



Effectiveness and Efficiency of Public Procurement Processes for IFAD-Funded Agricultural Projects in Zimbabwe: Lessons from the Smallholder Agriculture Cluster Project

Takesure Kudai

Department of Public Management and Economics, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

Email: tkudai77@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness and efficiency of public procurement processes in IFAD-supported agricultural projects in Zimbabwe, namely the Smallholder Agriculture Cluster Project (SACP). Zimbabwe allocates around 60% of its national budget to public procurement, but institutional weaknesses such as corruption, political meddling, incapability, and insufficient transparency undermine its success. Through a mixed-methods approach, consisting of surveys and interviews across five of the more diverse provinces, the research assesses buying behavior, attitudes among stakeholders, and business choke-points. Findings reveal moderate perceptions of transparency, high issues related to delays, limited awareness of policy, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Despite improvements in compliance and supplier quality, issues of long cycle times and capacity shortcomings persist. The research highlights systemic vulnerabilities such as weak institutional controls, weak digital infrastructure, and misdirected priorities that seem to erode value for money and project success. Drawing on institutional, principal-agent, and transaction cost theories, the research elucidates internal and external drivers influencing procurement performance. The research advocates for better regulation systems, capacity building, and the adoption of technologies such as e-procurement systems to enhance transparency and accountability. Recommendations emphasize tailored training, policy reforms, and digital innovations to optimize resource utilization, reduce delays, and foster sustainable development outcomes in Zimbabwe's rural agricultural sector.

Subject Areas

Supply Chain Management

Keywords

Transparency, Efficiency, Corruption, Procurement, Technology

1. Introduction

This public procurement, a critical component of government expenditure, is particularly significant in Zimbabwe, where it accounts for an estimated 60% of the national budget, underscoring its pivotal role in national development despite the country's liquidity challenges and lack of balance of payments support [1]. This substantial allocation necessitates robust and transparent procurement systems to ensure judicious utilization of public funds and to mitigate inefficiencies that could impede service delivery and economic growth [2]. However, the efficacy of public procurement in Zimbabwe's rural district councils has been questioned due to observed misalignments between procurement processes and the achievement of value for money, often exacerbated by political interference and corruption [1]. This research seeks to address these concerns by evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of public procurement within IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe, specifically focusing on the Smallholder Agriculture Cluster Project [2].

2. Background of the Study

The public procurement landscape in Zimbabwe is characterized by persistent challenges that undermine service delivery and national development objectives, prompting calls for systemic improvements to ensure accountability and optimal resource allocation [1] [3]. Despite efforts to establish transparent, fair, and cost-effective procurement mechanisms, such as the creation of the Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, the public sector's purchasing system continues to face criticism for its perceived inefficiency and for contributing to delays or abandonment of crucial government projects [3]. Indeed, public procurement in Zimbabwe continues to be plagued by inefficiencies, including rent-seeking behavior, a lack of transparency, and poor adherence to established procurement procedures, which collectively compromise the integrity and effectiveness of public spending [2] [3]. These challenges often lead to a failure in achieving the primary objectives of public procurement, which include cost reduction through competition, fostering transparency, safeguarding public funds, and reducing corruption to enhance public service delivery [1]. The persistent challenges within Zimbabwe's public procurement system, including the limited application of the Most Economically Advantageous Tender criterion in rural areas and resistance to electronic procurement systems, further compound these issues, hindering

governmental objectives and sustainable development [3]-[5]. Consequently, these systemic shortcomings not only impede the timely and effective implementation of projects but also erode public trust and deter foreign investment [5]. This research, therefore, aims to critically examine the operational dynamics of public procurement within IFAD-funded agricultural initiatives in Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on identifying areas for enhancing effectiveness and efficiency to mitigate these adverse outcomes.

