

Socially responsible ideas among Swedish public procurers: An exploratory study



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ABSTRACT

Public procurement is increasingly being recognized as a tool to promote corporate social responsibility and a vehicle to help governments achieve their social development goals. Due to their power to intervene and their reliance on tax money, public sector organizations are focused on expanding the inclusion of social responsibility in their public procurement strategies. At the EU level, there is a strong focus on providing new opportunities for public authorities to promote socially responsible public procurement. Utilizing translation theory and following the travel of ideas framework in a Scandinavian institutionalism approach, this study maps the adoption, development, and implementation of social responsibility in public procurement through the five stages of materialization, categorization, transportation, institutionalization, and re-travel. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with public procurement authorities from municipalities, regional councils, and governmental organizations in Sweden. The findings show that the travel of social responsibility policies in public procurement follows a new Scandinavian institutionalism approach that has brought policy makers freedom in prioritizing social issues but leaves them confused about what to prioritize.

Furthermore, while the results show a positive relationship in organizations between their size, measured as full-time procurement employees, and their maturity level in terms of social responsibility, this maturity level is not associated with their procurement spending. The study findings have important implications for research on socially responsible public procurement. Additionally, the data collected from public organizations suggest several ways that policy makers can include, promote, and institutionalize social responsibility in their procurement strategies to reduce disparity and improve social welfare.

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Introduction

Public procurement – namely, the activity of purchasing goods and services with public funds on behalf of public authorities (WTO, 2020) – undoubtedly holds a central position in the development of the global economy and society and involves considerable tax revenue (Flammer, 2018). As a multifaceted concept, public procurement can be conceptualized as a broad domain with diverse functions. Otherwise stated, it can contribute to government efficiency, act as a policy tool, and impose strategic consequences (Koala & Steinfeld, 2018). Knebel and Seele (2020) recognized this three-dimensional nature of public procurement, which is adopted in the current paper.

Considering the growing awareness of the need to address various social issues in procurement, a large body of researchers have been highlighting the value and magnitude of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its social welfare implications (Gandullia & Piserà, 2020). Reflecting on the United Nations 2030 agenda, which introduces seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) and one hundred and sixty-nine sustainability targets (UN, 2015), the field of procurement is increasingly being called on to include social criteria within its processes, such as reducing unemployment, improving employment conditions, supporting small businesses, increasing supplier diversity, employing minorities, and practicing inclusive purchasing (Brammer & Walker, 2011; Grandia & Meehan, 2017; Preuss, 2009). Brammer and Walker (2011) suggested that sustainable procurement practices are region dependent, and they identified several perceived barriers and facilitators of sustainable procurement. Grandia and Meehan (2017) argued that, although public procurement can be used as a policy tool to achieve public values, it often lacks

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strategic maturity and critical issues. Although public procurement lacks strategic maturity, public procurers have been addressing all three pillars of sustainability.

To solidify transparency and incorporate social activities, central governments enforce regulations and standards for effective policy implementations (Jackson, Bartosch, Avetisyan, Kinderman & Knudsen, 2020). In the agendas of European governments, CSR is now prioritized using a framework in which social and environmental public policies are designed to incorporate multi-stakeholder strategies (Albareda, Lozano & Ysa, 2007).

Public sector organizations have the potential for tremendous power to facilitate the successful implementation of social responsibility (SR). Such organizations are focused on increasing social initiatives in their procurement activities to help their governments achieve social development goals (Cravero, 2018). However, sustainable public procurement has recently been associated with several challenges, such as combining standardized and customized sustainability performance indicators (Salathé-Beaulieu, Bouchard & Mendell, 2019), creating confusion and uncertainty about how SR is incorporated into public procurement (Knebel & Seele, 2020). Although SR is widely acknowledged in public procurement and the use of public procurement to achieve SR is widespread, information on the adoption, development, and implementation of SR policies and practices in public procurement is often vague and lacking detail (Kordestani, Sattari, Peighambari & Oghazi, 2017).

The above issue might be rooted in the challenges to the regulations, policies, standards, and guidelines posed by increasingly complex procurement processes that include SR (Ravenswood & Kaine, 2015). It may also be explained by organizations' different approaches to SR and the translation of these concepts and policies into action in public procurement programs. The process of translating concepts, policies, and ideas across and within organizational borders has been given different labels in the literature, such as imitation, institutional transplantation, institutional transfer, policy transfer, policy mobility, and policy mutation (e.g., Cook & Ward, 2012; De Jong, Lalenis & Virginie, 2002; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Evans & Davies, 1999; Jacoby, 2001; McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Robertson, 1991; Rose, 1993; Stone, 2004; Westney, 1987). However, policy and idea translation differ from policy mobility, transfer, or mutation despite many similarities. Instead, policy translation is similar to a social constructivist approach that is manifested in emphasizing the social travel of ideas and policies (Mukhtarov, 2014).

The travel of ideas may be one of the critical issues in the theory and practice of CSR policies by explaining practices between the different local, national, and international business systems in which organizations operate, including public procurement. The travel of policy ideas across countries is a widely acknowledged phenomenon, and it goes beyond the mere transfer of policies. The travel of ideas approach influences understanding of socially effective public policy by asking questions such as: Which policies move? Who engages in policy travel? Which elements of policy travel? From where do policies travel? What factors enable or constrain policy travel (Fadeeva, 2005; Mukhtarov, 2014; Stone, 2004)?

The travel of SR-related ideas is relevant in public procurement, which has proven to be a dedicated follower of political fashion (McCrudden, 2007). By following fashion and imitating traveling ideas, public policies are influenced by other systems and the experiences of other organizations (Bryntse & Greve, 2002). This means that ideas travel, and many public policies in different regions and contexts apply the same types of concepts and standards to the same area (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), although with adaptations to their specific contexts. From this perspective, the process of adopting SR policies and practices within procurement processes could be interpreted as a recognition of the SR concept by public organizations based on interaction with established SR policies and standards in

other business or public systems at local, national, and international levels.

Moreover, SR performance is an essential contributor to national competitiveness; indeed, it is recommended that socially responsible positioning strategies be promoted by national initiatives (Boulouta & Pitelis, 2014). As a result, many countries have unleashed the power of public procurement to promote social criteria. Japan, the Philippines, and Canada are among the most successful adopters (Witjes & Lozano, 2016).

