent for them, the simple fact of wanting to work with us may pressure them to improve societal aspects of their policies, company and goals." Interviewee 8

"Their reputation will also be increasing because of working with [the case company]." Interviewee 9

4.2.3 Company reputation and market position

Company reputation was discussed also in other contexts. Two interviewees mentioned high profile cases of other large-scale companies in the countries they were located in. These companies were in the headlines due to child labor and environmental crimes connected to their operations or supply chain. The interviewees considered that these cases had had an impact on companies in various industries. Violations by other companies create a sense of urgency to examine their own value chain. More companies from the same countries have taken a serious approach towards sustainable procurement guidelines and practice, faster.

Company reputation was also mentioned in terms of employer branding and how the company utilizes social media. Local news was considered to advance the company sustainability reputation, attracting local talents. Reputation and sustainability were factors that also current employees recognized to be important for them.

"A company that takes care of environment is also a company that people want to work with, you know, in terms of resources. Last month I have an open position - and I read not once or twice, but more than three times, people willing to work with [case company] because our footprint on sustainability." Interviewee 10

"I work with pleasure on this agenda. I understand that we have a great purpose and a good opportunity to help these sectors that are societally very significant." Interviewee 5

Supporting the growth of social capital by hiring local talents and retaining knowledge within the country or region was valuable. Promoting the local economy and assisting the businesses' growth was mentioned to be key. This was seen to support the region's competitiveness. Interviewees considered that the company recognizes and uses its ability to positively influence employees and surrounding societies about sustainability. In practice, this would be spreading awareness of sustainable practices, building the value chain, and creating job openings within the region to avoid people from settling abroad after their studies. The company has a history of cooperating with local universities, showcasing what is involved in different roles and encouraging innovation. The local companies can invite students of different ages to visit, work, or study on a project with the company. The cooperation offers the students an opportunity to evaluate if they would be interested in working with the company and industry.

"I do believe that many countries are limited because they are sending their brains abroad and in the case of Africa, it's a very significant problem. Because it's shown that only 15% of the brains come back to their origin countries. Meaning that the development is happening somewhere else and not in Africa." Interviewee 11

"Of course we want to promote the localization of the resources - so in that respect, it's a long term plan. It's taking a long time to be implemented. It requires efforts and investments, but on the long term it should be - it will be more sustainable. - We might invest a lot in certain things, but on the long run the cost of the company is definitely smaller 'cause when you have an expats, and this is valid for all the businesses, of course, the cost associated with someone coming from abroad is much higher." Interviewee 2

The case company also supports employee activism. Although financial constraints might exist, these could be bypassed for example by using professional skills for voluntary work. The company has supported various activities visibly: at place and on social media platforms. By communicating about the activities internally, case company further encourages innovativeness. There is a strong belief that these activities support a steady work towards changing the society in which the company operates to a more sustainable society.

"We just go and spend two hours diving in and pick up whatever we found in the bottom of the channel. The local authorities, they all welcome these activities. They're actually happy that we do that now. Does it give us, you know, does it give us anything? We actually not doing anything for the authorities. We don't send them anything there, so it's really more like an environmental initiative that actually our own team have actually generated. And we just supported them." Interviewee 3

"It was more coming from ideas of specific employees and then something was done in the last few years. Things slightly changed. We are trying to have a committee for the CSR activities. So, we want to try to contribute to the local company, to the local society in a stronger way." Interviewee 2

4.2.4 Country

The question about the role of a country in advancing sustainable supplier selection sparked a lot of thoughts. Laws and policies, governmental incentives, safety, economics, societal norms and normative behavior, infrastructure, politics and political instability, history, and culture were listed to impact SP and SSS. Within the company, the supplier base and supply chain network within that country and indirect spend volumes for the country were considered to affect the opportunity for sustainable supplier selection. The

underlying expectations and the country's reputation were also considered to impact the relations and communication with suppliers. Some interviewees believe that the way Nordic countries are seen on a global level positively influences the sustainability work by the case company. Forests, clear water, strong work-life balance and equal rights are generally characteristics connected to the Nordics. Driving sustainable development would thus be expected from Nordic companies to a certain extent.

The country was expected to impact the sustainability of local companies more than supplying MNC could. While interviewees acknowledged the power of the case company to its supply chain, the country was considered to hold more coercive forces to influence sustainable procurement. Today, focal companies are struggling with the bureaucracy and administrative work that is required by them to measure and monitor supply chain sustainability. Regional and government regulations were considered as a potential aid to both control and advance supply chain sustainability. This would release resources from the focal company to attend to innovative, value creative work. All top management interviewees saw it necessary for employees to have the required time and flexibility to engage in innovative work. This was seen to advance true sustainability.

“In the whole supply chain, the current value chain thinking is a bit challenging. Because it starts from the focal organization being responsible for everyone else. Then we are focusing plenty of resources to that kind of systematic control, bureaucratic work and that is not necessarily the way to achieve best results. In my opinion the demands should be targeted to the suppliers and that they are accountable for what they do. Here the countries must monitor the suppliers.” Interviewee 5

Although some interviewees referred to regions, such as Asia and Africa, in their replies, everyone was in accordance that countries should be examined individually in the context of sustainability. The shared norms, governance, infrastructure and historical development largely affect a country's sustainable development. If the underlying norms are not acknowledged, it can lead to miscommunication. The ability to trust that all parties follow discussed agreements is at the core of SP. Normative behavior can be only grasped

by understanding the culture well. This gives a better platform for discussion between the parties.

“We need to always look at the structure of the countries and their development towards the sustainable societies which it comes to workloads, to entertainment, to food supply, to water supply, to traffic jams, you name it. - We're trying to continuously showcase success stories in Europe or in America. Where that development is taking. It is almost 4-5 years ahead of the Asian market.” Interviewee 3

“In the Nordics we have a higher degree of trust, and we are all kind of also maybe naive that we think OK that company in that country they are compliant otherwise they would be out of business kind of because that's the culture, that's the environment they're working [in]. I think sitting in the Nordics and working with Nordic companies, I'm probably very spoiled.” Interviewee 1

“So it's almost like when we ask, OK, so we speak about what should be done, but how do we actually check that it is done? In some of these like I would imagine in South America. So even the Middle East and then largely Africa. Some people could be, you know, cutting corners.” Interviewee 9

Expectations management is also important. On a global level the industry standards for sustainable development may be high, demanding state-of-the-art innovations. A country might not have the capabilities to leverage on those innovations to advance sustainability. The main goal instead could be to build reliable systems for water and electricity. Some interviewees pondered on individuals' readiness to make changes in their lifestyle habits. The change agents believed to hold power to positively influence their social circles. Educational approaches have been adopted by many. At extreme, sustainability might not be believed to be true. Consequently, it would be tough for the focal company to advance SP in this environment.

“Well, they're not there. They need power first. They don't need to understand how they're going to make the mix. They need to figure out what is my most economical and reliable solution that I can have?” Interviewee 3

“They don't know why, they don't understand why. So they do not accept it and change.” Interviewee 8

"I know there are some countries that say climate change and sustainability is a hoax. So they say that that is just something for the for the UN and the world. [For] all these national companies to rip off people." Interviewee 9

On the other hand, the country was also considered to guide the supplier selections over the focal company demands in case of for instance governmental demands. South Africa is a good example of advanced policies with for example Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment. Africa has diverse approaches and a large scale of various readiness and approach for sustainable procurement amongst its countries. Some interviewees considered that the case company has an opportunity to enable transformation towards sustainable decision making. By being present in the country, creating a stable footprint and having sustainable solutions available they create the practical opportunity for the government and private sector to start advancing sustainability. The case company was seen to already indirectly influence society through its supply chain.