Smallholder Agriculture Cluster Project (2021-2027)

The Smallholder Agriculture Cluster Project (SACP) is a six-year development project financed jointly by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), OPEC Fund, the Government of Zimbabwe and the private sector. SACP supports the transformation of smallholder agriculture in Zimbabwe through private sector-led value chain development. The project operates in the five provinces of Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Matabeleland North and Midlands. It consists of three interlinked components: Component 1: Inclusive Value Chain Development, Component 2: Climate-Proofed Value Chain Infrastructure and Component 3: Policy and Institutional Support and Project Coordination. While the lead agency of the project is the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development (MLAFWRD), all SACP activities include proactive co-operations with the private sector, including the farming community, small and medium enterprises and larger processing and marketing companies in key agricultural value chains. This particular project, a crucial intervention in Zimbabwe's agricultural sector, aims to bolster food security and economic resilience among smallholder farmers, who constitute a significant portion of the country's agricultural producers [3]. However, the success of such initiatives heavily relies on robust and transparent procurement processes to ensure that resources are utilized optimally and effectively for the benefit of the intended beneficiaries [1]. Given Zimbabwe's history of public resource mismanagement and a pervasive trust deficit between the government and its citizens, examining the procurement and distribution trends within this project is particularly pertinent [1] [5]. Analyzing the effectiveness and efficiency of public procurement within IFAD-funded agricultural projects, therefore, contributes to a broader understanding of how procurement practices influence developmental outcomes in contexts marked by governance challenges [1].

3. Literature Review

A comprehensive review of existing literature reveals that public procurement in developing economies frequently grapples with issues such as a lack of professional expertise, inadequate regulatory frameworks, and susceptibility to corruption, all of which compromise its effectiveness and efficiency [6]. Furthermore, research indicates that between 50% and 70% of government budgets in developing nations are allocated to procurement-related expenditures, highlighting the

critical need for sound policies to prevent wastage and achieve economic growth [7]. Despite legislative efforts aimed at improving procurement processes, malpractices persist, with global illicit public procurement estimated to range from \$390 - 400 billion annually, and African nations alone experiencing an estimated \$148 billion in annual misconduct [7]. These alarming figures underscore the pervasive nature of corruption and inefficiency within public procurement, particularly in developing contexts, necessitating a deeper examination of underlying systemic vulnerabilities [8].

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This extensive financial impact necessitates rigorous academic inquiry into the theoretical underpinnings that explain and predict procurement outcomes, particularly within the agricultural sector [6]. The subsequent sections will delineate a robust methodological framework, encompassing research design, data collection, and analytical approaches, to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of public procurement mechanisms within the specified IFAD-funded projects [8]. Such an evaluation is crucial for identifying specific challenges and formulating evidence-based recommendations to enhance the integrity and performance of public procurement in similar development initiatives [6]. Specifically, this study draws upon institutional theory to explore how external pressures and internal norms shape procurement practices within IFAD-funded agricultural projects, offering a nuanced understanding of their impact on effectiveness and efficiency [7]. Furthermore, principal-agent theory will be applied to analyze the dynamics between procuring entities and suppliers, shedding light on potential conflicts of interest and information asymmetries that can undermine procurement integrity [8]. Finally, transaction cost economics will provide a lens through which to examine the costs associated with different contractual arrangements and governance structures, thereby informing strategies for optimizing procurement processes in complex agricultural development contexts [9] [10].

3.2. Conceptual Framework

This framework integrates various elements, such as stakeholder engagement, transparency mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives, to provide a holistic understanding of how these factors interact to influence procurement performance. It specifically delineates how effective oversight, competitive bidding processes, and robust contractual enforcement contribute to successful project delivery and accountability within IFAD-funded agricultural initiatives. The framework also considers the role of technology adoption, such as e-procurement systems, in enhancing efficiency and reducing opportunities for corruption, drawing insights from the broader literature on Procurement 4.0 [11]. Moreover, the conceptual framework acknowledges the interplay between socio-economic objectives and commercial considerations, recognizing that procurement in agricultural development projects often balances the need for cost-effectiveness with broader de-

developmental goals like supporting local small and medium-sized enterprises [12] [13]. Additionally, the framework emphasizes the importance of contingency theory in adapting procurement strategies to the unique contextual factors and evolving institutional landscapes of Zimbabwe [12].

