

Local Content and Sustainable Procurement in the AfCFTA Era

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers major opportunities for economic integration, industrialisation, and sustainable development across Africa. However, these opportunities are limited by weak local content development and overreliance on imports in public procurement systems. This study examines the role of local content and sustainable procurement in promoting inclusive growth under the AfCFTA framework. Using a qualitative approach based on policy analysis, document review, and stakeholder interviews, the study identified key opportunities and challenges affecting implementation. The findings show that effective local content policies and sustainable procurement practices can promote industrial growth, employment creation, competitiveness, and regional value chains. However, weak institutions, poor policy enforcement, corruption, and limited procurement skills remain major barriers. The study concludes that strengthening local content policies, harmonising procurement regulations, investing in capacity building, and promoting regional cooperation are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive economic transformation under AfCFTA.

Keywords: Local Content, Sustainable Procurement, AfCFTA, Economic Integration, Policy Frameworks, Inclusive Growth

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2021, represents one of the most ambitious initiatives for regional economic integration in Africa's history. The agreement brings together more than 50 African countries into a single market aimed at promoting intra-African trade, industrialization, economic diversification, and sustainable development through the reduction of tariffs and trade barriers (UNECA, 2022;). Despite Africa possessing abundant natural resources and a growing consumer market, the continent continues to experience low levels of intra-African trade compared to other regions of the world. Many African economies remain heavily dependent on imported manufactured goods and external supply chains, resulting in limited domestic industrial growth, unemployment, and persistent trade imbalances. These structural weaknesses raise concerns about whether African countries are adequately prepared to benefit from the opportunities created by AfCFTA.

One of the major challenges affecting African economies is the limited integration of local industries into procurement and production systems. In many countries, procurement practices continue to favour imported goods and foreign suppliers, reducing opportunities for local firms to participate in national and regional markets (OECD, 2016). This dependence on imports weakens local manufacturing capacity, limits technology transfer, and constrains employment creation, especially among youth and small-scale entrepreneurs. As AfCFTA promotes market liberalization and increased competition, countries without strong local content strategies risk becoming markets for foreign products rather than beneficiaries of industrial development and value addition. The absence of effective procurement systems that prioritise local participation therefore presents a significant developmental problem.

In response to these challenges, local content policies and sustainable procurement have emerged as important strategies for promoting inclusive economic growth. Local content refers to policies and practices designed to increase the participation of domestic firms, labour, and resources in economic activities and procurement systems. Sustainable procurement, on the other hand, involves procurement processes that consider economic, social, and environmental impacts while promoting long-term development goals (Testa et al., 2016). These approaches have the potential to stimulate industrialisation, create employment, strengthen regional value chains, and promote environmental sustainability. However, the implementation of sustainable procurement across

many African countries remains constrained by weak institutional frameworks, corruption, poor policy enforcement, and inadequate technical skills (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

Zimbabwe faces similar challenges as it seeks to position itself within the AfCFTA framework. While the country has significant potential in sectors such as manufacturing, mining, agriculture, and construction, local industries continue to struggle against imported products and limited access to procurement opportunities (African Development Bank, 2023). Balancing trade liberalisation with the protection and development of domestic industries has become a critical policy issue. Without deliberate procurement policies that promote local content and sustainability, Zimbabwe may fail to fully benefit from AfCFTA's economic opportunities. This situation highlights the need for strategies that align procurement systems with industrial development goals and regional integration priorities.

Against this background, the present study explores the role of local content and sustainable procurement in promoting inclusive growth under the AfCFTA framework. Using qualitative methods such as policy analysis, document review, and interviews with procurement professionals and policymakers, the study examines the opportunities, challenges, and best practices associated with integrating local content into procurement systems. The research contributes to policy discussions on economic integration and sustainable development by providing insights that can assist Zimbabwe and other African countries in leveraging AfCFTA for long-term socio-economic transformation.

Literature Review

Local Content Development in Africa

Local content development refers to the deliberate use of domestic resources including labour, materials, technology, and capital in production and procurement processes to stimulate local economic growth (OECD, 2016). Across Africa, governments have increasingly recognised that local content policies are crucial for economic diversification, industrial upgrading, and employment creation. In Nigeria, for example, the oil and gas sector's local content legislation has significantly increased domestic participation, allowing local firms to provide goods and services previously dominated by foreign companies (World Bank, 2020). Similar initiatives in South

Africa and Ghana demonstrate the potential of local content frameworks to enhance industrial capacity while fostering skills development.