By employing the *travel of ideas* framework and drawing upon translation theory, the research question of this paper is how public organizations adopt, develop, and implement SR in procurement activities. The case of Sweden is of particular interest to this paper for two main reasons. First, the Swedish government has updated its legislation on public procurement following the 2014 EU directives to reflect recent SR considerations that were neglected in older legislative acts (Lindell & Olander, 2019). Moreover, international cooperation is vital for Sweden's public procurement. The Swedish Competition Authority is a member of all major international organizations (i.e., OECD, ICN, and UNCTAD) that pave the way for global procurement development (Konkurrensvirket, 2020). However, despite the evident engagement of the Swedish government in public procurement practices, there is still a lack of clear guidelines and an understanding of social responsibilities among the procurers in Sweden's major industries (Lindell & Olander, 2019).

In the context of the current paper, the *travel of ideas* phenomenon explains why, in most instances, SR policies and practices do not need to be created from scratch by public organizations; they are simply developed through the "travel of ideas" from other systems on different levels (McCrudden, 2004). This paper explains that the travel of social regulations happens in the development stage of policies, and it is influenced by domestic, regional, and international debates.

We apply a qualitative methodology through a series of interviews with procurement professionals. Our sample size comprised 27 organizations consisting of representatives from 18 municipalities, three regional councils, and 6 governmental organizations. We coded data using the interview guide. We employed common themes for each firm and then compared these themes with the five stages in the travel of ideas. We use this mapping to explain the adoption, development, and implementation of social criteria in public procurement.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework that forms the paper's basis and reviews pertinent literature in the field of socially responsible public procurement. In particular, translation theory, the concept of the *travels of ideas*, and the new Scandinavian institutionalism approach are discussed, followed by a review of the travel of ideas framework operationalization. We then introduce a 5-stage framework derived from the above and outline the public procurement situation in Sweden. Section 3 presents our research methodology while, in Section 4, we introduce and discuss our findings. In the last section, conclusions are drawn, and implications and future research avenues are suggested.

Theoretical framework

Translation theory and travel of ideas

Translation theory is rooted in the works of Serres (1982), Latour (1986), and Callon (1986). Much of its recent development has been attributed to Czarniawska and colleagues (e.g., Czarniawska, 2005; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). As a multifaceted concept, there is no clear definition of translation theory. However, most researchers agree on a common tenet that *translation* moves beyond its literal function and is associated with the dynamic transformation of ideas

(Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Thus, the word “translation” does not simply refer to a change from one language to another but is about finding new applications and new contexts and establishing new links between stakeholders.

Translation can be conceptualized through political, geometric, and semiotic perspectives (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). The political aspect means that new interests and interpretations will be developed. The geometric dimension involves travel from one place to another, and the semiotic element can be interpreted as a transformation during travel (Latour, 1987; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). Translation theory has been used in disciplines such as economics, management, and organization. It is often considered when exploring the dynamic traveling of ideas – that is, how and why ideas transcend space and how they are altered during this process (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Indeed, translation theory using the travel of ideas is a well-researched conceptualization of change management, having appeared in a significant body of research including books and articles since the 1970s (e.g., Forsell, 1989; March & Olsen, 1984; Mukhtarov, 2014; Powell & DiMaggio, 2012; Westney & Piekkari, 2019; Zucker, 1977). For example, Forsell (1989) discussed the modernization of saving banks in Sweden, and how these organizations were transformed from saving banks to businesslike enterprises.

One of the most well-known conceptual studies employing translation theory to explain the travel of ideas is Czarniawska and Joerges (1996). Moreover, some researchers have discussed the travel of ideas as an alternative to diffusion models (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). Diffusion lacks the power to explain metaphors. Although it can predict new things from analogous objects (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016), ideas cannot be explained well by diffusion concepts. Translation provides a lens for studying the travel of ideas by focusing on people as actors and users of the change. The translation process involves materializing ideas, turning ideas into objects, and then turning them back into ideas to explain the organizational change. Thus, it explains how an idea becomes an object, and how it translates into action and is then institutionalized.

Translation theory has also shown how policies travel in the private and public sectors. For example, Mukhtarov (2014) conducted a case study on the water sector in Turkey using translation theory to study the travel of water policy ideas. He argued that translation theory could help study the travel of policy ideas by developing heuristics in the three categories of scale, meaning, and contingency. He answered how to study the travel of policy ideas but left for future research the question of how policies travel. Kirkpatrick, Bullinger, Lega and Dent (2013) conducted a multiple case study on how John Hopkins Hospital (JHH) practices have traveled and translated into healthcare systems in Denmark, England, France, and Italy. They found that the practices of this hospital have been translated differently in the health systems of these four countries, with such differences involving whether management is concentrated in one unit or fragmented among people and whether the management structure consists of clinical experts. Hospitals in England had the closest translation of JHH practices, with management centered in one unit and performed by non-clinical managers, which resulted in less ambiguity. Italy had the most different translation; Denmark had unity in decision making but clinical experts took the decisions, and France was in the middle of both factors.

Recent research (e.g., Ejiogu & Ejiogu, 2018; Nielsen, Wæraas & Dahl, 2020) has continuously highlighted the inextricable relationship between *translation* and the *travel of ideas*. A systematic literature study by Wæraas and Nielsen (2016) identified three perspectives on translation in organization research: studies rooted in actor–network theory (ANT), knowledge-based theory, and Scandinavian institutionalism. In ANT, the object of translation – that which is translated – is interests, claims, convictions, and meanings. The knowledge-based perspective focuses on organizational knowledge as the object of translation. From the Scandinavian

institutionalist perspective, the object of translation is general management ideas, models, and practices, meaning that change in management ideas and models explains the concept of translation (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016).

Particularly in organizational studies, the tie mentioned above is investigated through the lens of new Scandinavian institutionalism. New Scandinavian institutionalism borrows translation concepts from actor–network theory and institutional theory to explain the notion of change of ideas during travel and to challenge isomorphic diffusion (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). This notion signifies that ideas are constantly translated as they traverse diverse settings and adapt to fit specific contexts (Lamb & Currie, 2012).

The new scandinavian institutionalism

Scandinavian institutionalism is an approach to translation within the discipline of organization and management that is inspired by actor–network theory in general and Latourian translation in particular (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016).