3.3. Public Procurement in Zimbabwe

The public procurement system in Zimbabwe has undergone significant reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, accountability, and efficiency, mirroring global trends towards good governance in public spending. These reforms, largely enshrined in the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act (Chapter 22: 23), seek to align national practices with international best standards to optimize resource utilization in publicly funded projects [5]. Despite these legislative advancements, challenges persist in the practical implementation and enforcement of these regulations, often leading to inefficiencies and suboptimal outcomes in agricultural projects [13]. These challenges include a scarcity of competent procurement staff, susceptibility to political influence, and insufficient monitoring of contract performance, which collectively hinder the realization of value for money in public projects [8]. Moreover, issues such as fiscal discrepancies, underdeveloped digital infrastructure, and limited stakeholder participation further exacerbate these challenges, hindering the full operationalization of procurement reforms [9]. Consequently, enhancing accountability in public procurement within Zimbabwe remains a critical concern, as weaknesses in government oversight functions continue to impede the effective management of public resources [13] [14].

3.4. Effectiveness of Public Procurement

Understanding the effectiveness of public procurement within IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe requires an assessment of its capacity to achieve desired developmental outcomes, such as improved food security, poverty reduction, and sustainable agricultural practices. This involves evaluating whether procurement processes facilitate the timely acquisition of appropriate goods, works, and services that directly contribute to project goals, while also adhering to principles of fairness, transparency, and value for money [8]. Furthermore, it involves scrutinizing the extent to which these procurement activities support broader national agricultural policies and initiatives, such as those promoting enhanced agricultural productivity or climate-proofed input schemes [15]. This evaluation extends to assessing the long-term sustainability of procured interventions and their direct impact on the livelihoods of smallholder farmers [8]. It also encompasses an analysis of how procurement policies influence market dynamics, local economic development, and equitable access to resources for marginalized communities [13]. Moreover, the effectiveness of public procurement is inherently linked to its accountability mechanisms, particularly in ensuring that procurements are free from ethical breaches and biases that can distort market competition and undermine public trust [8] [16].

3.5. Efficiency of Public Procurement

The efficiency of public procurement, particularly within IFAD-funded agricultural projects, concerns the optimization of resource utilization to achieve maximum output with minimal waste [17]. This includes minimizing lead times, reducing administrative overheads, and ensuring that procured goods and services meet specified quality standards at the lowest possible cost over their entire life cycle [13]. It also encompasses an assessment of how well procurement procedures streamline operations, reduce transaction costs, and leverage economies of scale to enhance overall project performance. Furthermore, efficiency analysis in public procurement now frequently incorporates both monetary and non-monetary criteria, particularly in economically advanced nations, reflecting a broader trend towards holistic performance measurement [18]. This comprehensive view of efficiency extends beyond mere financial metrics to encompass social, environmental, and developmental impacts, ensuring that projects deliver sustainable value. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of efficiency must account for the complex interplay between cost-effectiveness and broader societal benefits, aligning with the core principles of public procurement [19] [20].

3.6. Challenges in Public Procurement in Developing Countries

Developing nations frequently encounter distinct hurdles in public procurement, stemming from a confluence of institutional, infrastructural, and governance deficiencies [8]. These challenges often manifest as limited competition, inadequate legal frameworks, and pervasive issues such as corruption and lack of technical capacity [21]. Specifically, in public sector agricultural projects, these challenges are compounded by issues like government bureaucracy, political interference, and unfairness in procurement contracts and tendering processes [8]. A critical aspect contributing to these inefficiencies is the lack of competent procurement staff and insufficient mechanisms for contract monitoring, which impede the effective implementation of projects and contribute to ethical lapses [6]. Moreover, the absence of robust digital infrastructure further exacerbates these problems, limiting transparency and hindering efficient information exchange in the procurement cycle [1]. These systemic issues underscore the imperative for comprehensive reforms that address not only legislative gaps but also the practical limitations in human resources and technological adoption to foster a more resilient and transparent procurement ecosystem [18] [22]. This includes a thorough review of bid evaluation criteria, which can range from a focus on the lowest price to a multi-criteria assessment, to ensure the optimal selection of suppliers and contractors [18]. Such evaluations highlight the necessity of balancing cost-efficiency with considerations for quality, sustainability, and socio-economic impact [12]. This approach aligns with contemporary procurement paradigms that emphasize social value and broader development objectives beyond mere economic efficiency [23]-[25]. Moreover, the traditional emphasis on compliance and cost reduction in public procurement, prevalent in many developing countries, often stifles inno-

vation and agility [25] [26].