"So if I take Saudi, Qatar, UAE. Unfortunately for them, it's not too much yet looking at us doing it greener. The reason they would go for us is again more about us being present in the countries. So this is like a local content. They will recognize the brand by knowing that that organization is embedded into their structure in their countries. That's their first buy-in." Interviewee 3

"We want to drive business to smaller suppliers or to local suppliers. But on the other hand, they might not be able to sustain that in the long run. So it's very important to be aware of that when we select vendors to either make a plan that you can sustain for your [sustainability] requirements." Interviewee 10

Perhaps surprisingly, language was not in general considered to be a barrier. The interviewees who considered it as a barrier both referred to South America. Whilst there certainly are also other countries, the interesting point is that unknowingly of each other, they referred to the language barrier to concern the whole region.

"One of the biggest barriers that we have to replicate that worldwide is the language. - Quite often if you find something that is missing [you] find [that] it is something that was not complete because of lack of understanding." Interviewee 10

"We see that for example South America, Africa if for the majority of French speaking country, it can be very challenging -. So I speak with experience to said anything only in English language that that will be just a no go. And the same goes sometimes for Asia." Interviewee 11

Two interviewees considered that a country should not have a role in supplier selections. The answer by interviewee 4 underlined the importance of learning about the culture and country one is dealing with. This would aid in mitigating unconscious bias that impacts attitudes, communication – and eventually trust, that is required for shared value creation and innovation.

"People shouldn't have any kind of bias or prejudice based on the, on the country or the background of themselves or the supplier. But in reality, there's a lot of, there's a lot of prejudices. - Many of the leading-edge IT companies from India, for example, are very forward thinking in terms of sustainability because they see that as a way of showing that they are responsible and they are different from, you know maybe the country image or the country brand." Interviewee 4

4.2.5 Natural environment

Summarizing the interdependencies of what influences us and the complexity of trying to pinpoint one major trigger for sustainability, natural environment was referred to as a trigger. This points to the multilevel complexity of sustainability. Perhaps surprisingly, global warming and climate change were only mentioned once each. Interestingly, the phenomena were not expressed in a negative context: the tone used was rather accepting. These were not considered to reduce determination, as the interviewees expressed trust for the future.

"It is just what's happening around us that triggers this." Interviewee 9

"I mean it took very long to create the earth. It took very long for us to develop into the society we are now. So I don't think I will ever master sustainability. I would probably get a better grip about it, but it's so many things to think about." Interviewee 11

4.2.6 Corporate sustainability

When raising the topic of corporate sustainability, the main trigger that the interviewees listed concerned the company strategy. The strategy was described to be simple and clear: everyone could understand what it meant in practice. This was considered to set good frames for everyday operations and decision-making. As described by interviewee 7, strategy could also be seen as a barrier. It did provide guidance but did not suffice alone as a trigger for SP.

"Is a fantastic platform for any kind of discussion, culture building. Think it's so simplified that anyone can relate to it but still it's very clear and it gives a clear guidance. It's not a fluffy thing." Interviewee 1

"I think we are standing on a platform which is fairly good, but we are not taking the step due to different reasons." Interviewee 7

Many of the interviewees emphasized actions related to environmental sustainability as it is referred to in the strategy. Some interviewees considered that the focus on environmental performance was acting as a barrier to advancing holistic sustainability. For example, social sustainability could be understood easier in the context of SP, if there was practical guidance to examples. The strategic targets and sustainability practices related to downstream needs by many of the interviewees. While there exists a drive to advance SP through change agency, corporate sustainability and culture could help as triggers. Corporate sustainability would govern, and culture facilitate the required changes, such as innovation. Interestingly, one interviewee considered the environmental sustainability to be lower and social instead better.

"I think we're good. We are good. But we are because if you look at all aspects of sustainability, I think it's a fantastically inclusive company. You have potential to grow and this is not a given in many other companies. So the social part is really great and that I have a strong sense for. But when we think environmental sustainability, I think we are not there yet on the level." Interviewee 11

The question about what type of culture facilitates innovation for sustainability split the interviewees into two groups. Some raised examples from the case company, while

others considered it difficult to find examples from the case company from the top of their minds. However, change agency could be spotted in all answers as concrete examples were provided to explain what is required.

"It's speculative to think what might impact at the end, but of course a deep understanding of the sustainability theme. Also, as I said, culture is an important word and it is not an unambiguous word. It requires systematic, long-term work - when we achieve the understanding, we also have the ability to think what to do. - We talk the language; we have measures to advance and we show the measures. This of course creates the culture which is at the core of our strategy." Interviewee 5

"Sharing ideas and not being afraid to raise their voice and challenge the status quo." Interviewee 1

"If we have so many changes, it's because we innovate and we tend towards very ambitious and challenging goals." Interviewee 8

If case company was not considered to facilitate innovation for sustainability, interviewees would provide arguments to what was missing. For IP, the main challenges were the lack of knowledge about SP and lack of understanding on expectations. Interviewees concluded that general training about sustainability and SP specific training would help the development. Not having clear demands, guidelines, metrics and thus not being able to follow-up performance were also listed. The latter was mentioned in relation to both internal performance as well as supplier performance. Whilst sustainability is mentioned in e.g., policies, it must be underlined, clarified or implemented in other ways to practice. All interviewees were asked whether they had ever participated in a training about sustainable procurement: case company code of conduct was mentioned by three interviewees. In fact, there are six internal training courses available on the topic of sustainability on the company training platform. Whilst five of them are mandatory for all employees, none of the interviewees mentioned them other than the code of conduct. This signals a need for internal promotion about the learning opportunities already available on company training platforms.

“Maybe sort of kind of intellectual flexibility in terms of not being stuck in their ways and considering new things as an opportunity rather than a threat and something that must be done. - I think now there's a growing recognition that you can actually do fairly innovative things that can benefit not only the company and the brand but also the supply chain partnerships that the companies have. I guess certain kind of forward thinking and flexibility in the human strategy is something worth mentioning.” Interviewee 4

“I really think we have a problem here. Sustainability is not understood as human welfare. It's really understood as decarbonization or, you know, pollution in general. And this is the big focus we have internationally. - So that's why I think it has to be an overall training so people understand that when they talk about sustainability, it's not only CO2, it's always true. It's as well the people who are working here the way they are handled. If they have psychological safety at their end. So it's a lot of things that makes our companies as sustainable. So these has to be done on, on top level.” Interviewee 11

“You cannot delegate sustainability responsibility, can you? We should act sustainable, everybody, but then that comes to again back to roles and responsibilities. I think there is where we it would be fantastic to have some sort of very light introduction to what is sustainability and who can impact it and how. Because at the end of the day, I think everybody can impact it.” Interviewee 1

There also seemed to be little visibility to the actions and sustainability related innovations by the case company. Actions are driven by many separate groups. Although there is regular communication about these, it does not seem to reach its audience: after all, all interviewees were interested in sustainability, seeking information and opportunities. The size of the company might also set limitations on efficient networking internally. Finding the right parties to advance or brainstorm specific topics would require efforts: identifying the right competences, function and setting time for discussion.

“We have these different sporadic events that are done right.” Interviewee 6

The organizational sustainability orientation (OSO) was described varyingly. Many interviewees felt that it was positive at the downstream of supply chain (for example by using words “mature”, “medium”, “strong”). The upstream OSO was described differently, proposing that a positive OSO had not triggered sustainable development at IP. A few reasons for this could be the tendency to focus on compliance, lack of tangible examples for

procurement, and training for SP. Advancing sustainability is a visible theme and internal stakeholders are aware of its importance. It seems that there is a gap in demanding this from products and services that they purchase for executing their own tasks.