The Scandinavian institutionalist approach to translation goes beyond explanations and translations, including negotiation and interpretation, to find new meanings. This approach is based on the travel of ideas, which applies translation theory to a Scandinavian context. Translators as social actors, translations as the materialization of an idea or practice, and the translation process are essential to this approach (Westney & Piekkari, 2019). In this approach, translators as the sense makers have a paramount role in translating the institutional pressure of organizations. Their interest, understanding, interpretation ability, and choice of interpretation frame shape how organizations respond to institutional pressure (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009). The interpretation and reformulation of ideas allow adaptation during adoption in the organizational context (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

The Scandinavian institutionalist approach to translation has been prevalent in organizational studies and has appeared in several influential works over recent decades (e.g., Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Creed, Scully & Austin, 2002; Czarniawska, 2009; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Westney & Piekkari, 2019). Boxenbaum and Pedersen (2009) discuss how Scandinavia has been under pressure from isomorphism as a result of institutional theory, yet Scandinavian institutionalism has developed its own variation and diversity. Creed et al. (2002) used translation theory in studying policies protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons (LGBT). They added cultural building blocks to better explain how agents shape meaning and generate actions to change social arrangements. Czarniawska (2009) studied the emergence and crisis period of the London School of Economics and Political Sciences and suggested that institutional entrepreneurs created new institutions with loose connections to formal organizations. Using translation theory, Westney and Piekkari (2019) suggested that the movement of Japanese organizational practices from Japan to the USA required a translation ecosystem that translators, translations, and translation processes and audiences could interact with to make the flow possible.

According to Nielsen, Mathiassen and Newell (2021), two streams of translation literature exist within Scandinavian institutionalism. The first stream focuses on “idea carriers” (such as consultants, business schools, management gurus, technology suppliers, and business media) in the circulation and translation of ideas (e.g., Sahlin-Anderesson & Engwall, 2002). But the most dominant is the second stream, which adopts an organization perspective to explain how ideas transform into practices in multiple ways within organizations (e.g., Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

Works relying on the Scandinavian institutionalist perspective tend to refer to Czarniawska's works on the travel of ideas and bring the notion of translation into institutional analysis as the origin of

Scandinavian institutionalism and one of its promising new thinking directions.

As this research is motivated to understand how ideas travel across an organizational field and how these ideas are tailored to specific organizational settings and contribute to shaping organizational practices, it uses the Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) travel of ideas framework.

Operationalization of the process of the travel of ideas

Although the travel of ideas was thoroughly conceptualized by Czarniawska and Joerges (1996), this concept needs further definition to be measured empirically. Furthermore, it is interesting to study what happens to an idea after institutionalization. Hence, we detail the process involved in the travel of ideas and develop a final stage to explain how an idea travels again to another organization. The theoretical framework developed by Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) is conceptualized, explained, and extended in the following five stages.

Stage one

The first stage involves materializing and objectifying ideas by turning mental images into pictures or sounds. Development projects change from a planned idea to a materialized idea upon implementation. Hence, the materialization of ideas has paramount importance (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, pp.19–20). Ideas are images that can become known in the form of pictures or sounds. This materialization, in which an idea becomes an object, occurs when an idea is painted into a picture, or a musical idea is put into a song. Materialization involves the contexts of time and space.

Stage two

The second stage is the categorization of objects. Recipients categorize their perceptions of ideas by picking parts of the idea and finding categories for them. The translation of ideas usually takes place by objectifying such ideas. The actors involved in the translation often use examples and quotations from those who initiated the idea to emphasize its origin. These examples, quotations, and other forms of emphasis will ultimately be forgotten, but the idea will persist after leaving its object. Translation requires attention to perceptual readiness: if the recipient is not perceptually ready, the idea cannot be received. Recipients should be able to assign an identity to an object through categorization, which is when the recipient tries to perceive an object based on other familiar objects. Very new ideas are thus challenging to perceive because the recipient may lack appropriate categories for them. One of the simplest ways of objectifying is to find linguistic artifacts in the form of labels and metaphors. These linguistic artifacts direct the change options in the translation process. The scope of ideas expands because labels are found that are broader and more closely attached to the society that adopts the idea (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 32). An idea can also be objectified using design through graphic forms or images. Images are familiar in societies and more accessible for the general public to understand and, thus, they are one way of popularizing ideas (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 33). Willing people and politicians can expedite the traveling of an objectified idea. These people create an understanding of a part of the whole idea and put that part into action. Other people then perceive the action, spreading the idea to a broader community and making it well known among other stakeholders.

Stage three

The third stage involves fashioning as a way of transporting ideas. After ideas have been turned into actions or categorized in linguistic artifacts or images, they become known to early adopters and interested peers. There is then a need to transport and convey these ideas to popularize them among stakeholders. Ideas can become fashionable and then transported among those who follow fashion; in

particular, companies often follow fashion to compete. However, managers should avoid following mere fashion or fad but instead adopt fashionable ideas that help them remain competitive (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, pp. 34–35). It is essential to add that only master ideas – ideas that have existed for a long time and are registered in people’s minds – can be transported by fashion (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 36). Master ideas are more persistent than passing fashion and have the potential to become institutions. There is a connection between past and present fashion in that past fashions sometimes return to the present, but they may not last. Therefore, the notion of persistence is vital in institutionalizing ideas (pp. 36–37).

Stage four

The fourth stage is the institutionalization of a fashioned idea in organizational fields. To understand the process by which a master idea becomes institutionalized, it is helpful to consider the formation of an organizational field. An organization field is constituted by increasing interaction among companies, the emergence of a network of companies due to mergers, information exchange among companies, or increasing awareness that a group of companies belongs to one family. External pressures, such as the government, economic competition, and other networks, can also help in the genesis of a field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). After the organization field is formed, the organizations involved attempt to become similar through approaches such as coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive isomorphism occurs when companies try to become similar due to external pressure or interest, while mimetic isomorphism occurs in the presence of uncertainty. Normative isomorphism is a more conscious choice in which an organization chooses the sort of master idea it wants to adopt. However, as Westney and Piekari (2019) explain, the Scandinavian institutionalist approach focuses on translation, in which organizations do not necessarily seek similarity. Instead, they attempt to select, translate, and develop policies that meet their own needs in a normative approach.

Although it seems that fashion (change, short term) and institutionalization (similarity, long-lasting) are different, the institutionalization of a fashion creates room for the emergence of a new fashion. The form of the fashioned master idea changes during the institutionalization process (pp. 38–39). Master ideas need to be put into action to be institutionalized; otherwise, people will forget them, or they will remain simply ideas. Actionizing an idea places an idea in the image, meaning a verbal or graphical representation, of an action. Thus, actionizing is not accurate, but it is the first step – similar to sketching a machine or a city map before construction begins. Actionizing can be a back-and-forth process in which ideas turn into action and then back into ideas again, progressing over time. This process of putting ideas into action is not simple for two main reasons. First, many ideas might be needed to create one action. Second, ideas emerge when one action opposes the original idea and takes it through a lengthy revision process over time.