3.7. IFAD-Funded Agricultural Projects and Procurement Practices

These projects often face unique procurement challenges due to their focus on rural development, which necessitates flexible approaches tailored to local contexts and capacities. For instance, challenges such as inadequate planning, frequent design changes, and insufficient contract monitoring mechanisms commonly hinder the successful execution of these initiatives [8]. This is further complicated by the need to navigate diverse regulatory environments and capacity constraints of local suppliers, which can limit competitive bidding and affect project timelines. Therefore, IFAD-funded projects often require innovative procurement strategies that balance international standards with local realities, fostering community participation and building local capacity. This may frequently involve employing methods such as community-based procurement, direct contracting with farmer organizations, and integrating local content requirements to enhance project sustainability and ownership [3]. Furthermore, these projects encounter difficulties stemming from poorly defined criteria for tender preparation and evaluation, which impede objective assessment and subsequent monitoring [27]. The absence of robust systems for transaction recording and documentation further exacerbates these challenges, diminishing transparency and accountability throughout the procurement lifecycle [28]. These issues collectively contribute to delays, cost overruns, and ultimately compromise the developmental outcomes intended for the agricultural communities they serve [8]. Addressing these systemic weaknesses necessitates a re-evaluation of procurement guidelines, integrating principles of social value and sustainability to achieve long-term community benefits [8] [29].

4. Methodology

This section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques employed to investigate the effectiveness and efficiency of public procurement within IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively assess the multi-faceted dimensions of procurement performance and its impact on project outcomes.

4.1. Research Design

Specifically, a convergent parallel mixed-methods design was utilized, allowing for simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the procurement landscape. This design facilitated the triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn regarding procurement effectiveness and efficiency. This approach enabled the researchers to cross-validate insights derived from statistical analyses with rich, contextual narratives from qualitative inquiries, thereby

offering a more robust interpretation of the factors influencing procurement outcomes. The integration of diverse data sources permitted a nuanced exploration of procurement challenges and successes within the specific context of IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe, a region often characterized by unique socio-economic and institutional landscapes [8]. This methodological triangulation ensured a robust and comprehensive understanding of the procurement landscape, addressing the identified literature gaps concerning IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe.

4.2. Study Area

The study focused on five provinces within Zimbabwe—Mashonaland West, East, Central, Midlands and Matabeleland North—selected due to their significant agricultural activity and the presence of ongoing IFAD-funded project (SACP). These regions represent a diverse range of agricultural practices and socio-economic conditions, offering a comprehensive context for evaluating procurement effectiveness. Specifically, the Goromonzi and Zvimba districts, situated in Mashonaland East and West respectively, were included due to their prime agricultural land, suitability for diversified production, and existing engagement with agricultural development projects. The selection of these diverse regions enabled an examination of how varying local conditions and institutional capacities influence procurement outcomes in the context of IFAD-funded agricultural initiatives.

4.3. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected between January and February 2024 using a combination of structured questionnaires for quantitative data and semi-structured interviews for qualitative insights. This multi-pronged approach facilitated the triangulation of data, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the study's findings. Structured questionnaires were administered to a sample of 854 smallholder farmers, 40 extension staff, and 8 development workers to gather socio-economic data, farm size information, digital advisory service usage, and perceived impacts of the procurement processes (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Survey indicators and scales for effectiveness and efficiency.

Construct	Indicator	Operational Definition	Scale/Response options	Scoring Method
Effectiveness	Achievement of project objectives	Extent to which procurement processes contributed to project goals	5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree	Average score across relevant items (higher scores indicate greater effectiveness)
	Timeliness of procurement processes	Degree to which procurement activities were completed within scheduled timelines	5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree	Average score; scores ≥ 4 suggest high timeliness