"I can see improvement areas is definitely around communication of the importance of sustainability. And why? Everyone should carefully think about it when taking daily business decisions." Interviewee 2

"I think we already did very much to our customers. But then when we look inside, how do we work internally and how do we interact with our suppliers? I'd say that's quite a big difference." Interviewee 7

The current strategy and culture were not enough to trigger sustainable procurement. IP's role in advancing corporate sustainability was not always recognized, creating a barrier for IP to execute a process that would ensure SSS. In practice this shows by not initiating the procurement early enough to reserve time for the purchaser to evaluate suitable sustainability criteria. Where end-users would select the supplier, they would not necessarily consider a sustainability related criterion. A clear need was identified to review internal norms, provide more training and showcase the value of a professional of that category leading the procurement, thus supplier selection, process. Corporate sustainability can therefore be considered to impact the level of how IP is seen to be accountable for advancing sustainability. It can also be a trigger to increase resources. Directly through training and tools, or indirectly, by creating a demand for a centralized, professional and efficient indirect procurement organization that ensures sustainable procurement. Both top management and IP change agents were seen to be able to remove the barriers, with the support of culture, balanced OSO and strong corporate sustainability.

"I can't really vision that we would do a non-sustainable procurement. If it was all mayhem and everybody could do whatever they like. Then there is a risk that it might be a non-sustainable procurement." Interviewee 1

"It's the resistance to change. I think that will be the biggest obstacle in terms of how people change. People will ask questions about "we've always done things this

way", so they need to then understand. So what is new? Why are we doing it?" Interviewee 9

4.2.7 Technology

E-procurement is not exhaustively utilized to aid SSS by the case company. An e-procurement platform is globally available but especially e-sourcing & e-auctioning usage rates are low. Although definite root causes have not been identified, a few assumptions have been made. Whilst policies guide the process and tools to be used, the sourcing and auctioning tools are not mandatory. Hands-on support and training are available, and IP organization invests in continuous development of the processes and tools. Interviewees suggested that making the usage of the tools mandatory or following the use rate more frequently could increase the usage rate. Change management was lacking as the sole availability of training did not guide the change to changing the standard way of sourcing. Two interviewees considered that if for example e-sourcing wasn't used, the case exception ought to be justified. Still, the main theme in the interviews was user experience. Technology should be intuitive and easy to use. Many interviewees referred to global e-commerce MNCs as examples. For sustainability to be embedded to the tools, interviewees recommended an iterative approach with small changes. The existing tools were considered to have opportunities that had not been seized. For example, to set prerequisites for the suppliers to be allowed to participate in an auction. Digitalization was not seen as a barrier for SME suppliers to participate if they had internet access and suitable hardware available for connecting.

"In any case they do not need to pay or install anything. They can work from a laptop, from a tablet or even their phone. We had the case of a supplier participating live with their phone for an auction, so it works just fine." Interviewee 11

Two interviewees raised the concern that utilizing digitalization for procurement over traditional means of communication may feel distant. They highlighted the importance of human interaction for building rapport. This was seen to be of essence for negotiations. Another issue raised was the lack of transparency to carbon footprint. Interviewees explained in cases where end-users select an item from pre-set catalogues or directly

from a supplier's web shop, they should see the carbon footprint from manufacturing and delivering the item. In these cases, the supplier is already selected by IP – but the end-user would still be guided to include sustainability criteria in their decision-making, by the system. Finally, the server carbon footprint was raised as a concern. ICT technologies produce significant amounts of emissions, which often might be left aside from the discussions as people excitedly promote the opportunities of analytics and machine learning.

"Somebody just said "why did we spend over a month negotiating?" Yeah. Because we didn't. We tried to do it online and you don't negotiate online. You need to go face-to-face." Interviewee 3

"It's also using huge amounts of energy. The more you digitalize, how much the raw materials are unavailable? This would be a ratio that would be very interesting, because there's probably a balance to be found. We cannot go 200% digitalized, I think." Interviewee 8

4.2.8 Indirect procurement accountability

Creating visibility across the organization about IP's ability to influence and advance corporate sustainability is required. Internal stakeholders, who are customers of IP, must understand the risks they are taking by selecting suppliers by themselves. Simultaneously they are working against the strategy that emphasizes sustainable development. Top management has the power to improve the situation to some extent. Policies created specifically for IP, considering SP in IP context and allocating necessary resources are still needed. IP could also be mentioned in the annual corporate sustainability report that is available also for external read. This could offer external stakeholders an opportunity to benchmark or invite them to open a discussion about potential cooperation.

"This [not involving IP] is probably the worst of it. You have no control." Interviewee 3

"So what the business must do, is to be extremely clear around the needs. - The business should not be involved in the selection of the suppliers. - The relationship

with all the different suppliers is mainly in the hands of indirect procurement team. So they are the ones that deal with the guys with these companies." Interviewee 2

"In general whatever we do on a corporate level, it has to be clearly specified: who does it concern, who are involved, it has to be recognizable. It cannot be unclear. - It has to be clearly specified and delimited and we talk about the same control group annually when we tell how things have developed. If it drains from somewhere it becomes meaningless." Interviewee 5

"If you have a black and white kind of internal norm, then people will adjust to it because that's what the company are going to do and when they were recruited they were informed [about it]." Interviewee 8

A practical issue brought up by many of the interviewees was the lack of metrics and opportunities to monitor performance. In general, official performance targets (such as KPI) are an effective way to guide the focus and efforts on desired subjects. SP is not currently an official performance target within IP. One interviewee opposed to this view, arguing that mandatory and voluntary sustainability reporting would suffice to examine past performance. The interviewee also raised the concern that performance metrics guide professional purchasers' focus. SP transformation requires an innovative approach that can criticize current practices. This interviewee preferred guidelines, considering that those would give enough support without limiting creativity. The current policies and guidelines refer to sustainability, but on a general level: the necessity of practical examples and guidance was underlined by many interviewees. External policies and guidelines should help the procurement professionals with leading the sustainability discussion with suppliers. On a more practical level, category strategies could give guidance to how SP could be considered in the context of subcategories. This is key within IP, because the subcategories can vary within a category. Sustainability could also be embedded into existing targets, such as savings.

"And then I think you get what you are measured for. So if you want to have a big impact, then we put in everybody's bonus program that you need to cover sustainability, then you get change it because everybody is more keen to get it done." Interviewee 7

Another debatable trigger was a mandate for IP to increase the budget for spending. Sustainable products and services are still widely considered to be more expensive than non-sustainable ones. Although this is an assumption rather than a fact, it ought to be addressed when aiming to transform procurement operations. Identifying and challenging bias by addressing it first internally helps the procurement professionals to lead similar conversations with their internal stakeholders. In the interviews, a suggestion about a mandate for procurement to consider an increase in total monetary value of purchased items and services was raised. Some interviewees pondered whether this could be a mandate given by top management. The question of a mandate raised contradicting views.

"Well, I do think that one of the fundamental challenges of sustainable procurement is always the discussion of costs. I do not know if you can ever get away from it which is of course part of the problem." Interviewee 5

"You can say it internally as well. Only like hey, or if we want to promote it like, hey, we are now willing to spend 10% more as long as the supplier is green or more social and like thinking of minorities or buying more rather from this country, then that country because their legislation is more green." Interviewee 6

"It's [procurement] job definitely to promote the sustainability aspects and do our job thoroughly. But then it's also the business owner's job to then make those decisions. And sometimes you know, I'm totally sure that sometimes the best sustainability option is also the cheapest. You know, I don't, I don't like this thinking that it has to be more expensive if it's sustainable. Sustainability can also come in, for example, innovative ways of spending less or using less-natural resources. Then everybody wins." Interviewee 4

4.2.9 Indirect procurement resources

Many ideas for transforming towards SP were provided. These varied from improving communication with internal stakeholders especially at the client interface, moving away from savings focused sourcing and increasing the internal understanding of how IP can advance corporate sustainability. The main singular resource mentioned by interviewees was training for sustainability competence. Training in sustainability in the company

context and sustainable procurement were seen necessary. There exists consensus on eagerness to learn more, acceptance that there is more to be done and new innovations to be made. In practice, change agents within IP expressed the need to understand how sustainability shows in each IP (sub)category. The IP portfolio of products and services is very broad. As an example, similar sustainability criteria set could not be applied to sourcing IT hardware, flowers, or HR consulting.