Zimbabwe, in particular, faces challenges in translating policy rhetoric into tangible outcomes for local industries. Studies indicate that while procurement regulations encourage local participation, enforcement remains weak due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of technical capacity (African Development Bank, 2023). The result is a recurring pattern in which foreign suppliers dominate contracts, and local suppliers struggle to compete effectively. Addressing these gaps requires integrating local content policies directly into public and private procurement processes, ensuring compliance through monitoring mechanisms and incentives.

Beyond economic objectives, local content development also has social implications. By prioritising domestic suppliers and labour, local content policies promote wealth distribution, reduce unemployment, and empower small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (UNCTAD, 2022). However, some scholars caution that without strategic implementation, local content can lead to protectionism, inefficiency, and market distortions, particularly if domestic firms lack the capability to meet international standards (UNECA, 2021). Hence, careful policy design and capacity-building are central to achieving sustainable local content outcomes.

Regional integration under AfCFTA presents both opportunities and challenges for local content development. On the one hand, the liberalised trade environment encourages cross-border procurement and market expansion for local firms (UNECA, 2022). On the other hand, it exposes domestic industries to competition from more advanced African economies, potentially undermining weaker local suppliers. Studies suggest that harmonised regional policies, coupled with targeted support programs for SMEs, are essential for balancing these dynamics and ensuring that local content strategies complement continental integration (African Development Bank, 2019).

In conclusion, local content development in Africa is a multifaceted strategy that links economic, social, and industrial objectives. Its success depends on robust policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and alignment with regional trade agreements such as AfCFTA. Effective integration of local content into procurement processes can drive industrialisation, employment, and inclusive growth, while mitigating the risks of dependency on imports and foreign suppliers (OECD, 2016).

Sustainable Procurement in Africa

Sustainable procurement is defined as the acquisition of goods, services, and works that achieve value for money while considering environmental, social, and economic impacts (Testa et al., 2016). It reflects a shift from traditional procurement, which focuses solely on cost and efficiency, to a broader framework emphasising responsibility, ethics, and long-term impact. In Africa, sustainable procurement is increasingly recognised as a tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

Despite its recognized importance, the adoption of sustainable procurement in African economies remains uneven. Many governments lack clear guidelines, enforcement mechanisms, or incentives for organizations to prioritize sustainability in procurement decisions. For example, in Ghana, sustainable procurement policies exist but are largely aspirational, with limited practical implementation in public tenders (UNEP, 2017). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, procurement regulations encourage local sourcing but do not adequately integrate environmental and social considerations, leaving gaps in achieving sustainable development objectives (African Development Bank, 2023).

A key challenge to sustainable procurement is the limited technical capacity and awareness among procurement professionals. Many organizations lack personnel trained in environmental management, social impact assessment, or life-cycle costing, making it difficult to implement sustainability standards effectively (Testa et al., 2016). Additionally, corruption and political interference often distort procurement decisions, further undermining the goals of sustainable procurement. These issues highlight the need for capacity building, institutional strengthening, and the establishment of clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Notwithstanding these challenges, best practices are emerging in Africa. South Africa, for instance, has integrated sustainability into public procurement through the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act, which incentivises suppliers meeting environmental and social criteria (Bolton, 2006). Similarly, Kenya's Green Procurement Strategy encourages government departments to prioritise eco-friendly products and services, fostering a culture of sustainability across sectors. These cases demonstrate the potential of sustainable procurement to

create market opportunities for responsible suppliers while promoting economic and environmental resilience.

Overall, sustainable procurement in Africa presents a strategic tool for linking economic growth with social and environmental objectives. For AfCFTA-era economies, embedding sustainability into procurement processes ensures that trade liberalization does not compromise local development, environmental integrity, or social equity (Walker & Phillips, 2009). By combining local content and sustainability principles, African countries can transform procurement into a driver of inclusive and responsible economic development.

AfCFTA and Procurement

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to create a single continental market for goods and services, harmonizing trade rules, and promoting regional value chains (UNECA, 2022). While its primary focus is trade liberalisation the implications for procurement are significant. By expanding market access, AfCFTA encourages competition, efficiency, and industrial upgrading, but it also presents challenges for domestic industries that are not adequately prepared to compete with firms from more advanced economies (African Development Bank, 2019).

Procurement under AfCFTA can act as a strategic instrument for local economic development if guided by policies emphasizing local content inclusion. Regional governments can incorporate AfCFTA rules into procurement regulations to stimulate domestic industries while complying with trade liberalization commitments. Studies highlight that without such integration, liberalized trade could exacerbate inequalities, allowing foreign suppliers to dominate local markets and crowd out domestic SMEs (UNECA, 2021).