Continued

	Quality of procured goods/services	Satisfaction with procurement quality and adherence to standards	5-point Likert scale: 1 = Very Dissatisfied to 5 = Very Satisfied	Mean score; higher indicates better quality
	Stakeholder satisfaction with procurement outcomes	Perceived satisfaction of project implementers and beneficiaries with procurement results	5-point Likert scale: 1 = Very Dissatisfied to 5 = Very Satisfied	Mean score; higher scores reflect greater satisfaction
Efficiency	Cost-effectiveness of procurement processes	Extent to which procurement was achieved within budget constraints	5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree	Average score; scores ≥ 4 indicate high cost-efficiency
	Processing time per procurement cycle	Average number of days from procurement initiation to completion	Continuous variable (number of days)	Shorter durations indicate higher efficiency
	Number of procurement procedures per project	Volume of procurement activities undertaken within the project period	Count of procedures	Fewer procedures per outcome suggest higher efficiency
	Resource utilization in procurement (staff and financial)	Adequacy and optimal use of resources during procurement	5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree	Mean score; higher indicates better resource utilization

Notes: Each indicator was measured through survey items rated on a Likert scale, allowing for quantitative analysis of perceptions and self-reported data. Operational definitions were crafted to capture specific facets of effectiveness and efficiency relevant to procurement processes in agricultural projects. Scores were computed as averages or sums, with higher values generally indicating better performance in the respective construct.

4.4. Data Analysis

For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, complementing the quantitative findings. The quantitative data, primarily collected through structured questionnaires, were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to quantify procurement efficiency, effectiveness, and their correlations with project outcomes, utilizing IBM SPSS Statistics 29 Software for comprehensive analysis. This comprehensive analytical approach allowed for a robust examination of the complex interplay between procurement practices and their tangible effects on agricultural project success in Zimbabwe.

5. Summary of Findings

This section presents the findings derived from the rigorous application of the outlined methodology, detailing the outcomes of both quantitative statistical analyses and qualitative thematic interpretations regarding procurement effectiveness and efficiency in IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe. The results are organized to first present an overview of the sampled participants' demographic and project-related characteristics, followed by an in-depth exploration of the iden-

tified efficiencies and inefficiencies within the procurement processes [30] [31]. Subsequently, this section delves into how these procurement dynamics influence project performance and farmer outcomes, integrating insights from both quantitative metrics and qualitative narratives.

5.1. Response Rate

The response rate was 64%. This fairly remarkable engagement underscores the significance and relevance of the research area within the context of agricultural projects funded by IFAD in Zimbabwe. The high participation rate not only ensures the representativeness of the sample but also enhances the credibility and validity of the findings. [4] wrote that a response rate of 60% is acceptable, specifically if the researcher is dealing with special interest groups, though this response rate is generally unattainable for populations with little interest in the subject under investigation.

5.2. Transparency of SACP Procurement Processes

The opinions of the respondents concerning transparency in SACP procurement processes were varied as evident from the analysis. 45.7% strongly agree that the processes are transparent in procurement, while 45.8% remained neutral and 19.6% strongly disagreed. This discrepancy represents varied experiences and impressions about levels of transparency. Open-ended answers imply that some of the respondents value the availability of competitive procurement procedures and adherence to established rules, emphasizing proper procedures such as requisitions, supplier selection, and payment as being key to accountability. Others spoke of limited involvement or details regarding procurement operations, which might influence their perceptions in a negative manner. The results support the position of openness in guaranteeing trust, accountability, and effectiveness in procurement, more so for agricultural projects financed by IFAD in Zimbabwe. The differing viewpoints highlight the complexities involved in maintaining transparent procurement systems and the importance of continuous interactions with stakeholders and ongoing improvements to ensure perceived weaknesses are eliminated and transparency in SACP's procurement is maximized.

5.3. Measurement of the Efficiency and Effectiveness of SACP Procurement System

The evaluation of SACP procurement system reflects positive general attitudes across several key measures. 73.9% of interviewees agree that there is improvement in compliance, reflecting higher adherence to rules and policies, improving governance and accountability. Similarly, 82.6% observe a decline in supplier defect rates, which points to better quality and reliability of suppliers. Over half (56.5%) view purchase order and invoice accuracy as improved, which supports improvement in procurement processes. However, opinions are more divided on other subjects. While 47.8% of respondents view emergency buys as lower, fully 52.2%

are neutral, indicating doubt or variation in experience. Supplier availability and procurement advantage both show similar variation, with around 39% - 47% agreement but high neutral reporting, again suggesting the need for greater clarity. Price competitiveness is viewed more positively, with 56.5% viewing this as better, though 34.8% is neutral. Most notably, there are negative attitudes towards procurement cycle time; 19.6% assent it has decreased, 45.7% dissent, and 34.8% remain neutral, indicating very little improvement or possible delays. Overall, however, there are strong positive attitudes towards quality and compliance improvement, but other areas indicate mixed or neutral views, indicating room for targeted improvement in the SACP procurement system.