Stage five

The fifth stage is the traveling of an institutionalized idea. In this stage, institutionalized ideas might deinstitutionalize and travel again. They can travel within the same organizational context or to a new context, and they may maintain their original form and translate to different images. Fig. 1 graphically depicts the stages in the travel of ideas process.

The different elements of the above illustration represent different types of ideas. These ideas require time and space to travel to new contexts and fields, and their composition can change during travel; ultimately, they may become new ideas. Ideas can become institutionalized if practiced; otherwise, they will be forgotten, like many other fashioned ideas. Once an idea becomes institutionalized,

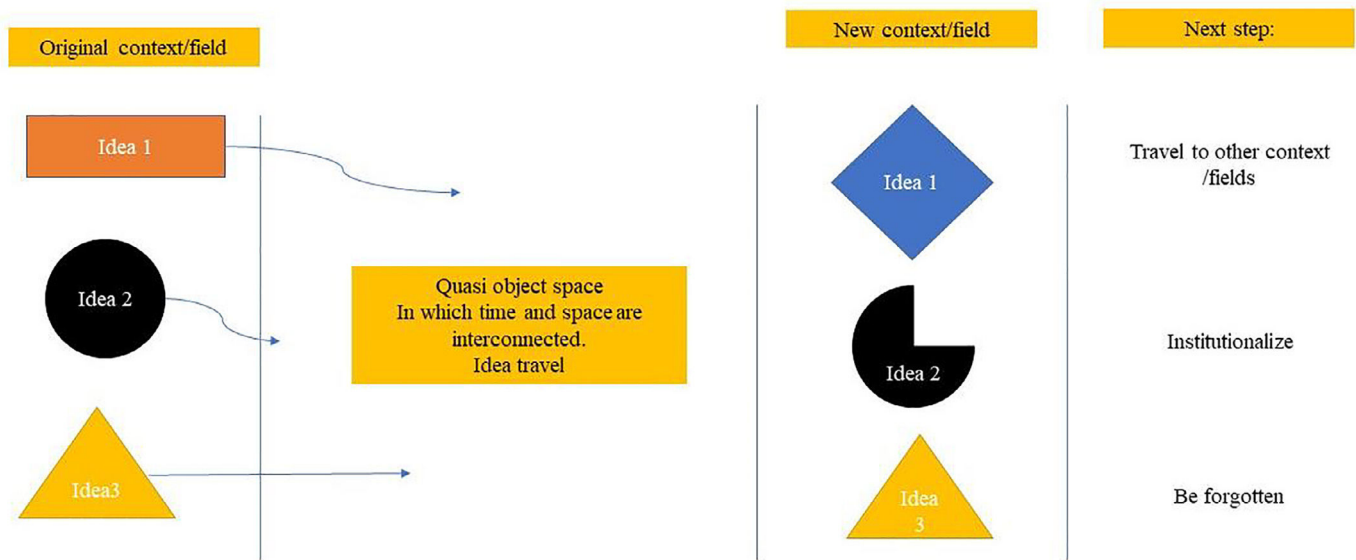


Fig. 1. Illustration of the travel of ideas (adapted and developed from Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

it can emerge again from that institutionalized form and travel to other contexts and fields. The above explanation of the different stages in the travel of ideas is summarized in Table 1.

Public procurement in Sweden

The European Commission published guidelines to encourage its members to apply social criteria in their procurement. Sweden has shown considerable progress in applying such criteria (Edman & Nohrstedt, 2017), among other top performers are the Netherlands (Melissen & Reinders, 2012; Witjes & Lozano, 2016); and the United Kingdom (Brammer & Walker, 2011). Public procurement in Sweden amounts to approximately 76 billion euros, which is one-sixth of the country’s GDP (Public procurement statistics, 2020). There are different minority groups in Sweden, including immigrant entrepreneurs, who would benefit from using social criteria in public procurement (Kordestani et al., 2017). Social sustainability criteria, such as diversity, philanthropy, and labor conditions, have a long history in Sweden. However, an eye-opening report on public procurement from international suppliers published by Swedwatch in 2007 showed that medical equipment procured with taxpayers’ money by the Stockholm region in Pakistan had been spent on suppliers whose employers broke the ILO conventions (Edman & Nohrstedt, 2017). Since this incident, Sweden has spent considerable resources to include social criteria in the procurements of municipalities, regions, and governmental organizations to improve social sustainability.

Public procurement in Sweden is broad and includes health, medical care, social welfare, education, elderly care, local transportation, and housing (Edman & Nohrstedt, 2017). Decision-making in public procurement is centralized in that all procurement authorities follow the guidelines developed by the Swedish national agency for public

procurement (Czarnezki, 2019). However, it is also decentralized; there are 290 independent municipalities with distinct expertise that have integrated social criteria to different levels in their procurement. Although Sweden is positioned at the top level in the EU for the inclusion of environmental criteria in public procurement (Czarnezki, 2019), such criteria vary significantly across the procuring organizations. Environmental criteria are not the focus of this paper, but they are still relevant to identifying the barriers to including social criteria in procurement. There are many barriers, such as information asymmetry, the size of the procuring organization, voluntary guidelines, time limits, knowledge limits, and available resources (e.g., information asymmetry) (Czarnezki, 2019).

Furthermore, public organizations in Sweden have undergone reforms since the 1980s to become more independent and act more like companies. History shows that organizations began to shift to become locally democratic following two pioneering organizations, but almost without knowing why (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). As a result, public organizations have a long history of applying their social criteria to public procurement by considering local priorities. In the travel of SR as an idea, stakeholders play an important role both as initiators of travel and in the spread and re-travel. In the case of public policy, it is recommended that policy makers approach CSR-related initiatives on a societal basis and foster stakeholder participation and dialog (González & Martinez, 2004).