Several African countries have initiated measures to align procurement with AfCFTA. In Ethiopia, for instance, procurement policies are being restructured to support domestic firms and SMEs, ensuring they can participate in regional supply chains (UNEP, 2017). Similarly, South Africa emphasizes regional supplier development and capacity-building programs in its public procurement framework. These examples illustrate that procurement strategies can be harmonized with AfCFTA to balance trade openness with local economic development objectives.

However, achieving this alignment is complex. Policymakers must navigate tensions between trade liberalization and industrial protection, particularly in countries with fragile industrial bases like Zimbabwe. Institutional weaknesses, limited data on local suppliers, and inadequate regulatory frameworks can undermine the effectiveness of procurement as a tool for local development (African Development Bank, 2023). Consequently, a deliberate policy approach is required, integrating local content, sustainability, and AfCFTA compliance to maximize developmental impact.

In conclusion, procurement under AfCFTA offers both opportunities and risks. When strategically implemented, it can foster local industry growth, regional value chain integration, and inclusive economic development. Conversely, neglecting local content and sustainability principles can lead to increased dependency, job losses, and social inequities, highlighting the critical role of policy coherence and institutional capacity (UNECA, 2022).

Challenges to Local Content and Sustainable Procurement

Despite the potential benefits of local content and sustainable procurement, African economies face significant challenges in operationalizing these concepts. One major challenge is institutional weakness, where fragmented agencies, unclear mandates, and lack of coordination hinder effective implementation (Walker & Phillips, 2009). In Zimbabwe, for instance, multiple government bodies oversee procurement, industrial policy, and trade regulation, often resulting in inconsistent enforcement and limited accountability (African Development Bank, 2023).

Corruption and governance issues present another barrier. Procurement processes are often subject to political influence, bribery, and favoritism, which compromise local supplier participation and undermine sustainability goals (OECD, 2016). Weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms allow foreign suppliers to bypass local content requirements, reducing the developmental impact of procurement activities. These challenges indicate that policy design alone is insufficient; strong institutional capacity and transparency are critical for success.

A further challenge is the lack of skills and technical expertise in sustainable procurement. Many procurement professionals in Africa are not trained in integrating environmental and social considerations into procurement decisions (Testa et al., 2016). This skills gap limits the ability of organizations to implement green procurement, assess lifecycle costs, or engage local suppliers

effectively. Addressing this requires targeted capacity-building initiatives and professional development programs.

Market constraints and infrastructure limitations also hinder local content development. Poor access to finance, inadequate industrial infrastructure, and limited technology adoption restrict the ability of local SMEs to compete with larger foreign firms (UNCTAD, 2022). This gap is particularly pronounced in sectors such as manufacturing and construction, which are critical for inclusive economic growth. Governments must therefore complement procurement policies with supportive industrial and financial policies to enable local firms to participate meaningfully.

In sum, while local content and sustainable procurement offer significant potential, their implementation is constrained by institutional weaknesses, governance issues, skill gaps, and market limitations. Overcoming these challenges requires integrated policy frameworks, capacity building, and targeted support for domestic industries to ensure that AfCFTA's promises translate into tangible developmental outcomes.

Best Practices and Lessons

African countries and international experiences provide valuable lessons on integrating local content and sustainability in procurement. Globally, the European Union's Green Public Procurement framework demonstrates how procurement can incentivise environmentally and socially responsible suppliers while promoting innovation and local value creation (Walker & Brammer, 2021; Testa et al., 2016). Similarly, ASEAN countries have successfully linked procurement to industrial upgrading, fostering domestic supplier networks and regional value chains (UNEP, 2017).

Within Africa, Nigeria's oil and gas local content policy and South Africa's Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act exemplify practical measures that enhance domestic participation and promote sustainability. These policies combine regulatory mandates with incentives, training programs, and monitoring mechanisms, providing a balanced approach that encourages compliance while building local capacity.

Regional cooperation under AfCFTA also offers opportunities for cross-border learning and harmonization. By aligning procurement standards, certification processes, and sustainability criteria across countries, African economies can create larger, integrated markets that benefit

domestic suppliers and reduce trade frictions (African Development Bank, 2019). Such harmonization ensures that local content policies do not conflict with continental trade commitments while promoting shared developmental goals.

Capacity building emerges as a recurring best practice. Training procurement professionals, establishing technical support centers, and engaging industry associations enhance the ability of local firms to participate in procurement processes effectively (UNCTAD, 2022). Additionally, transparency and accountability mechanisms, such as digital procurement platforms and open tendering, strengthen trust in the system and improve compliance with local content and sustainability objectives.