5.4. Challenges Related to the SACP Procurement System

SACP Procurement System review identified several key challenges. A clear 82.6% of the respondents admitted to limited procurement policy and regulation knowledge, which indicates the need for capacity development. Additionally, 37.0% confessed to being unaware of such policies, further hampering effective procurement. Trust problems from suppliers were noticed by 17.4%, undermining system confidence. All respondents (100%) agreed that administrative bureaucracy in the procurement administration hinders efficiency, with frustrations and delays. Free text responses added other issues, such as poor prioritization by technical personnel, delays in budget approvals, centralization of procurement, low remuneration, and competitive bidding for even minor goods and services. All these issues resonate with issues noted in other public procurement cases, where corruption, policy complexity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies are prevalent. On the whole, procedural intricacies and knowledge gaps are key impediments to effective procurement in the SACP system.

6. Discussion

This section critically analyzes the presented findings, contextualizing them within existing literature on public procurement in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. It synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative results, exploring their implications for policy and practice within IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe, and identifies areas for further research. The discourse will delve into how the identified challenges align with broader issues in African public sector financial management, such as inadequate education, legislative constraints, and a lack of political support for reforms [32]. These systemic issues often manifest as government bureaucracy, frequent personnel changes, and improper planning, significantly hindering procurement efficiency and project outcomes [8]. Furthermore, political influence and a lack of competent procurement staff also contribute to significant delays and biases in procurement plans and contract tendering within public-sector agricultural development projects [2].

The absence of clearly defined project scopes, coupled with inadequate infra-

structure for storage and transportation, further complicates the procurement landscape, exacerbating delays and increasing overall project costs [5]. These challenges in turn contribute to an unstable procurement environment, where actions addressing one issue often influence others, making comprehensive and integrated solutions imperative for sustainable improvement [8]. This holistic perspective underscores the necessity of a multi-pronged approach that addresses not only procedural weaknesses but also underlying governance deficits and infrastructural limitations [32]. Moreover, an examination of accountability mechanisms reveals significant weaknesses, as the current system often lacks the robustness required to ensure value for money and discourage corrupt practices [16] [23].

6.1. Connecting Empirical Findings to Institutional Theory

The study's findings on the varied perceptions of transparency and the significant knowledge gaps regarding procurement policies strongly resonate with Institutional Theory. The observation that "45.7% strongly agree that the processes are transparent in procurement, while 45.8% remained neutral and 19.6% strongly disagreed" indicates a divergence in how formal institutional structures (e.g., competitive procurement procedures, established rules) are perceived and enacted. While some respondents value adherence to formal procedures, others experienced "limited involvement or details regarding procurement operations", leading to negative perceptions. This suggests that the mere existence of formal rules does not guarantee uniform understanding or application, a core tenet of institutional theory which distinguishes between formal and informal institutions [17] [22]. Research indicates that formal compliance might not translate to effective implementation if there's a disconnect between policy and practice [18].

Furthermore, the finding that "82.6% of the respondents admitted to limited procurement policy and regulation knowledge, which indicates the need for capacity development", and "37.0% confessed to being unaware of such policies" points to a profound challenge in institutionalizing best practices. This lack of knowledge acts as a barrier to normative and cognitive isomorphic pressures, where organizations adopt similar structures and practices due to shared values or beliefs [8]. When actors are unaware of or misunderstand policies, the informal norms and existing practices often continue to dominate, hindering the implementation of intended reforms. This supports the broader literature indicating that legislative constraints and inadequate education contribute to persistent challenges in public sector financial management in African contexts [32]. The unanimous agreement on "administrative bureaucracy in the procurement administration hinders efficiency" further illustrates how institutional inertia and complex formal structures can create barriers, even when the intention is to streamline processes [16] [27] [33]. Political considerations and personal agendas can also strongly constrain the evolution of regulatory frameworks for procurement in developing economies [4].