“Far and foremost, everybody working in this area should get the training to understand sustainability. We get training [for] negotiation, we get trained in calculations on savings part and all that. But we don't get training in sustainability. - It's not that easy. Google is a fine tool, but it's not the best one.” Interviewee 7

Suppliers are one of the main resources for procurement. Many interviewees lifted the challenge of a large supplier pool. This creates problems as in practice it is difficult to ensure that all suppliers are actively engaged in sustainable development. Simply signing a documentation would not suffice as proof. IP employees would need to free up more time and prioritize the tasks of advancing sustainability with suppliers. On-site visits were also lifted as they provide the opportunity for relationship management and audits, where seen necessary. The interviewees expressed a need for help with starting the work. The interviewees considered it difficult to start working on innovations and shared value creation without first ensuring that suppliers are compliant, having the required competence and capabilities. It was recognized that all suppliers would not need to be engaged in a similar manner nor depth. Some suppliers would likely be more interested in sustainable innovation. The capacity would also likely differ. It was important to secure baseline. One interviewee felt that IP did not have enough time to evaluate the sourcing cases and find sustainable options, if the need was for a foreign country.

If interviewees described a problem, they also suggested solutions. One solution example was for category strategy to include practical guidance on how to utilize local sourcing from SME and minority owned businesses. Roles within procurement could also have different expectations on how to drive SP transformation. With the gap in adoption of digitalized procurement, know-how, guidelines and clear expectations SP was currently

seen somewhat as a challenge. Finally, meetings with suppliers were seen as key for building rapport. This was considered to advance shared value creation. Interestingly, only one interviewee noted that also non-governmental organizations and public sector are resources for advancing SP. It may signal that there is a need for re-defining who are external stakeholders in the context of shared sustainable value creation and sustainable development in procurement.

"By the end of this year [2024] we have everyone understanding their supply base because they need to know that to discuss with their stakeholders. And then we'll be able to implement better including sustainability. But the direct straightforward answer is no, we don't have that yet as we should. - Final comment is that to implement the sustainability we need to be with a good planning considering all the relevant stakeholders engagement." Interviewee 10

Certain underlying expectations became visible in the interviews, as middle management was expected to have a strong understanding of SP. Managers were expected to be familiar with sustainability-related terms and concepts. Sustainability terminology is known to be under constant development. In internal discussions various sustainability terms are used as synonyms, although those would have different meanings. This might create a situation where parties of the conversation are inadvertently discussing different things. Therefore, setting unified norms and descriptions for the procurement ecosystem is important: operations, management, internal stakeholders, and external stakeholders.

"You can't just expect people to be more sustainable by telling them to be more sustainable or being more sustainable in the supplier selection because they wouldn't know what to look for." Interviewee 4

"So if all the chain is with this understanding that we need to address sustainability every time we have a supplier online, then I think we will grow quickly together with our suppliers." Interviewee 11

4.2.10 Change agency

Three different types of corporate change agents were interviewed. These were a strategic change agent, mainstream operational change agent, and informal change agent as employee activist. The motivation for adopting sustainable practices was considered to exist already in the minds of people. This is because sustainability is a well-known, actively promoted topic within the company as well as externally. Making the change by consciously adopting sustainability in decision-making was described to be the challenging part. Many interviewees considered that by starting small and demonstrating examples, one could trigger the change in their colleagues. On the other hand, metrics and policies were seen to be necessary for initiating the change. One of the interviewees had made a conscious decision to avoid sustainability metrics. In their experience this might limit creativity, which was considered essential for advancing sustainability. They reasoned that this gave a signal to focus on flexible problem-solving over-seeking opportunities to meet targets. This was an interesting finding as it contradicts some of the current theoretical and empirical recommendations. All change agents, regardless of their official title, thought that applying a few criteria to supplier selection would suffice as a starting point for the change. The arguments used to support this were simplicity, easier change management, wider applicability, and the complexity of a wide product & service portfolio. One of the interviewees described the "grey" that must be considered when setting policies and training: those must be applicable to a variety of scenarios.

"Because they [procurement professionals] need to be convinced to convince someone. You know I cannot convince you if I'm not convinced myself." Interviewee 10

"We just need to find a way to do something with it to just tell people this is the starting point. If the starting point is that we will only measure CO2 emissions, OK, fine, so be it. Then we have a starting point." Interviewee 7

When asked about how the interviewees developed their own competencies for sustainable procurement & sustainable supplier selection, responses could be divided into two groups. While some listed activities, others first considered that this was not something they had done. After a short discussion, the latter group acknowledged that they in fact

actively seek learning opportunities. The difference seemed to be that while the first group considered participation in internal development projects, unofficial discussions, listening to or watching sustainability related media productions, and reading other companies sustainability reports as developing own competences, the latter group had a stricter approach. They only counted proactive self-studies, such as open university courses, as competence development. This may be partially explained by the context in which the interviews took place. The interviewees acted in their professional role, discussing topics related to the employing company and their area of expertise. Therefore, it is natural to expect that competence development for sustainable procurement is understood as official training and education. General curiosity was confirmed to be a common trait amongst the interviewees.

"The big thing with sustainability is that though we communicate heavily on it, you will not be able to find one proper definition because sustainability is very personal. So I think it's really this human adventure and this journey of meeting people with different expectation for sustainability and then you can learn from it. You can look into it." 11

The interviewees also had different take on how they influenced others. Some described their way of communication as educational, whilst some opposed this. Usually, the interviewees listened to queues in conversations to bring up sustainability as a topic naturally. This was found to be an effective way to engage the other parties in the conversation. One interviewee used "we" instead of "I" throughout the interview. When being asked about this, she explained that this was in the effort to create unity. The interviewees confirmed competencies already found by academia. Change agents were for instance careful not to underestimate the counterparty's knowledge and decision-making logic. This applied to both internal and external stakeholders. Another common competence was to accept opposite worldviews and creativity. The interviewees also confirmed some new capabilities and characteristics that they saw to be important for advancing SP and SSS (Table 5).

"Maybe I'm a little bit too careful doing it, but that's, you know, you never know. You might go to the stakeholder who is following this really closely, and then if you try to say something wrong then you mess up that relationship quite quickly. So this is all about relationship management." Interviewee 7

"Do not mind asking questions. Go deeper. Dig deeper, because sometimes they might be greener than you think. It's just that they're not aware of it because it's a common practice, so don't be too European or too focused on your own ways of working, ways of doing. Sustainability has many aspects, so be curious about the other and discover what they have." Interviewee 11

"Sustainability is much more integrated into our daily operation than what we are aware of." Interviewee 1

"I think they [opportunities for discussion] just occur with many people." Interviewee 6

Table 5. Capabilities of an internal change agent

Capability	Characteristics
Accepting change in knowing-learning roles	Empathy
Identify realistic opportunities	Resilience
Leadership	Positivity

On all occasions, the interviewees strived to express respect and sincere willingness to create a win-win situation. This was done in various ways, mostly depending on the change agent's personality but also the relationship they had with their counterparty (for example, supplier, manager, peer, friend). They paid attention to evaluating what would be the best way to communicate, being mindful of others' background, interests, and non-verbal communication. Sometimes the interviewees tried to communicate between the lines. Especially when more than two people take part in the conversation, the agent should be mindful of how they oppose "unsustainable" opinions.