In conclusion, best practices highlight the importance of policy coherence, capacity building, incentives, and regional coordination in advancing local content and sustainable procurement. By adopting these lessons, African economies, including Zimbabwe, can leverage AfCFTA to stimulate industrialization, promote inclusive growth, and ensure that procurement contributes to long-term sustainability (OECD, 2016; UNECA, 2022).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study of local content and sustainable procurement under the AfCFTA framework can be anchored in multiple theoretical perspectives to provide a robust analytical foundation. Institutional theory emphasizes the role of formal rules, regulations, and social norms in shaping organizational behavior (Scott, 2022). Within the African procurement context, institutional theory explains how government policies, AfCFTA regulations, and industry standards influence procurement decisions and the adoption of local content practices. By examining the institutional pressures and incentives, this theory helps to understand why some organizations comply with local content and sustainability mandates, while others may circumvent them due to weak enforcement or resource constraints.

Sustainable Development Theory was popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) through the Brundtland Report titled *Our Common Future*, published in 1987. The theory defines sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). The theory emerged in response to growing concerns over environmental degradation, social

inequality, and unsustainable economic growth patterns worldwide. It argues that long-term development can only be achieved when economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection are pursued simultaneously and in a balanced manner.

The theory is built around three pillars: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Economic sustainability focuses on promoting long-term economic growth, industrialization, productivity, and efficient use of resources. In procurement, this involves supporting local industries, encouraging innovation, and promoting value addition through local content policies. Social sustainability emphasizes social equity, employment creation, poverty reduction, human rights, and improved living standards. Within procurement systems, this includes promoting fair labor practices, supporting local communities, and creating opportunities for small and medium enterprises. Environmental sustainability focuses on protecting natural resources, reducing pollution, minimizing waste, and encouraging environmentally responsible production and consumption practices. Sustainable procurement therefore seeks to ensure that procurement activities contribute positively to all three dimensions of development.

The relevance of Sustainable Development Theory to this study lies in its emphasis on balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives within procurement systems under the AfCFTA framework. The theory supports the argument that procurement should not only focus on acquiring goods and services at the lowest cost but should also promote local industrial growth, employment creation, social inclusion, and environmental responsibility. In the context of AfCFTA, the theory helps explain how sustainable procurement and local content policies can contribute to inclusive economic transformation by strengthening domestic industries while ensuring responsible and sustainable use of resources. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how African countries, including Zimbabwe, can align procurement practices with broader sustainable development goals under regional economic integration.

Economic Integration Theory was primarily propounded by Béla Balassa in 1961 through his influential work *The Theory of Economic Integration*. Balassa explained economic integration as a process by which countries remove trade barriers and coordinate economic policies in order to increase trade, improve market efficiency, and stimulate economic growth. The theory identifies different stages of integration, including free trade areas, customs unions, common markets, economic unions, and complete economic integration. Economic Integration Theory argues that

regional cooperation enables countries to benefit from expanded markets, specialization, economies of scale, and increased competitiveness.

The major variables of the theory include trade liberalization market access, regional cooperation, industrial competitiveness, and economic efficiency. Trade liberalization involves reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers to encourage the free movement of goods and services among member states. Market access refers to the ability of firms to participate in larger regional markets beyond their national boundaries. Industrial competitiveness focuses on the capacity of domestic industries to compete effectively within integrated regional markets. Economic efficiency is achieved through specialization, improved resource allocation, and increased production opportunities resulting from regional cooperation.

The relevance of Economic Integration Theory to this study lies in its explanation of how the AfCFTA can promote economic growth and industrial development through expanded regional trade and cooperation. The theory helps explain the opportunities created by AfCFTA for African businesses to access larger markets and participate in regional value chains. However, the theory also highlights the risks associated with trade liberalization, particularly for weaker domestic industries that may struggle to compete with firms from more industrialized economies. In relation to this study, Economic Integration Theory supports the need for local content policies and sustainable procurement strategies that protect and strengthen local industries while participating in regional trade integration. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how African countries, including Zimbabwe, can balance trade liberalization with domestic industrial development and inclusive economic growth under the AfCFTA framework.

Based on these theoretical underpinnings, the conceptual framework of this study posits that AfCFTA-driven trade liberalization interacts with national procurement policies, local content requirements, and sustainability principles to influence inclusive growth outcomes. In this framework, local content policies mediate the relationship between AfCFTA integration and domestic industrial development, while sustainable procurement ensures that economic gains do not compromise social or environmental objectives. Institutional capacity, governance, and enforcement mechanisms serve as moderating factors that determine the effectiveness of procurement strategies in achieving intended developmental outcomes.