6.2. Analyzing Empirical Findings through Principal-Agent Theory

The empirical findings related to inefficiencies and challenges directly reflect the complexities inherent in Principal-Agent Theory. The study reveals a concerning “decline in trust from suppliers was noticed by 17.4%”. This lack of trust is a classic symptom of agency problems, where information asymmetry and conflicting interests between the procuring entity (principal) and suppliers (agents) can lead to opportunistic behavior [5] [12]. When suppliers perceive a lack of transparency or fairness, their trust erodes, potentially impacting competition and quality of bids. The “limited involvement or details regarding procurement operations” experienced by some respondents could be interpreted as a failure of the principal to provide sufficient information, making it difficult to prevent corruption [8].

Moreover, the qualitative insights regarding “poor prioritization by technical personnel, delays in budget approvals, centralization of procurement, low remuneration” all point to potential agency issues. Poor prioritization and delays by personnel (agents) can stem from divergent goals or inadequate incentives, where their actions do not align with the principal’s objective of efficient project delivery. Low remuneration can create incentives for rent-seeking behavior, a common problem where agents exploit their position for personal gain at the expense of the principal [4]. The documented “susceptibility to political influence” further exacerbates this, as external pressures can induce agents to deviate from their mandate, thereby undermining the integrity and effectiveness of public spending [8]. An empirical evaluation found that e-procurement has the potential to reduce corruption by addressing information asymmetry and enhancing transparency and accountability, issues central to principal-agent conflicts [2].

6.3. Understanding Empirical Findings with Transaction Cost Economics

The results regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the SACP procurement system provide concrete evidence for analysis through Transaction Cost Economics. The finding that “there are negative attitudes towards procurement cycle time; 19.6% assent it has decreased, 45.7% dissent, and 34.8% remain neutral” clearly indicates high transaction costs. Lengthy procurement cycle times represent significant costs in terms of delays, lost opportunities, and administrative overheads, contradicting the objective of minimizing lead times [17]. The qualitative feedback detailing “administrative bureaucracy”, “delays in budget approvals”, and “competitive bidding for even minor goods and services” all point to high ex-ante (search and information) and ex-post (monitoring and enforcement) transaction costs [32]. For instance, a country-level assessment in Russia found that transaction costs for small purchases could exceed the budget savings from competitive procurement, suggesting a need to simplify regulations for minor procurements [8].

While some positive aspects like “improvement in compliance” (73.9% agreement) and “decline in supplier defect rates” (82.6% agreement) might suggest ef-

forts to reduce quality-related transaction costs and ensure asset specificity, the persistence of delays and bureaucratic hurdles indicates that overall transaction costs remain a significant impediment. The “poor prioritization by technical personnel” can lead to increased haggling costs or a need for more extensive contract specifications to mitigate opportunism, further driving up transaction costs. The issues identified resonate with previous studies on public procurement failures, linking them to high transaction costs and governmental capacity limitations [12]. The challenges with e-procurement adoption in Zimbabwe, as highlighted in the background, also underscore the reluctance or difficulty in implementing mechanisms that could potentially reduce these transaction costs and optimize project timelines [8] [19].

7. Comparison with Previous Studies

Previous scholarly works on public procurement in Zimbabwe highlight recurring issues such as a lack of transparency, susceptibility to political interference, and inadequate legal frameworks, which resonate strongly with the challenges observed within the SACP [1] [2]. These studies consistently point to a need for strengthened institutional capacity, enhanced legal oversight, and a reduction in political influence to foster a more efficient and equitable procurement landscape [32]-[34]. Similarly, a review of public procurement in South Africa revealed persistent challenges despite various reforms, emphasizing the need for well-trained procurement officials and a strategic refocusing of the procurement process [35] [36]. Moreover, poor service delivery and a lack of proper planning are significant problems affecting operational procurement processes in the Zimbabwean public sector [1]. This corroborates findings that link procurement inefficiencies to broader government expenditure and project implementation failures, particularly given that a substantial portion of government spending in Zimbabwe is allocated to public procurement [3]. The challenges experienced in Zimbabwean public procurement are not unique, mirroring those in other developing nations where the efficacy of public sector purchasing systems is frequently undermined by similar factors [3] [37].