"It's kind of a seed that has been planted. I don't know how long it will take to grow. It might take longer than if I had been more provocative. But then I would, I might have lost a friend as well. I think it's important to take in consideration how

much you know the person you're talking to with these topics and choosing the correct words so that you do not harm or judge the person. " Interviewee 8

Indirect procurement holds the power to change the frame of how procurement is viewed. Different to direct procurement, IP leads the sourcing and purchasing process with internal end-users having the ultimate decision-making power. In addition to embedding sustainability criteria into the SSS, IP can propose avoiding purchasing. Options could be leasing, borrowing, or renting. Circular economy and second-hand products could also be evaluated as options, when possible. A clear advantage of these solutions is financial saving. This change would eventually alter the traditional role, purpose, operating model, and goals of procurement. It would organically shift the current focus from purchasing to sourcing and consulting.

"Let's say you're having conversation with a person who absolutely need this brand-new tool. Then you ask: How long are you gonna use this tool? Is it a standard tool? Is it really needed to buy it? Could we rent it? Maybe. That would be the professional way to guide people towards a bit more sustainable stuff." Interviewee 8

4.2.11 Top management change agency

Although top management interviewees were referred to as a separate group from other change agents, all interviewees act as change agents. One of the interviewees referred to top management as "ambassadors" who "bring it home", referring to their unique position in comparison to other organizational roles. As leaders, top management has an inimitable platform for communication. They have influence on the sustainability definition and criteria that people consider in their daily decision-making. A common theme for top management communication was positivity. This was also how top management was expected to communicate and how they should engage the organization. Rather than demanding, their role is to encourage and support. As an example, the company has been promoting safety for several years. Safety has been underlined to be of everyone's responsibility. Employees are trained to identify risks and promote features increasing safety. Consequently, people feel empowered and equipped to do this. This is a

potentially transferable example to grow the OSO and SP, since the case company culture nurtures trust and innovativeness.

"That a project like that is something that we need to have upper management in involvement and granting, maybe demanding sponsoring. This is very important. All companies that I have worked with, the global companies that have not [had] support from upper management failed." Interviewee 10

"We are looking at the quality and the safety first for our people, that's something [case company] promotes, isn't it, safety. So you, every one of us had the authority to stop at work if it's not safe for the people. So I would say just given the definition that we have from top management." Interviewee 11

Top management interviewees strived to create a safe environment where trial and error were encouraged. Sustainability was seen as something that should be embedded to the core of operations and culture, as everyone should acknowledge sustainability to be their responsibility. Top management interviewees saw their role to be steering, helping with maintaining focus on the strategical targets in everyday decision-making. Challenging the current situation and practices was seen to be one concrete way of supporting development. Their responsibility was also to make sure there would be enough bandwidth and well-grounded reasoning on sustainability initiatives.

"Trusting people and giving them the ability to test out things and trying and failing". Interviewee 1

"I believe very much in, in the leaders role being empowering. - Give people the courage to try different things and also fail. Because especially in this kind of area there will be some failures and some things don't work. Some things might backfire a little bit." 4

Expressing genuine trust and positivity, as well as presenting steady progress was seen to also belong to the role of top management in removing barriers for sustainability and SP. Interviewees were keen on discussing employee activism. They were proud to have colleagues who utilized their professional knowledge and skillset to advance sustainable development, even outside of their official role. Although none of the interviewees described it as influencing, it felt as if this was a positive way of influencing their

counterparty through inspiring them with successful case examples. At the same time, allowing the feelings raised by setbacks was important. By using expressions such as “exhaustive” or “hemming and having” the interviewees set themselves as examples that it is natural to feel overwhelmed at times. Still, consensus was found in trusting that good things will happen and that there are countless opportunities.

“Now we are in a transition phase which is quite exciting, but also quite exhaustive and you feel a bit lost I guess every now and then.” Interviewee 1

“This is a long road and there comes all these geopolitical tensions, wars etc. and this affects the world economy and... It's such hemming and hawing at times, but one must just believe that we are understanding what the measures should be.” Interviewee 5

“Only the sky is the limit in terms of what you can do.” Interviewee 4

The top management interviewees brought up also other practical examples through which they actively promoted advanced sustainability. These were fostering openness, asking for support from internal audit, and translating stakeholder needs into company activities. The latter referred to industry, societal, national, business cluster, regional, or global level needs. In other words, top management interviewees strived to actively stay on top of subjects that affect the company. Four top management interviewees confirmed that they had proactively set sustainability related targets to their teams. Some of the targets were evidently advancing sustainability, while others could be described as “unconsciously sustainability related”. On the other hand, the interviewees explained that majority of the targets set were linked to sustainability.

4.3 Summary of the key findings and the revised framework

The findings show that change agents, a group to which top management can belong to, act as an important internal variable to both trigger sustainable procurement and remove internal barriers to it. However, macrolevel enablers in the organization are found

to be necessary for change agents who are not top management. These enablers are company culture, leadership, policies, procurement metrics and sustainability & sustainable procurement focused trainings. These may be interdependent and of different importances in how they affect change agents. Whilst change agents can remove other internal barriers and trigger SP, the listed enablers are required for a systematic change. Though digital procurement was not extensively discussed with the interviewees, the responses indicated potential for digitalized procurement to act as an enabler.

The findings suggest also changes to the supplier selection process, by adding two steps to it. These are presented in Figure 7, as steps “0 Supplier is selected by internal stakeholder” and “6 Supplier de-selection”. First, it is acknowledged that internal stakeholders are often selecting a supplier without involving IP organization. In this scenario the sustainable supplier selection process is likely not followed. It is realistic to claim that non-procurement professionals do not hold the necessary skills to evaluate relevant sustainability criterion on various procurement cases. Procurement requires a variety of professional skills, and understanding sustainability in supply chain context considerably adds to the skillset complexity. Bypassing the supplier selection process reduces procurement opportunities for risk management and increases their work both short and long-term. The finding signals a need for increased communication about procurement’s role in advancing corporate sustainability and closer cooperation with internal stakeholders. Whilst eventually this is a cultural change, top management holds a significant communication platform to advance it. Secondly, a sixth step of de-selecting suppliers is suggested. This is considered to strengthen the sustainable supply chain, increase negotiation power, and advance shared value creation. This change can be further evaluated and studied, as there are downsides to it which must be weighed against the expected value. Should supplier de-selection be trialed, change agents play an important role in driving the change by discussing the advantages with peers and procurement stakeholders.

Even though academia has previously identified triggers and barriers for sustainable procurement, new insights were found. A total of three new trigger themes were identified. Additionally, new items were listed to four existing trigger themes. In total three new barrier themes were identified, of which one was significantly altered. In addition, new items were listed to one existing theme acting as a barrier. External governance, macro-economics & politics, industry, country, technology, and corporate sustainability can be considered as both triggers and barriers. In the context and at the time of this study, technology was considered to act as a barrier for sustainable procurement in the case company. Company reputation and market position as well as indirect procurement accountability and resources are considered as triggers.

A significant notion is the altered balance of triggers and barriers that this study's findings indicate. There are more triggers than barriers. Moreover, internal triggers "corporate sustainability", "indirect procurement accountability", and "indirect procurement resources" were considered to hold the most significant role in advancing sustainable procurement and supplier selection. Corporate sustainability and top management are suggested to act as an enabler and driver to indirect procurement accountability and indirect procurement resources. Finally, the country was confirmed to play an important role in sustainable supplier selection. The findings imply that the role of a country is more significant than indicated by previous studies. New themes and items acting as variables are marked in cursive in Table 6.