AfCFTA trade liberalization serves as the exogenous variable influencing procurement decisions and market dynamics. Local content policies act as a mediator, guiding the extent to which domestic suppliers participate in procurement. Sustainable procurement practices ensure that procurement activities promote environmental stewardship and social equity. Finally, inclusive growth represents the ultimate dependent variable, reflecting economic expansion that benefits local communities, creates employment, and promotes sustainable development. Institutional capacity and governance are key moderating factors that determine whether policies translate into actionable outcomes (African Development Bank, 2023).

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how procurement can be leveraged as a strategic tool in the AfCFTA era. It emphasizes that achieving inclusive growth requires an integrated approach that aligns trade liberalization, local content development, sustainability, and institutional capacity. This framework forms the basis for analyzing qualitative data collected through policy documents, interviews, and industry reports, guiding the study's interpretation of opportunities, challenges, and best practices.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, focusing on an in-depth exploration of local content and sustainable procurement practices under the AfCFTA framework. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for this study because they allow for a nuanced understanding of policy frameworks, institutional practices, and stakeholder experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The research emphasizes policy analysis, document review, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to capture insights on opportunities, challenges, and best practices in integrating local content and sustainability into procurement. This approach aligns with the study's objective of producing actionable recommendations for Zimbabwe and other African economies.

Policy and document analysis formed the first component of data collection. Relevant policies, procurement guidelines, legislative instruments, and AfCFTA implementation reports were systematically reviewed to identify existing frameworks, regulatory gaps, and areas for improvement (Bowen, 2022). Government procurement regulations from Zimbabwe, regional trade agreements, and sector-specific industrial policies were examined. Document analysis

provided a foundation for understanding the formal structures that govern local content and sustainable procurement, as well as the alignment or misalignment between national and continental trade frameworks.

The second component involved semi-structured interviews with experts in procurement, policymakers, industry associations, and private sector firms involved in AfCFTA implementation. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant experience and knowledge of local content and sustainable procurement practices (Bryman, 2021). Interviews explored themes such as policy effectiveness, institutional challenges, capacity constraints, and innovative practices. This method enabled the collection of rich qualitative data, capturing perspectives that may not be evident from policy documents alone.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved coding interview transcripts and policy documents to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were organized around opportunities for local content integration, challenges in sustainable procurement, and best practices for aligning procurement strategies with AfCFTA objectives. The use of thematic analysis enabled a systematic interpretation of qualitative data, linking empirical findings to the study's conceptual framework and theoretical underpinnings.

Finally, the study acknowledged limitations and ethical considerations. Limitations include potential biases in self-reported interview data, limited generalizability beyond the selected organizations, and the dynamic nature of AfCFTA policy implementation. Ethical measures were strictly adhered to, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and anonymizing sensitive data. These precautions ensured the integrity of the research while maintaining stakeholder trust and the credibility of the findings.

In summary, the research methodology provides a robust framework for exploring how local content and sustainable procurement can be effectively integrated under AfCFTA. By combining document analysis with expert interviews and thematic analysis, the study generates comprehensive insights into policy gaps, institutional challenges, and practical strategies for promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development in African procurement systems.

The population of this study comprised key stakeholders involved in procurement, trade policy, industrial development, and AfCFTA implementation in Zimbabwe and selected African

institutions. The target population included government procurement officials, policymakers from ministries responsible for trade and industry, representatives from regulatory authorities, procurement professionals, private-sector firms, manufacturing associations, industry experts, and representatives from regional trade and business organizations. These stakeholders were considered appropriate for the study because they possess relevant knowledge and practical experience regarding local content policies, sustainable procurement practices, and regional trade integration under the AfCFTA framework.

The study adopted a qualitative sample size of approximately 20–25 participants selected from the identified stakeholder groups. The sample size was considered sufficient because qualitative research emphasizes depth, quality, and richness of information rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Participants were selected based on their expertise, experience, and direct involvement in procurement systems and AfCFTA-related activities. The study employed purposive sampling as the primary sampling technique to deliberately identify individuals with specialized knowledge relevant to the research topic. In addition, snowball sampling was utilized to identify additional participants through referrals from initial respondents, particularly experts and policymakers who were not easily accessible. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling enhanced the reliability and comprehensiveness of the data collected by ensuring that knowledgeable and experienced participants contributed meaningful insights to the study.

Findings and Discussion

Opportunities for Local Content under AfCFTA

The study indicates that the AfCFTA provides significant opportunities to promote local content across African economies. By creating a single continental market of over 1.3 billion people, AfCFTA allows local suppliers to scale production and access new markets beyond their national borders (UNECA, 2022). For Zimbabwean firms, this presents a chance to increase market share, enhance competitiveness, and participate in regional value chains. Stakeholders emphasized that local content policies, when integrated into procurement strategies, can stimulate domestic industries and encourage innovation.