Limitations of the Study

Despite the comprehensive nature of this study, certain limitations must be acknowledged, particularly regarding the generalizability of findings from a single case study to the broader context of IFAD-funded projects across diverse regions. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data from project stakeholders, while valuable, may introduce an element of subjective bias that could influence the interpretation of certain outcomes. Additionally, the scope of this research was confined to a specific project within Zimbabwe, potentially limiting the direct applicability of its conclusions to other agricultural development initiatives with varying operational contexts and funding structures. Future research could benefit from comparative studies across multiple IFAD-funded projects in different countries to

identify common challenges and best practices.

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that, despite notable improvements, the public procurement processes for IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe face significant systemic challenges that undermine their effectiveness and efficiency. Institutional weaknesses such as inadequate capacity, limited transparency, bureaucratic delays, and susceptibility to corruption persist, impeding optimal resource utilization and project outcomes. The findings underscore that formal regulations alone are insufficient; implementation gaps, knowledge deficits, and entrenched informal norms continue to hinder reform efforts. The application of institutional, principal-agent, and transaction cost theories elucidates how internal and external pressures, information asymmetries, and high transaction costs contribute to procurement inefficiencies [38]. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach: strengthening regulatory frameworks, capacity building for procurement personnel, and embracing digital innovations such as e-procurement systems to enhance transparency, reduce delays, and foster accountability. Tailored policy reforms, continuous stakeholder engagement, and leveraging emerging technologies are critical to improving procurement practices. Ultimately, enhancing procurement effectiveness and efficiency in Zimbabwe's rural development initiatives is vital for maximizing developmental outcomes, promoting sustainable agriculture, and rebuilding trust in public resource management. By implementing these targeted interventions, Zimbabwe can better harness its substantial public procurement budget towards achieving resilient and inclusive agricultural growth [33] [38].

9. Recommendations

To address these multi-faceted issues, several recommendations are proposed, aiming to bolster the effectiveness and efficiency of public procurement within IFAD-funded agricultural projects in Zimbabwe. These recommendations include strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing the capacity of procurement personnel, and leveraging digital technologies to improve transparency and accountability [5] [29] [39].

9.1. Recommendations for Policy

Given the persistent challenges in achieving value for money in public procurement, it is recommended that policies prioritize the development of customized training materials and programs to enhance the competencies of procurement officials.

9.2. Recommendations for Practice

To foster a culture of continuous improvement and best-practice sharing, procurement organizations within IFAD-funded projects should implement specific communication mechanisms and roles that facilitate coordination and compli-

ance with internal and external procedures. This includes establishing dedicated communication channels for feedback and issue resolution, as well as assigning clear responsibilities for monitoring adherence to procurement guidelines. Additionally, practical implementation should emphasize transparent reporting mechanisms and regular performance audits to identify bottlenecks and ensure accountability.

9.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research endeavors should explore the effectiveness of incorporating artificial intelligence and blockchain technology in enhancing transparency and efficiency within public procurement processes, particularly in light of existing infrastructural and human capital limitations. Additionally, investigating the moderating roles of socio-cultural values and other environmental factors on transparency and accountability in competitive tendering within developing economies could provide further insights into context-specific challenges [10] [36] [40]. This includes examining how factors such as bounded rationality and cognitive limitations among decision-makers influence transparency and compliance with procurement regulations, particularly in competitive tendering scenarios where information asymmetry and complex decision environments are prevalent.

Declaration

The author is a Senior Procurement Specialist at the Smallholder Agriculture Cluster Project (SACP) in Zimbabwe and submitted this study in partial fulfillment of the Capstone Diploma in Project Procurement for Agricultural and Rural Development at the International Training Centre of the International Labor Organization (ITCILO) Turin Campus. Every effort was made to reduce and mitigate against any form of conflict of interest and bias.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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