Table 6. Revised themes acting as triggers and barriers to sustainable procurement

Triggers		
EXTERNAL VARIABLES	Industry demands & inquiries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client & another external stakeholder demands • Environmental & social pressure groups • Economical pressure • Large purchasing volumes • Supplier initiatives for sustainability • Shared norms within the industry • <i>Business cluster innovation (top management network)</i>

	External governance & economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and other external regulations & incentives • Legal demands • Organizational factors • Cost reduction through green practices
	Country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Culture and shared norms</i> • <i>Economics</i> • <i>Politics</i> • <i>History</i> • <i>Image</i>
	Natural environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Global warming</i> • <i>Climate change</i>
	Company reputation & market position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive advantage • Reputational loss • <i>Brand connected to sustainability advancing shared value creation with external stakeholders</i> • <i>Employer brand</i> • <i>Voluntary work for societal and environmental sustainability</i>
INTERNAL VARIABLES	Corporate sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top management initiatives for sustainability • Company culture • <i>Company strategy</i> • <i>Employee incentives</i> • <i>Employee-led initiatives & activism</i>
	Indirect procurement accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Including procurement to external corporate sustainability reporting</i> • <i>Global purchasing policy or directive for sustainability</i> • <i>Including sustainability to procurement function specific performance indicators</i>
	Indirect procurement resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Employer provided baseline training on sustainable procurement</i> • <i>Resources to monitor suppliers' sustainability</i> • <i>Role specific sustainability responsibilities in procurement to set realistic expectations</i> • <i>Defining sustainability for the procurement ecosystem</i>
Barriers		
EXTERNAL VARIABLES	Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers within the industry • Lack of suitable suppliers/sources • Low availability of sustainable materials/products or services
	Supplier relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor supplier commitment • Weak supplier relationship
	External governance, macroeconomics & politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of standards and regulations • <i>Lack of demands towards suppliers</i> • <i>Macroeconomics, political instability & political conflicts</i>
	Country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Economy</i>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Legislation & politics</i> • <i>Politics</i> • <i>History</i> • <i>Culture and shared norms</i> • <i>Language</i>
INTERNAL VARIABLES	Corporate culture, governance & economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of employee interest • Financial constraints & restrictions • Increased costs due to sustainability initiatives translating into declining economic conditions • Insufficient or missing communication and complex coordination • Lack of clear vision & skills/knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Lack of understanding the procurement policies</i> • Lack of consensus or prioritization of the topic at executive level / top management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Ignoring procurement's role in achieving strategic sustainability goals on corporate level</i> • Lack of resources • Misalignment of short- and long-term strategic goals • Sourcing strategy • Poor performance measurement systems • Resistance to change • Organizational culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Not adhering to procurement policies, bypassing the set procurement channels & department</i>
	Indirect procurement direction & resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lack of sustainability training</i> • <i>Lack of clear demands for procurement professionals & suppliers</i> • <i>Missing a centralized indirect procurement function</i> • <i>Lack of time in the supplier selection process to understand & apply the correct mix of criteria</i>
	Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps in technological tools and skills • Challenging user interface (for end-users and procurement professionals) • Lack of transparency

Based on the above discussed key findings, a revised framework is provided considering both theoretical and empirical expertise.

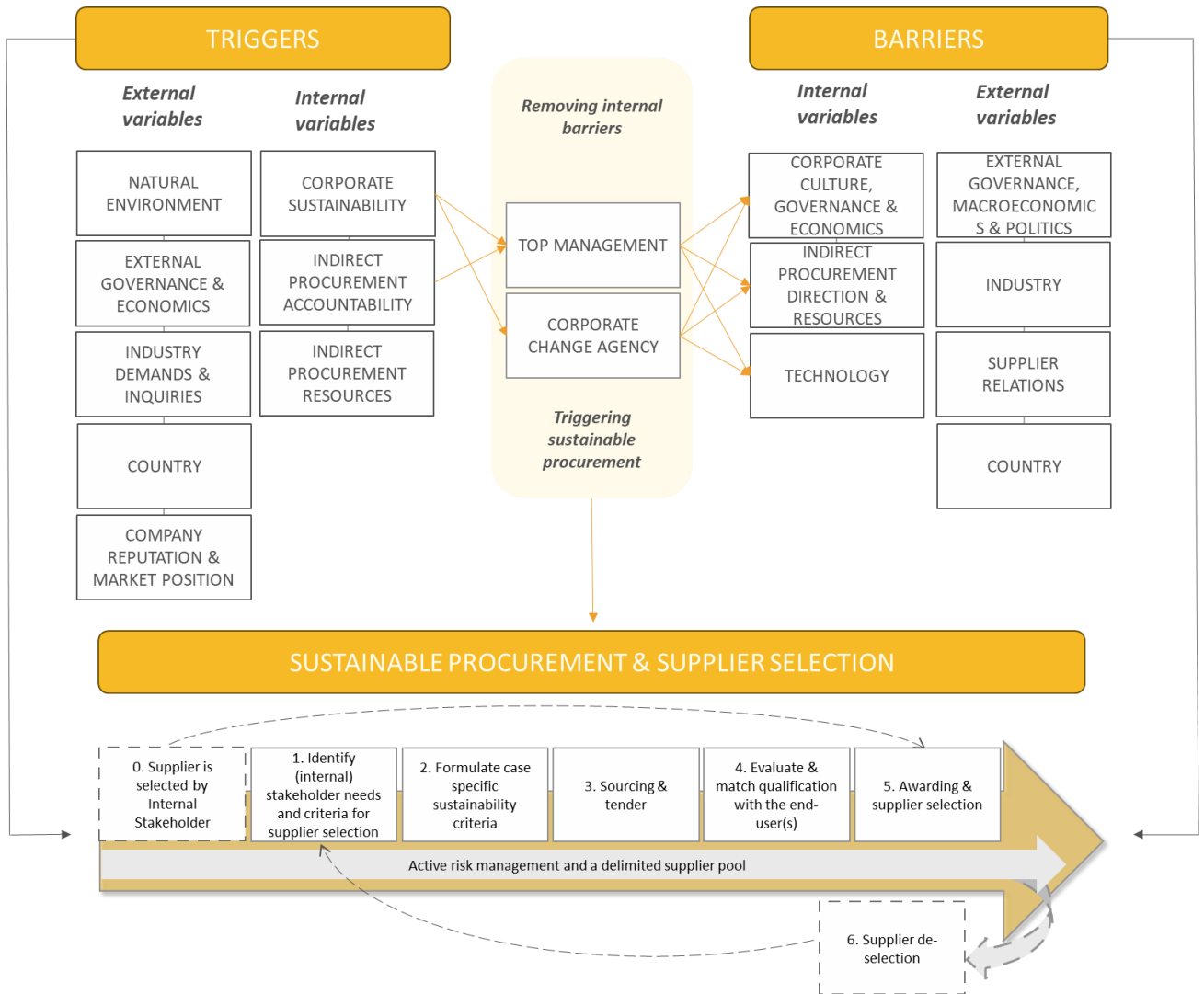


Figure 7. Revised framework of the thesis

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study provides three distinctive theoretical contributions. This study provides new knowledge to advance sustainable indirect procurement. As Jayaram & Curkovic (2018, p. 15) note, indirect procurement holds a strategical role in advancing competitive advantage yet has received “very little attention”. As a practical example, today the company sustainability reputation is essential. The procurement function of an organization not only has the resources but is also responsible to secure true supply chain sustainability. If overlooked, the company risks its reputation – affecting its market position, investors, partnerships, employer attractiveness, etc. The study scope covers all indirect procurement categories of the case company addressing all three sustainability pillars. This allows the findings to provide a holistic understanding of the different variables for advancing sustainable procurement strategy, over niche contributions.