Interviews revealed that government procurement is a critical lever for promoting local content. Participants noted that tender requirements emphasizing local labor, materials, and technology could incentivize firms to source domestically (UNCTAD, 2022). This aligns with global evidence showing that procurement policies with embedded local content provisions contribute to industrial development, skills transfer, and employment generation (World Bank, 2020).

Regional cooperation under AfCFTA also enhances knowledge sharing and capacity building among local firms. Several respondents highlighted that collaborations with regional industry associations and trade networks enable local suppliers to meet international standards and compete in cross-border tenders. This supports findings from Ghana and Nigeria, where regional integration has strengthened supplier capabilities and promoted intra-African trade (UNEP, 2017).

Furthermore, local content integration in procurement fosters value retention within national economies. Instead of capital outflows through imports, funds are circulated domestically, boosting employment, technology adoption, and SME growth. This multiplier effect is essential for economies like Zimbabwe, where industrialization and job creation are strategic development goals (African Development Bank, 2023). Respondents emphasized that linking local content to AfCFTA trade opportunities can transform procurement into a developmental tool rather than a routine administrative function.

Finally, opportunities extend to sectoral diversification. Key sectors such as agro-processing, construction, and renewable energy stand to benefit from local content integration, enabling domestic firms to upgrade technology, improve production processes, and expand regional market participation. Stakeholders argued that this could accelerate inclusive growth by creating employment across both skilled and unskilled labor segments (UNECA, 2021). In sum, AfCFTA offers a platform for leveraging procurement to strengthen local industries and promote sustainable economic development.

Challenges in Integrating Sustainable Procurement

Despite the opportunities, the study identified several challenges to embedding sustainability in procurement. A dominant issue is institutional weakness, where fragmented agencies, inconsistent enforcement, and lack of technical capacity hinder implementation (Walker & Phillips, 2009). Interviewees noted that many government departments lack clear guidance on how to

operationalize sustainable procurement, leading to superficial compliance or reliance on traditional cost-based decision-making.

Corruption and political interference also emerged as key obstacles. Participants described cases in which procurement decisions favoured politically connected firms, bypassing local-content or sustainability requirements. Such practices undermine policy objectives and reduce the developmental impact of procurement (OECD, 2016). Weak monitoring mechanisms exacerbate the problem, making it difficult to track compliance or evaluate environmental and social outcomes.

Another challenge is the skills gap among procurement professionals. Respondents highlighted limited training in life-cycle costing, environmental impact assessment, and supplier evaluation for sustainability criteria. This aligns with prior studies indicating that lack of technical competence is a major barrier to effective sustainable procurement in African countries (Testa et al., 2016). Without capacity building, even well-intentioned policies fail to achieve intended outcomes.

Financial constraints further limit the adoption of green procurement. Sustainable products and services are often perceived as more expensive, discouraging their integration into public tenders, particularly in resource-constrained economies like Zimbabwe (African Development Bank, 2023). Participants suggested that government incentives, subsidies, or cost-benefit communication could encourage sustainable procurement practices without overburdening budgets.

Lastly, the liberalized trade environment under AfCFTA poses a challenge for local sustainability initiatives. While open markets provide opportunities for growth, they also expose domestic firms to competition from more advanced African suppliers who may have better environmental standards or economies of scale. This tension highlights the need for policies that balance competitiveness with sustainability and local content priorities (African Development Bank, 2019).

Best Practices and Lessons from Regional and Global Experiences

The study identified several best practices that could guide local content and sustainable procurement in Africa. Globally, the European Union's Green Public Procurement framework

demonstrates that procurement can incentivise environmentally and socially responsible suppliers while promoting innovation (Testa et al., 2016). By setting clear sustainability criteria and monitoring compliance, the EU has created a market advantage for green suppliers while promoting long-term social and environmental goals.

Within Africa, Nigeria's local content legislation in the oil and gas sector illustrates effective integration of domestic supplier requirements with capacity-building initiatives (World Bank, 2020). South Africa's Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act similarly incentivises suppliers who meet environmental, social, and industrial participation standards, combining regulatory mandates with technical support (Bolton, 2006). These examples emphasise the importance of clear guidelines, monitoring mechanisms, and complementary capacity-building programs.

Regional coordination under AfCFTA also offers lessons. Participants highlighted that aligning procurement standards and certification processes across countries facilitates cross-border trade while promoting local content. Harmonised policies reduce trade frictions, improve transparency, and expand market access for domestic suppliers (African Development Bank, 2019). Such approaches are particularly relevant for Zimbabwe, where aligning national policies with regional frameworks is critical for leveraging AfCFTA.