Methodology

To address the aim of the study and understand how public organizations in Sweden adopt, develop, and implement SR in procurement activities, we employed a qualitative methodology. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we followed a purposive

Table 1
Five stages of the travel of ideas (adapted and developed from Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

Stage No.	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Name	Materialization of the idea	Categorization of objects	Translating the idea	Institutionalization of the fashioned idea	Traveling of the institutionalized idea
Outcome	The idea turns into an object	The object is translated	The idea travels to stakeholders	Institutionalization/death of the idea	Ideas born from actions
Process	Turning mental images into sounds or images	Categorization through graphic forms	Fashioning ideas and following fashion	Putting fashioned images of actions into plans of actions	Actions turn into ideas to travel again

sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014) for two reasons. First, we wanted to ensure that different perspectives of different categories of procuring organizations (governmental, municipal, regional) were represented. Second, we aimed to obtain a thorough understanding of social criteria in public organizations. Although public procurement should be open for all eligible firms regardless of their geographical location, procurement organizations were randomly chosen from all over Sweden to reduce biases, such as focusing on specific geographic locations, sizes, or industries. In particular, we collected data through a series of interviews with professionals who were knowledgeable about procurement policies and practices; often, they were procurement managers in charge of procurement activities. The main reason for choosing this method was the novel and multifaceted nature of the subject, which requires more time to be spent on each individual through interviews.

Interview guide

The interview guide used in this paper consisted of demographic questions and questions on the travel of SR to and within an organization. Table 2 presents the themes of the questions used to measure the adoption, development, and implementation of SR in public procurement. The questions in the interview guide were taken from previous studies (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Mukhtarov, 2014; Sandström & Helin, 2010; European Commission, 2011). The transfer process has been adapted from Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) and Mukhtarov (2014), communication of the SR policies was adapted from Sandström and Helin (2010), and post-tender feedback was drawn from a guide published at the European Commission (Buying Social, 2011).

Data collection and analysis

Before conducting full-scale interviews, the authors tested the questions through pilot interviews to gain better insight into the

public procurement process from the procurers' perspective. The pilot phase was conducted using an original preliminary interview guide using telephone or face-to-face interviews. The interview guide was finalized on the basis of the preliminary findings to support the authors' investigation of the research question through semi-structured interviews.

We searched the local and Tender Electronic Daily (TED) databases to find tenders and contact information. TED is a free access database that publishes tenders across the European Union. In parallel, we searched magazines and web pages to identify procuring organizations that mentioned social criteria policy for public procurement or those that had tested social criteria through tenders. This process resulted in a list of usable contact details for public procurers in municipalities, regional councils, and governmental organizations for interviews. The purpose of having different types of organizations was to obtain a more accurate picture of public procurement with social criteria.

The next step was to clean the collected data and remove respondents who did not answer the questions. In this step, 10 interviewees whose transcripts did not have answers to questions were removed. The reasons for missing values in the questionnaire varied – for instance, novelty of the concepts, new recruitment, inapplicability, and irrelevance of questions due to the narrow focus of the procurement organization. This screening resulted in a final list of 27 workable interviews for further analysis. These 27 interviews consisted of representatives from 18 municipalities, three regional councils, and six governmental organizations. The majority of interviewees were procurement managers. The interviews were 40 min on average; a few lasted an hour. The interviews were recorded for transcription and further analysis. Table 3 presents a picture of the descriptive statistics based on answers to the demographic questions of the study.

There are similar yet different techniques to analyze qualitative data, such as thematic analysis, grounded theory, and hermeneutic

Table 2
The interview guide.

Question Theme	Question	Scope	Question Theme	Question	Scope
Travel of SR to the organization	Hearing about SR ^a for the first time	AD ^a	Travel of SR within the organization	Perception of SR by internal stakeholders	AD, DE
	Inclusion of SR in PP ^a policy	AD, DE ^a		Bargaining power of stakeholders in implementing SR.	IM ^a
	Inclusion duration and timing, the process of inclusion, people who were involved	AD, DE		SR-related pieces of training in organization	IM.
	Influence of international/regional/organizational policies in inclusion and the extent of their influence	AD, DE		Training materials for writing tenders incorporating SR	DE, IM.
	Subquestion: Process of adopting international/regional/organizational policies for SR	AD, DE		Procurers' education in SR for minority suppliers	DE.
	Subquestion: policies kept and policies changed	AD, DE		Other support for tender participants	IM.
	Subquestion: Reasons for keeping or changing	AD, DE		Post-tender feedback	IM.
	Subquestion: enablers and withholders in the translation process	AD, DE		Discussion of SR policies with external stakeholders	DE, IM.
	Demographic questions	Job position of interviewee		DM ^a	Communication of SR with int. and ext. stakeholders
	Duration of holding job position	DM.	Personal opinion of SR	AD	
	Duration of involvement with public procurement	DM.	Personal involvement with SR	AD, IM.	
	Number of full-time employees working in the procurement division	DM.	A personal opinion on the effectiveness of SR	AD	
	Procurement spending during last fiscal year	DM.	Other motives for implementing SR in procurement	DE	
	Major products and services procured during last fiscal year	DM.			

^a SR: Social Responsibility, PP: Public Procurement, AD: Adopt, DE: Develop, IM: Implement, DM: Demographic.

Table 3
Demographics of the interviewees.

ID.	Job Position	Organization Type	No. of years in the position	No. of years involved in PP.	No. of FT employees in procurement	Procurement spend (billion SEK)	Major products and services procured during last fiscal year
1	Purchase strategist	Governmental	1	17	100	40	Services
2	Purchasing Manager	Municipal	9	9	12	2	transportation, food, and technical consultants
3	Procurement Manager	Municipal	10	27	6	0.3	real estate, food, IT, consultants and foreign services, leasing
4	Procurer	Municipal	4	14	11	0.5	food, construction services
5	Procurement Manager	Municipal	3	18	3	0.3	transportation, food, and technical consultants
6	Procurement Manager	Municipal	1	20	3	0.5	chemicals, IT, R&D
7	Procurement Manager	Municipal	1	1	10	1	construction, vehicles, nursing services, healthcare and care services
8	Procurement responsible	Governmental	4	10	50	4	construction
9	CEO	Municipal	8	25	23	4	recycling bags
10	Procurement Manager	Municipal	4	4	4	0.5	human resource in project
11	Procurement Manager	Municipal	8	8	5	0.15	transportation, food, and technical consultants
12	Project leader	Municipal	2	5	9	0.8	construction
13	Procurement Manager	Municipal	5	37	13	2	educational services, construction services, food, transportation
14	Procurement Manager	Governmental	1	7	20	2.5	safety equipment for criminal services
15	Procurer strategist	Municipal	7	7	10	2.5	food
16	Environmental coordinator	Governmental	2	4	7	1.3	construction
17	Procurement Manager	Municipal	1	9	7	0.02	educational equipment
18	Procurement Manager	Municipal	4	25	9	0.8	elderly services, food, health care, IT.
19	Procurement Manager	Regional	2	12	14	2.7	elderly services, educational equipment
20	Procurement Manager	Municipal	3	10	6	0.35	food, construction services, IT.
21	Procurement Manager	Municipal	10	10	5	0.7	transportation
22	Supply manager	Governmental	1	9	20	13	construction, elderly services
23	Procurement Manager	Municipal	5	8	8	1.1	Food, electricity, energy
24	Procurement Manager	Municipal	8	29	5	0.84	IT, consultation, transport
25	Procurement Manager	Regional	3	16	3	0.35	Environmental analysis
26	Procurer	Governmental	1	12	5	0.052	equipment
27	Procurement Responsible	Regional	2	20	50	6	furniture, vehicle