First, this study advances current knowledge about triggers and barriers for SP. The SSS process is well re-defined for the context of indirect procurement. In the case study the internal factors were consistently mentioned as the primary triggers and enablers for SP. Answering to the call of Tardin et al. (2024) this study finds that a strong organizational sustainability orientation (OSO) does not trigger, drive nor bridge SSS. Interestingly, the findings also indicate that OSO can vary between one organization’s functions. Furthermore, corporate sustainability, to which an OSO and strategy are included, is not enough to initiate indirect procurement sustainability transformation. The findings support the argument by van Hoek et al. (2024) and Seuring & Müller (2008a) that an ethical guidance by the organization is not enough to direct SP. The study also suggests that the role of a country is more significant than indicated by earlier studies (see Tables 1 and 2). The findings of this study also provide new information about the importance of a country in sustainable supplier selection. It is confirmed that the country can act both as a trigger and a barrier. Its role largely depends on the country’s capacity to support sustainable procurement. Yet, the supplier’s relation to the focal company is of important relevance

as well (first tier or further). Whether it is presented as a trigger or barrier depends largely on the individual country's capability to advance sustainable procurement. As an example, McMurray et al. (2014) find religion to have a considerable impact on how SP is viewed by procurement managers in Malaysian public and private organizations. Interestingly, none of the interviewees of this study addressed religion in their answers. It is suggested that organizations may have a unique mix of triggers and barriers that they ought to acknowledge.

Second, this study extends the previous research on corporate change agency in sustainability transformation. Change agents who are not top management experience challenges in initiating change. The conflicting external and internal demands are found to hinder change agents. The primary purpose of a corporation is still to deliver financial value to its stakeholders. Yet, there is an increasing demand for acting & delivering sustainable non-monetary value. In the company, the latter is both an external and internal demand. Another key challenge is the perceived organizational role of indirect procurement. The supplier selections are made by internal stakeholders. Their decision-making is guided by the company culture and practices, reflecting the given esteem. This study confirms that change agents actively promote the importance of sustainable supply chain, procurement and supplier selection. They combine their personal competencies and professional skills with sustainability knowledge to influence their social groups. This study argues that their role in advancing sustainable procurement is key for achieving a long-term cultural shift. Similarly, the change agents can actively balance organizational sustainability orientation in the upstream value chain. The study answers the call of Buhr et al. (2023) by providing a more fine-grained view on how top management support, coordinate, and collaborate in enhancing SP. The role of top management is key to achieving the transformation on an organizational level. They hold the power to alter the organizational culture as well as transform how indirect procurement is viewed internally. Further, this study also discusses ways for change agents to develop their competencies and their ways of communication when advancing sustainability related topics as suggested by Schaltegger et al. (2024). The findings support the argument of Nsiah-Sarfo et

al. (2023, p. 3) that MNC's "can leverage coercive influence because recipient organizations rely on them for critical resources". This power is recognized by the procurement professionals in their negotiation power for demanding and advancing SP.

Third, this study adds knowledge about SP "in countries outside of the Anglo-American and European sphere" (Buhr et al., 2023, p. 4240). Interview participants reside in the Nordics, Europe, Middle East, Latin America and Africa. Some of the regions include countries under development, referred to as the Global South. Consequently, this study also addresses the need to understand "challenges in enhancing SP in developing countries" (Kabra et al., 2023, p. 4385). The challenges or barriers described in this study are wars, politics, (macro)economy, societal norms, and if expats are prioritized over locals in hiring process. Language may act as a barrier in some countries but is not identified as a general barrier. Additionally, the country's infrastructure was found to impact SP. For example, if there are issues with sourcing and distributing water or electricity the supply chain is found to focus on strengthening the distribution. By offering the opportunity to develop this the MNC can build grounds to organically advance societal, economic and environmental sustainability. Overall, the findings of this study answer to the question raised by Kabra et al. (2023) on "how the adoption of sustainability practices into procurement can be improved".

5.2 Managerial implications

Sustainability related criterion was listed as one of the most important ones in supplier selection by 80% of the top management interviewees. Somewhat controversially some of the indirect procurement interviewees considered that internal stakeholders did not generally consider sustainability in sourcing nor purchasing criteria. Main identified gaps concern digitalized procurement, training, baseline sustainability criteria in SSS and strengthening the role of procurement in advancing corporate sustainability. There are also several practical development opportunities. This study suggests focusing on intra-organizational cooperation, process re-evaluation, and discussing the necessity and role

of metrics for sustainable procurement. Additionally, this study recommends creating specific vocabulary addressing SP in the case company. It is important that each party involved to procurement activities has the same understanding of the topics being discussed. This does not only limit the internal employees of the company, but also external stakeholders. As confirmed by several academical sources, sustainability does not have one definition. Focus on standardized vocabulary and training should be prioritized. Involving sustainability aspects in negotiations and supplier management requires the ability and knowledge to challenge the current state. Moreover, this study found that there are underlying expectations towards management on the topic of SP. To manage expectations in communications with internal and external procurement stakeholders, vocabulary is suggested as it can help with creating a standard way of addressing the subject. Change management is necessary for a sustained change in mindset. Change agents are proposed to be utilized more by the case company management. A practical recommendation to initiate the change is to embed sustainability into all category strategies and action plans. They should give guidance on how SP could be considered in the context of subcategories.

Based on the current low adoption of e-procurement functions, it is suggested that further utilization of digitalized procurement aids would require thorough training and change management. E-procurement is not exhaustively utilized to aid SSS by the case company. Consequently, interviewees were not expected to provide insights into successfully adopted digitalized procurement. Instead, the availability and opportunities of the current tools were discussed. While it is arguable whether digitalized procurement tools suit all sourcing, this study suggests making the use of e-sourcing mandatory. Exceptions could be made where required. The current platform offers the opportunity to include a set of sustainability baseline criteria for each case. AI could aid procurement professionals by suggesting a mix of criteria even for complex sourcing cases. This reduces the need for all procurement professionals to have the latest holistic understanding of sustainability. Instead, they could apply their combined knowledge of stakeholder needs, suppliers' capabilities and strategy to select the most suitable sustainability

criteria proposed by AI. Further, data management and assessment of suppliers' sustainability documentation is necessary. Yet, incorporating this through manual administrative work is not value adding nor motivating. Consequently, digitalized opportunities are recommended to be evaluated and re-enforced by procurement management. Not only does this enable SP transformation, but it also releases time for procurement professionals to identify benchmarking and innovation opportunities within the supply chain. This supports the transfer from a transactional buyer-supplier relationship to partnerships.

The four-staged implementation model by Maaz et al. (2022) is suggested to suit vis-à-vis to the SP transformation. As described by one of the interviewees, people cannot simply be told to act sustainably. Sustainability practices must be embedded into processes, guidelines, practices and metrics in a practical manner. The extensive long-term value that IP brings in supplier selections should be made more visible to internal stakeholders. Enhancing sustainable procurement competence of procurement professionals is the key. This allows leveraging the latent influencing opportunities in their relations with internal end-customers and suppliers. The model discussed practical changes on mesolevel of the organization, its structure and ecosystem, as well as top management support (Maaz et al., 2022). SP transformation should be viewed as a strategical shift. It is not a siloed, procurement specific improvement program. Employees making supplier selections must realize and embrace their significant role in improving global sustainability of the natural environment.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

While aiming to provide further understanding on change agency in sustainable procurement, this study has some limitations. First, the researcher has been employed by the case company for several years and within the indirect procurement organization. The researcher was appointed in an official role to advance sustainability in the studied function during the analysis phase of this study. The researcher's official role during the interview stage was not connected to sustainability. Secondly, this case study is conducted

for a listed MNC operating in the fields of energy & technology with headquarters in the Nordics. The size of the organization, its type of ownership, headquarter location and fields of operations are expected to impact the opportunity to apply found knowledge to other organizations. In SME change agency may not require same, nor all enablers as certain agility can be expected in decision-making, the smaller the company. Thirdly, this is a short-term study, and more information could be gained from long-term study. Conducting a long-term study would likely allow the researcher to find further insights into the triggers and barriers. A long-term study could also demonstrate how change agents develop their competences for advancing the transformation. A long-term study would also offer the opportunity to find and interview more top management change agents. The time constraints the number of top management interviewees. Although more prospective interviewees might have been identified, the interviewees were scheduled to be conducted during two consecutive months.