Capacity building emerged as another key lesson. Training procurement professionals, engaging industry associations, and creating supplier support programs strengthen the ability of local firms to compete in regional markets (UNCTAD, 2022). Respondents emphasized that technical assistance, workshops, and mentorship can bridge knowledge gaps and promote sustainable procurement adoption.

Finally, transparency and digital procurement platforms enhance compliance and efficiency. Participants noted that open tendering systems and e-procurement solutions reduce corruption, increase accountability, and make it easier to integrate sustainability criteria. This aligns with global best practices, where technology-supported procurement enhances policy adherence and maximises developmental impact (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

Policy Implications for Zimbabwe and Africa

The findings highlight the critical need for policy coherence to maximize the developmental potential of AfCFTA. Zimbabwe and similar economies must align national procurement frameworks with local content policies, sustainability standards, and AfCFTA trade commitments (African Development Bank, 2023). Policies should balance trade liberalization with protective measures for domestic industries, ensuring that local SMEs are competitive in both domestic and regional markets.

Institutional capacity strengthening is essential. Ministries, regulatory agencies, and procurement units must coordinate effectively to enforce local content and sustainability requirements. Interviewees stressed the importance of capacity-building programs, monitoring mechanisms, and transparent reporting as central to improving policy outcomes (UNCTAD, 2022). Weak institutions undermine even well-designed policies, highlighting the need for governance reforms.

Financial and incentive structures also require attention. Governments can provide tax incentives, subsidies, and preferential financing to local suppliers that comply with sustainability and local-content standards. Such mechanisms reduce barriers to participation, particularly for SMEs, and encourage adoption of green technologies (UNEP, 2017). The alignment of fiscal policies with procurement objectives amplifies developmental impact.

Regional collaboration under AfCFTA is another critical policy implication. Harmonized procurement standards, certification processes, and technical support across countries reduce barriers for domestic suppliers and expand their market access. This coordination enhances competitiveness while maintaining sustainability and local content priorities (African Development Bank, 2019). Zimbabwe can benefit by actively participating in regional policy forums and industry networks.

Finally, policy design must integrate inclusive growth and SDG principles. Local content and sustainable procurement should aim to create employment, promote industrial upgrading, and advance environmental stewardship. Interviewees emphasized that the ultimate goal of procurement policies under AfCFTA should not be limited to trade compliance but should actively contribute to long-term socio-economic development (UNECA, 2021). Policies that are

comprehensive, coherent, and enforced are likely to yield significant benefits for both domestic economies and the continent at large.

Alignment with Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development Goals

The study reveals that local content and sustainable procurement have direct implications for inclusive growth and SDG achievement. By prioritizing domestic suppliers and labor, procurement policies generate employment opportunities, reduce income inequality, and stimulate local industrialization (UNCTAD, 2022). Respondents emphasized that procurement is not merely administrative but a strategic tool for social and economic transformation.

Sustainable procurement aligns closely with SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) by ensuring that economic activities are environmentally sound and socially equitable (Testa et al., 2016). Interviewees highlighted that integrating sustainability criteria into procurement encourages suppliers to adopt green technologies, improve labor conditions, and minimize environmental degradation, creating long-term benefits for communities.

The AfCFTA framework enhances these outcomes by enabling regional supply chain integration. Local suppliers can expand into new markets while maintaining domestic employment and sustainability standards. Stakeholders noted that cross-border trade under AfCFTA presents opportunities for scaling production, technology transfer, and regional collaboration, all of which support inclusive growth objectives (African Development Bank, 2019).

However, misalignment between policy goals and institutional capacity can undermine these benefits. The study found that when procurement practices prioritize cost over local content or sustainability, the developmental impact is significantly reduced. This highlights the importance of strong governance, monitoring, and capacity-building programs to ensure that procurement delivers on SDG targets and inclusive growth goals (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that procurement, when strategically designed, can serve as a powerful instrument for achieving inclusive economic development, environmental stewardship, and regional integration. Local content and sustainable procurement, aligned with AfCFTA regulations and SDG principles, provide a pathway for African countries, including Zimbabwe, to harness trade liberalization for sustainable, equitable growth.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the first recommendation is to strengthen institutional frameworks for procurement in Zimbabwe and other African countries. Effective local content and sustainable procurement require well-coordinated regulatory bodies with clear mandates and oversight mechanisms. Establishing a central procurement authority or strengthening existing institutions can ensure consistent enforcement of local content requirements, monitor compliance, and provide guidance to government departments and private firms (African Development Bank, 2023). Institutional capacity must also include mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and digital monitoring to minimize corruption and enhance policy adherence.