analysis (Alhojailan, 2012). Coding themes based on grounded theory call for data analysis to begin while data collection proceeds. In other words, analysis of data will be the foundation for the subsequent data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Hermeneutic analysis is inappropriate for analyzing data that includes respondents' visions (Alhojailan, 2012). But thematic analysis is suitable for interpretation based on the relationship between concepts, having the power of coding and categorizing. Since data analysis began after data collection, and our objective is to find patterns of adoption, development, and implementation of SR among public organizations, we chose thematic analysis.

In line with previous studies (Hosseiniinia & Ramezani, 2016; Kordestani et al., 2017; Sefiani & Bown, 2013) the data analysis part of this paper consisted of four phases. These phases were: i) developing transcripts from recordings; ii) familiarization through reading and discussions; iii) coding framework; and iv) presenting content in thematic charting. The interview guide was used as the coding sheet, and data from the transcripts were placed in the coding sheets. At the next coding level, these data sheets were examined for common themes in each firm and compared with the five stages in the travel of ideas. As a result of such processes, the data gathered became increasingly focused on emerging themes and questions. This model could explain the adoption, development, and implementation of social criteria very well.

During the process, each author independently checked the codings to ensure that assigning them to particular categories to match

the five-stage framework of the travel of ideas made the most analytic sense. Internal checking by three authors were carried out to assess the accuracy of manuscripts, codings, and the relevance of the resulting analysis adapting the framework. This facilitated a triangulation of the subject matter, which is less susceptible to individual bias (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001).

Research findings and discussion

To show the adoption, development, and implementation of SR in public procurement in Sweden, the data collected from the interviews were mapped (Table 4) into the five-stage framework of the travel of ideas adapted from Czarniawska and Joerges (1996): materialization, categorization, transportation, institutionalization, and the re-travel of SR.

Stage one

The results showed that, in the first stage, most of the interviewed organizations materialized SR ideas by looking at national and regional policies and eventually turning them into objects through different means. These public organizations looked mainly at the policies available at the national and regional levels, provided, for instance, by the National Agency for Public Procurement and the sustainability checklist developed by the SKL Kommentus organization, sustainability criteria including socially disadvantaged businesses,

Table 4
Results of data mapping on the five-stage framework for the travel of ideas.

ID	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
	Objectification - Idea Turns into Object - Materializing SR in PP	Translation/Categorization - Object Translated - Categorization of Objects	Travel to Stakeholders - Idea Travels to Stakeholders - Transporting SR	Death/Institutionalization - Institutionalization/Death of Idea - Institutionalization of SR.	Stay/Re-Travel - Ideas Born from Action - Traveling of SR.
1	From national procurement policy	Categorized as part of human rights	Adding SR to tenders	Internal meetings, management meetings	Meetings in forum, suppliers' days
2	From other policies at municipality and SR in other municipalities	As a guideline rather than a policy	Adding SR to tenders	Internal pages	Meetings at yearly public procurers' conference
3	From the national and regional policy	As policy and control documents	Adding SR to existing policies	Not communicated yet	Internal pages, municipality web
4	From the national and regional policy	As part of the code of conduct	Adding SR to tenders	Not communicated yet	Other five municipalities
5	Policy on prioritizing long-term unemployed people	Adding SR to the existing policy document	Adding SR to tenders	Not communicated yet	Not traveled to other organizations yet
6	Policy on prioritizing long-term unemployed people	Adding SR to the existing policy document	Adding SR to tenders	Inviting other municipalities to learn, inviting clients to tenders	Exchanging SR outcomes with other municipalities
7	From collective labor agreements	New procurement policy and guidelines	Top-down approach	Not fully institutionalized yet, meetings prior to tenders, motivating stakeholders to include SR.	Not traveled to other organizations yet
8	From Stockholm municipality	New procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Not communicated yet	Not traveled to other organizations yet
9	From the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact	New code of conduct but not policy	Adding SR to tenders	Supplier meetings, training suppliers	Not traveled to other organizations yet
10	From the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact	New procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Supplier follow-up meetings, self-assessment, an internal meeting between stakeholders quarterly	Not traveled to other organizations yet
11	From other municipalities	Adding SR to the existing policy document	Adding SR to tenders	Discuss with colleagues, inform policymakers	Not traveled to other organizations yet
12	From national procurement policy	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Seminars and informational meetings, meeting at management level, presentation at the site	Colleagues, other municipalities, other corporations, other stakeholders in tenders
13	From regional policies in Gothenburg and Örebro	As a process first and then new procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Internal communication with politicians and colleagues within the municipality	Not traveled to other organizations yet
14	From national and regional policies	A new procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Internal meeting	Not traveled to other organizations yet
15	From national policies and regional sustainability criteria	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Education	Educating other organizations, forum meetings
16	From national and international criteria on work conditions	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	External web page	Not traveled to other organizations yet
17	From international and regional policies	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Talk with colleagues, follow-up, education	To some extent, through meetings
18	From national policies	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Talks, meetings, education	To some extent, through meetings
19	From regional policies in Örebro	As part of procurement policy and guidelines	adding sr to tenders	dialogue, interview, or meet suppliers	To some extent, through meetings
20	From regional policies	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Spoken and written, supplier meeting, phone calls	Meetings
21	From international and regional policies	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Templates, policy, education, meetings	To some extent, through meetings
22	From international policies	As part of procurement policy and supplier code of conduct	Adding SR to tenders	Early involvement in the development phase	Website, annual report, supplier code of conduct, dialogue with customers, supplier education, collaboration with consultants
23	From international and regional policies for socially disadvantaged businesses	As part of guidelines and a small part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Educating customers and firms	Not traveled to other organizations yet
24	From national and regional policies	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Meeting with suppliers and customers, policy documents	Not traveled to other organizations yet
25	From national and regional policies	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Educating managers, informing new employees, making suppliers committed	To some extent, through meetings
26	From national and international policies	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Information meetings, dialogue, a follow-up meeting	Meetings, consultation, written communication
27	From the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact	As part of procurement policy	Adding SR to tenders	Meeting suppliers every year, general sustainability for employees, meeting every month with experts, customers.	Meetings, educations, trade fairs, conferences

and international guides, such as the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact and ILO policies on work conditions. For instance, interviewee 2 mentioned that “there is a national procurement strategy that says we must take SR into account. This type of policy called the National Procurement Strategy came in June 2016 and it says that all government agencies must take SR into account”.