Finally, the cohort of interviewees is limited. There are several differences between them and saturation was achieved. Still, a larger cohort may provide the opportunity for e.g., further comparison of agency competencies and top management support. All case company indirect procurement change agents were interviewed in this study, according to the researcher's best knowledge.

The proposition for further studies is to study the subject in SME or MNC operating in different industries. There is also still a limited number of studies combining behavioral management and sustainable procurement. Further, it is important to advance the understanding of how to manage the transformation of sustainable indirect procurement. Majority of studies address direct procurement. In the context of sustainable procurement, the findings cannot be fully applied to indirect procurement. Thus, a proposition is to study the different perspectives of advancing sustainable indirect procurement in combination with behavioral management theories.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview questions for change agents

Background

1. Which categories & countries do you work with?
2. How does sustainability show in your role?
 - a. Have you participated in training on sustainable procurement or sustainable supplier selection?
3. How would you describe your power to influence supplier selection?

Corporate sustainability & culture

4. Could you describe an organization culture that facilitates innovation for environmental, social and economic sustainability?
5. How would you describe the organizational sustainability orientation of the case company?
6. How does the case company organization culture support shared value creation with suppliers?
7. What is the role of the country (physical location of a company or individual) in advancing sustainable supplier selection?

Sustainable procurement

8. What triggers sustainable procurement?
9. What acts as a barrier to sustainable procurement?

Change agency

10. Could you give examples of situations, projects, events, meetings, etc. where you started discussing about sustainable procurement?
11. Which competencies do you find central for advancing sustainable procurement & sustainable supplier selection?
12. How do you develop your own competencies for sustainable procurement & sustainable supplier selection?
13. How do you motivate & activate others to adopt sustainability in their decision-making?
14. How do you support stakeholders in considering sustainability in supplier selection?
15. Referring to Figure 3 in appendix 3 "Interview key themes", how do you balance the criteria in supplier selection?

Digitalized procurement

16. How do you think the current technologies that are available in the case company aid sustainable supplier selection?
17. What would increase the usage of digitalized technologies in the procurement organization? (e.g., e-auction, e-sourcing, AI, machine learning)

18. What would you like to add to these topics that has not yet been discussed?

Appendix 2. Semi-structured interview questions for top management

Background

1. How does sustainability show in your role?
 - a. Have you participated in training on sustainable procurement or sustainable supplier selection?
2. How would you describe your power to influence supplier selection?

Corporate sustainability & culture

3. Could you describe an organization culture that facilitates innovation for environmental, social and economic sustainability?
4. How would you describe the organizational sustainability orientation of the case company?
5. How does the case company organization culture support shared value creation with suppliers?
6. What is the role of the country (physical location of a company or individual) in advancing sustainable supplier selection?

Leadership

7. How do you support others in adopting sustainability in their decision-making?
8. How do you facilitate commitment to sustainability?
9. Do you set sustainability related goals for your team/s?
10. How do you encourage innovation for sustainability? Please provide practical examples

Sustainable procurement & supplier selection

11. What triggers sustainable procurement?
12. What acts as a barrier to sustainable procurement?
13. How do you perceive the role of indirect procurement in advancing corporate sustainability?
14. How would you develop indirect procurement towards sustainable procurement?
15. How do you facilitate sustainable supplier selection?
16. Please put your usual supplier selection criteria in an order of importance.

Appendix 3. Interview key themes

The concepts below are key themes for the interview. As there exist various descriptions of the concepts, below descriptions aim to ensure an aligned understanding between the interviewee and the interviewer. Figure 3 summarizes the sustainability criteria that could be considered in sustainable supplier selection.

In this study, **sustainability** is considered from the dimensions of economic, environmental, social, and holistically combining all three. Please refer to Figure 3 for itemized criteria of the sustainability dimensions.

Sustainable procurement is a process by which organizations meet their needs for goods and services in a way that provides value for money while minimizing harm to the environment and society. Sustainable procurement can be practiced in the assessment and selection of suppliers by defining appropriate criteria and conditions that contribute to the focal company's sustainable development strategy and objectives and which suppliers must respect in all their activities. Sustainable procurement involves identifying, assessing, and selecting suppliers based on their environmental, economic and social performance. (Kaasinen, 2023, p. 93–94)

Corporate sustainability is commonly linked to the UN Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development (1987): "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Change agents can be any individual with direct connection to the focal company who intentionally and deliberately contribute to create a sustainability transformation on individual, organizational and systems level. In the context of this study, the change agent aims to drive sustainable supplier selection and embedding sustainability into indirect procurement.

Shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) happens when companies intentionally engage in addressing society's challenges & needs by creating societal & economical value in their transactions. Shared value creation is embedded across the company and in its core: it is not a separate philanthropical activity apart from the core business.

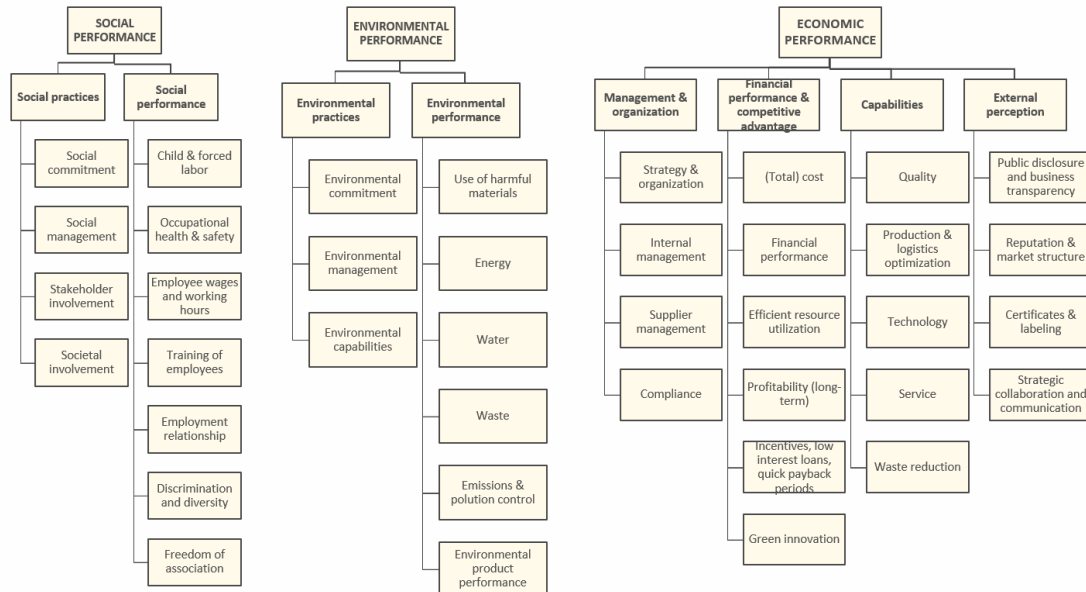


Figure 3. Itemized sustainability issues for sustainable supplier selection per social, environmental, and economical performance (adopted from Kaasinen, 2023; Zimmer et al., 2016; Zimon et al., 2019 and Panigrahi et al., 2018).

Appendix 4. Summary of interviewees

	Interviewee	Role/Area of operations	Interview duration
Top management change agents	1	Managing Director	1h 9min
	2	Operations Director, Managing Director	1h 10min
	3	Managing Director, Area Business Director	1h 16min
	4	Vice President	1h 3min
	5	Vice President	1h 2min
Change agents	6	Indirect Procurement	1h 24min
	7	Indirect Procurement	56min
	8	Indirect Procurement	1h 10min
	9	Indirect Procurement	1h 11min
	10	Indirect Procurement	1h 21min
	11	Procurement Development	1h 10min

Appendix 5. Data structurization