Second, the study recommends integrating local content into AfCFTA-aligned procurement policies. Policymakers should ensure that tender documents, procurement guidelines, and regulatory frameworks explicitly specify local content requirements, including the use of domestic labor, materials, and technology. In addition, policies should offer incentives for domestic suppliers, such as preferential scoring, tax breaks, or access to finance, to encourage compliance and strengthen local industry competitiveness (OECD, 2016). Aligning these policies with AfCFTA obligations ensures that trade liberalization complements, rather than undermines, domestic development objectives.

Third, capacity building and professional development for procurement practitioners is critical. The study found significant skills gaps in integrating sustainability and local content criteria into procurement processes. Training programs, workshops, and mentorship initiatives can equip procurement officers with knowledge in environmental impact assessment, life-cycle costing, and supplier evaluation (Testa et al., 2016). Strengthening technical competence will enable organizations to implement sustainable procurement effectively, ensuring that economic, social, and environmental goals are met.

Fourth, governments should establish financial and technical support mechanisms for local suppliers. Many SMEs face challenges in meeting quality standards, accessing technology, or competing with larger regional firms. Providing subsidies, grants, or preferential financing can lower entry barriers, promote industrial upgrading, and enhance the capacity of domestic suppliers to participate in AfCFTA-driven markets (UNEP, 2017). Technical assistance, such as supplier

development programs, certification support, and mentorship, will also help firms comply with sustainability and local content standards, boosting overall market competitiveness.

Fifth, the study recommends regional harmonization and collaboration under AfCFTA. Countries should coordinate procurement standards, sustainability criteria, and certification procedures to facilitate cross-border trade and enable domestic firms to compete effectively in regional markets (African Development Bank, 2019). Collaborative initiatives, such as joint industry associations, regional supplier development programs, and knowledge-sharing platforms, can enhance local content integration, strengthen supply chains, and ensure sustainable procurement practices are consistently applied across member states.

Finally, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement should be embedded into procurement practices. Governments and organizations must establish robust frameworks for assessing compliance with local content and sustainability requirements, measuring economic, social, and environmental outcomes, and refining policies accordingly. Utilizing digital tools, dashboards, and reporting mechanisms can improve transparency, accountability, and data-driven decision-making (UNCTAD, 2022). Continuous evaluation ensures that procurement strategies remain responsive to evolving market conditions and AfCFTA dynamics, thereby maximizing developmental impact.

Conclusion

This study has examined the critical role of local content and sustainable procurement in maximizing the developmental benefits of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The findings highlight that procurement is not merely an administrative or cost-driven function but a strategic tool for economic transformation. By integrating local content policies and sustainability principles, African economies can stimulate domestic industrial development, create employment, and enhance competitiveness within regional markets. The study underscores that these interventions are particularly relevant for Zimbabwe, where industrialization and inclusive growth remain central national priorities.

The research demonstrates that AfCFTA provides significant opportunities for local firms to access regional markets, participate in value chains, and benefit from knowledge transfer. Local content requirements embedded in procurement processes can ensure that domestic industries

capture economic value, retain employment, and benefit from skills development. However, the findings also emphasize that these opportunities are contingent upon strong institutional frameworks, effective enforcement mechanisms, and professional capacity in procurement. Without such structures, the potential for inclusive economic growth may be undermined, with foreign suppliers dominating local markets.

Sustainable procurement emerges as a complementary strategy that aligns procurement practices with environmental, social, and economic objectives. By incorporating sustainability criteria into tendering and supplier evaluation, governments and firms can promote environmentally responsible production, fair labor practices, and long-term socio-economic benefits. The study found that a lack of skills, weak monitoring, and financial constraints often hinder sustainable procurement in African countries. Addressing these challenges requires targeted capacity-building programs, financial incentives, and technological support for local suppliers and procurement professionals.

The study also highlights the importance of regional coordination under AfCFTA. Harmonized procurement standards, certification processes, and supplier development initiatives can facilitate cross-border trade while protecting domestic industries and promoting sustainability. Lessons from Nigeria, South Africa, and the European Union demonstrate that combining regulatory mandates with capacity-building, incentives, and transparent monitoring systems yields effective results. For Zimbabwe and similar economies, active participation in regional frameworks and alignment of national policies with AfCFTA provisions are essential for maximizing developmental outcomes.

In conclusion, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on procurement, local content, and sustainable development in Africa. It provides evidence that strategically designed procurement policies can advance inclusive growth, strengthen domestic industries, and ensure that AfCFTA's liberalized trade environment benefits local communities. The research reinforces the notion that integrating local content and sustainability into procurement is not optional but necessary for achieving equitable and long-term socio-economic development. Policymakers, industry stakeholders, and regional organizations must act collaboratively to harness procurement as a lever for industrialization, employment generation, and sustainable development across the continent.

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