Because most of the interviewed organizations were municipal organizations, they borrowed and adopted the idea of SR from other municipalities in Sweden through various means, such as networking. Municipalities, such as the cities of Stockholm, Örebro, and Gothenburg, were mentioned during the interviews.

The role of stakeholders, such as policy makers, demanding that public organizations include SR concepts in their procurement strategy was also highlighted as an essential factor in materializing the idea of SR. The focus of the policies from which materialization occurred varied among the studied organizations. For instance, Organizations 1 and 27 brought the idea of SR from national and international policies related to human rights and anti-corruption. An interviewee from Organization 1 indicated that “as part of the process, there has been something we call social contractual requirements, which has been involved in all our procurement since 2014. ... For example, a certain income level should take in as much consideration no matter if you work in another country Human rights and other (fair) conditions are crucial within our social contractual requirements”.

In contrast, Organization 17 emphasized the idea of SR being related to working conditions and the prohibition of child labor among its suppliers because the priority for them in addressing SR is to “secure that (their foreign suppliers) do not have child labor, or unfair working conditions in the factories”. This finding is allied with Scandinavian institutionalism. It reveals public procurement policy makers' important role in translating SR policies into procurement and including those policies that have high priorities for their organization (Westney & Piekkari, 2019).

Stage two

Moving to stage two of the travel of ideas, most of the respondents indicated that the translation and categorization of SR resulted mainly in updating existing procurement policy and adding SR in collaboration with their social office or sustainability officers. In some cases, it led to new procurement policies, guidelines, and control documents added to their supplier code of conduct and, overall, to their supply chain management strategies. In a few organizations, the categorization of SR first occurred by adding a new process to the organization that eventually led to a change in policies. For instance, in Organization 13, they realized that “this is new and (they) should of course try to address it. So, they sat down and thought it through and came up with a new process”. Hence, categorizations were treated seriously; instead of applying SR to principles or performing ad-hoc practices, authorities chose to add it to procurement policies, such as Organization 1, which added SR to its human rights policy.

Moreover, revisions made to procurement policies to include SR considerations had different focuses depending on the nature of the organization. For instance, organizations five, twelve, thirteen, and eighteen translated the idea of SR into their policies by focusing on the inclusion of long-term unemployed people and refugees, while Organization 23 focused on socially disadvantaged businesses, such as “suppliers where the company is owned by one or more persons who belong to a minority group”. Scandinavian institutionalism's approach to translation asserts that translators have a combination of interest, understanding, interpretation ability, and choice of interpretation frame to respond to organizational pressures (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009). In this regard, findings support the application of theory in public procurement that respondents had the freedom to choose interpretation frames and respond to organizational pressures.

Stage three

In stage three, the travel of SR to stakeholders mainly occurred in the form of social clauses included in tenders. Almost all interviewed authorities mentioned that this was how SR ideas traveled to stakeholders in their organizations. These stakeholders would ensure that their suppliers complied with these policies and clauses in tenders. Only one authority used the phrase “top-down” approach (Organization 7), meaning that an enforcement mechanism was behind the

travel of SR in that organization from department managers and executives to employees.

In some cases, the interviewees shared their concern (e.g., Organizations 3 and 4) that the idea behind the SR clauses and considerations in procurement policies had not been communicated clearly to stakeholders. For instance, as the Organization 4 interviewee put it, “We currently don't have any communication plan on SR with our stakeholders. There we have a lot to do, both among suppliers and clients or contracting authorities”. This created confusion for the suppliers and the procurer on how to adjust a tender concerning SR policies. They thought that there was a need for stakeholders to undergo formal education to highlight the importance of SR and to motivate them to include or implement it in their tenders and supply.

Stage four

The approach to stage four – travel, institutionalization, or death – varied in the organizations studied here. Internal staff and management meetings, internal communication, training, and supplier meetings were some of the methods used to institutionalize SR. As an example, Organization 22 has “a certification-education which (they) offer four times a year”. Regular meetings and formal/informal talks within the organization, with suppliers, and in training were among the most commonly adopted forms of institutionalization mentioned by the authorities interviewed. People with positive attitudes toward SR were identified as facilitators of this institutionalization.

Interestingly, several organizations (e.g., numbers 4, 6, 7, and 8) had not started the institutionalization phase or had not completed it for different reasons, such as a lack of internal communication, training, and formal education both internally and for suppliers, as well as difficulties in following up and checking to ensure the implementation of new policies. In sum, the authorities successfully used different approaches to institutionalize the idea of SR in their organization and in relation to their stakeholders.

Stage five

Analyzing the final stage results shows that, in most organizations, SR had not yet been reborn fully from actions to travel to other organizations. There are different explanations for this. First, these authorities might not have been sufficiently successful in stage four (institutionalization) or delivering an excellent example of SR in public procurement. Second, due to the fragmented structure of public authorities in Sweden, there are different priorities in each municipality and region. SR considerations in one region might have a lower priority in another region. Finally, the issue of SR in public procurement is new in Sweden. It takes time for authorities to become successful enough to serve as an example of best practices for other public sector organizations. However, in quite a number of the organizations interviewed, the idea of SR traveled from them to other organizations (to some extent or entirely) through meetings, consultation, written communication, education, trade fairs, websites, annual reports, and codes of conduct. Of these, meetings were deemed the most helpful approach.

In summary, applying the five-stage framework for the travel of ideas to SR shows that materialization has taken varied forms and that organizations follow different paths in objectifying SR in public procurement. However, there is a great deal of consensus on the translation and categorization of SR, in which organizations embed it into existing policy documents. This method of translation has facilitated the transportation of the idea by adding SR to tenders. Although organizations followed the same pattern, their translations are different in terms of the SR content and the prioritized social considerations included in tenders. This overall finding shows that interest, understanding, interpretation ability, and choice of interpretation frame – which are the main elements of the Scandinavian

institutionalism approach (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009) –have been influential in translating SR in public procurement. Organizations are in different stages of institutionalizing SR, ranging from the death of the idea to total commitment. They have used the different resources available to organizations to systematize their commitment to SR. As stated, narrative methods, such as meeting and talking, have the highest frequency of appearance. Finally, SR, to some extent, has re-traveled to other organizations. This limited re-travel can be due to either the novelty of the idea, which demands more time, or the fragmented structure of public procurement in Sweden.

In addition to mapping the collected data into the five stages of the travel of ideas framework, we studied the relationships between different demographic factors of the interviewees and the extent to which their organization had adopted, developed, and implemented SR in its procurement strategies. This analysis showed no association between organizations' procurement spending during the last fiscal year and the maturity level of social criteria in their public procurement. However, the number of full-time employees in procurement positively impacted how well SR was institutionalized and communicated within and outside of the organization. This finding shows that human resources empower organizations to enrich the higher stages of the five-stage model.

Conclusions, future research, and limitations

Our research has aimed to explain the adoption, development, and implementation of SR in the public procurement of Sweden. This study shows no common pattern in the travel of SR ideas in procurement, which are adopted, developed, and implemented in different ways. The travel of social responsibility ideas to public procurement follows a Scandinavian institutionalism approach (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) with a high focus on translators and translation processes (Westney & Piekkari, 2019). The implementation of social responsibility in public procurement follows a 5-stage framework of materialization, categorization, transportation, institutionalization, and re-travel (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). The adoption of SR was in the form of borrowing SR ideas from neighboring towns and well-known organizations. Development was done through pure replication, mainly in small organizations, changing composition in the case of different priorities, and developing joint SR when several organizations gathered. Implementations in organizations with sufficient resources resulted in institutionalization and sometimes the travel of ideas to external organizations.

The interesting results of this study may be relevant to other countries since Sweden has been a leader in innovation in the European Union (Edquist & Zabala-Iturriagagoitia, 2012; European innovation scoreboard, 2020; Vakulenko, Oghazi & Hellström, 2019) and has a long history of observing environmental criteria (Lidskog & Elander, 2012; Palmujoki, Parikka-Alhola & Ekroos, 2010; Uttam & Roos, 2015). Additionally, Sweden has often been led by social democratic parties with fundamental values based on equality, solidarity, and justice (Zannakis, 2015).

One of the implications of this study in SR is that there have been different levels of collaboration among public organizations. Some small and neighboring municipalities acted together to develop criteria, while other small municipalities acted individually. Additionally, the idea of SR traveled to some extent, but not in complete form, from communicative municipalities to others. Future researchers are encouraged to study the level of collaboration on SR between public organizations. One way to encourage suppliers to submit in response to a tender is through combinatorial procurement (Lunander & Lundberg, 2012). We encourage future researchers to study the diffusion of combinatorial procurement in tenders with social criteria.

The other implication of this study is that SR policies have been implemented by being added to tenders. The results of this study are

in line with the findings of a study conducted by Maon, Swaen and Lindgreen (2017), indicating that Nordic countries are pioneers in building CSR-related processes and capabilities with a strong focus on CSR compared to other European countries (Maon et al., 2017). Such processes and capabilities are an effective way to implement criteria because social criteria can sometimes become subjective, which increases the chance of violating public procurement principles (e.g., social criteria), such as equal treatment, mutual recognition, and nondiscrimination, and it increases the possibility of penalties. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to perform comparative studies on the different approaches of countries to incorporating SR in their procurement, including guidelines, policies, recommendations, and adding to tenders.

Social welfare is becoming a problem in Europe, and Sweden is no exception (Anderson, Brämä & Holmqvist, 2010; Malmberg, Andersson & Östh, 2013). However, this study has shown that public procurement is a mechanism for investing taxpayers' money to reduce disparity through socially responsible procurements. For instance, as presented in the research findings, social welfare considerations in the interviewed organizations are at a mature and institutionalized level, and SR is addressed through the inclusion of long-term unemployed people and refugees and with a focus on socially disadvantaged businesses. Future researchers are encouraged to perform follow-up or longitudinal studies to measure the effectiveness of SR in public procurement and how successful public authorities have been in maintaining other SR-related procurements (see Abdi, Lind & Birgisson, 2013). The parameters of interest may be how many SR procurements a public authority has had, how large the volume of SR public procurements has been, and how much of these procurements have been dedicated to SMEs.

Another implication of this study is related to the issue of procurement professionals' confusion due to their freedom in implementing SR and changing SR priorities. The idea of SR in public procurement travels from national and regional policies and partly from international policies and guidelines. Sweden's backbone built on collective agreements has made it easier to include such criteria in public procurement (Maon et al., 2017). The existing criteria match international agreements, such as the ILO core convention, to make public procurement fair and attractive to other countries. However, there have been different translations of social responsibilities due to the independence of municipalities and regions (Nilsson, 2001) in their decision making, such as varying prioritizations of long-term unemployed people, immigrants, refugees, and people with disabilities. Dissimilar translations and independence in decision making are not new to Swedish municipalities. For instance, the city of Malmö conducted study visits to Norway to learn about the organization of electric vehicles (EVs). However, it did not replicate the Norwegian model that allows EVs to use bus lanes and benefit from free parking (Palm & Backman, 2017). Yet, as that study shows, it might not always be helpful to have different priorities and needs because this might create confusion in selecting from among priorities, and it might reduce the amount of collaboration between public organizations.

By implementing a 5-stage framework, this study confirms the implications of new Scandinavian institutionalism (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Westney & Piekkari, 2019) in the context of public procurement in Sweden. We found evidence of negotiation and interpretation instead of explanation and translation in the travel of ideas process, which resulted in different approaches to SR in public procurement. Although it might help to prioritize the needs of a region, it has taken much time for procurement professionals to apply SR correctly. In sum, to address the critical call to improve social welfare and responsibility in the EU and, particularly in Sweden and for underrepresented groups, this study takes a step toward investigating how SR is adopted, developed, and implemented in public procurement in Sweden.

This study has limitations that need to be acknowledged. The main limitation relates to the study's sample size – namely, the interviews conducted on only 27 organizations. A larger sample would allow for a disaggregation of the results. It could also increase the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the results. Moreover, other translation models within Scandinavian institutionalism exist in the literature, and this study has focused only on one of them, the travel of ideas by Czarniawska and Joerges (1996). While we utilized a thematic analytical method, other approaches, such as grounded theory, could be used in further research. Finally, this study collected data from one country, Sweden. Collecting data from multiple countries can contribute to the theory and practice in a more generalizable manner.

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