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The rhetoric and reality of SME-friendly procurement

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Abstract

SME-friendly policies are central to public procurement. The extent to which these policies have been put into practice has gone largely untested, particularly from a SME perspective. To address this gap a survey of SMEs' reported experiences of policy implementation was conducted. Ireland served as the research context. The findings indicate that policy implementation has been limited. Firm size is found to be a significant predictor of SMEs' experiences, with micro-enterprises more negative than small or medium-sized enterprises. Reasons for the observed policy-practice divide as well as recommendations for its improvement are discussed.

Introduction

To increase small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) participation in public procurement governments are becoming more proactive. In the European Union (EU), for example, a Code of Best Practices Facilitating Access by SMEs to Public Procurement was adopted in 2008 (European Commission, 2008). Similar initiatives are to be found in other regions and countries. So-called SME-friendly policies form part of a more overarching agenda that aims to leverage public procurement in support of small enterprise development (Preuss, 2011). The translation of policy into everyday procurement practice is a prerequisite for the achievement of this goal. Surprisingly, there remains a dearth of evidence on whether SME-friendly policy has translated into practice. Absent of evidence on policy implementation it can be said that we know more about the rhetoric of SME-friendly procurement than we do about the reality. In a recent commentary on UK procurement policy Murray (2012, p. 167) echoed this view, pointing out that ".....there is an enormous chasm between saying something will, or should, happen and it actually happening". SME-friendly policy is no exception to this maxim. The fact that SME support measures are adopted by central government and promoted to public sector organizations does not mean that the public tendering landscape will transform itself. Research by Loader (2011) into public buyers' efforts to act on SME-friendly policy shows this to be the case.

The importance of differentiating policy aspiration from procurement practice cannot be overstated. It is the latter that ultimately determines SMEs' likelihood of involvement in public sector competitions. As Fee et al. (2002) identified, SMEs' frustration with public procurement is more likely to be attributable to the behaviours and actions of public buyers than policies per se. This relates back to Beyer *et al.*'s (1983, p. 229) observation that "...real public policy is made during its execution by implementers and not during its formation by decision makers". The objective of this paper is to examine SME-friendly policy in practice. SMEs' experiences of barriers in public sector tendering have been documented across many jurisdictions, including Ireland (Flynn *et al.* 2013), the United Kingdom (Loader, 2005), the United States (McManus, 1991) and Australia (Purchase *et al.* 2009). We build on this line of inquiry by capturing SMEs' experiences of policy measures designed to lessen these same barriers. Our results imply that SME-friendly policy has yet to become embedded in everyday procurement practice. The next section reviews existing research on SMEs and public procurement. Following on, the data collection method is described. SMEs' reported experiences are then analysed. The paper concludes with a discussion of why policy has not translated into practice and the steps that can be taken to address this problem.

Research to date

That SMEs experience challenges when competing in the market for public sector contracts is long established. These challenges include bureaucracy, inaccessible public buyers, too much weighting on cost (Cabras, 2011), lack of knowledge over how to source opportunities or navigate tendering procedures (Greer, 1999; Loader, 2005, 2007), onerous tender documentation and unprofessional procurement staff (Fee *et al.* 2002), time demands and financial costs of tendering and requirements for previous relevant experience (Flynn *et al.* 2013), slow payments, narrow bid specifications, difficulties in engaging with end users (McManus, 1991) and large contract sizes and information asymmetries (Bovis, 1996). The evidence suggests that the very nature of public sector tendering and SME resource limitations combine to stymie SMEs (Loader, 2013). In turn, this translates into participation and success rates that do not reflect SMEs' weighting in the economy (GHK, 2010).

SME-friendly policies are an attempt to reduce many of the barriers cited above and correct for the disadvantage SMEs experience relative to large firms when tendering (Anglund, 1999). While policies of this type are not new – Promoting SME Participation in Public Procurement in The Community was adopted by the European Commission in 1990 - the agenda for SME involvement in public procurement has become more salient in recent years. Increased appreciation of the SMEs' value as suppliers to public sector organizations (Loader, 2005), greater awareness of how public procurement can be leveraged in the interests of SME growth (Preuss, 2011) and the impact of the 2007 financial crisis (Murray, 2009) explain this effect. While policy has sought to tackle the main barriers facing SMEs, it has not gone so far as to discriminate in their favour (Kidalov and Snider, 2011). Instead the emphasis has been on creating equality of access for all potential suppliers, which is consistent with the sentiments of both public buyers and suppliers. The former have been found to favour this approach as it does not undermine the principle of open competition (Qiao *et al.* 2009) and suppliers have been shown only to want a less bureaucratic tendering process (Glover, 2008).

The importance attached to facilitating SMEs in public procurement notwithstanding, there is reason to believe that making it a reality will prove challenging. A number of studies have averred to the uneasy mix of policies and competing agendas that govern the procurement field (Erridge, 2007; Fee, 2002; Pickernell *et al.* 2011; Schapper *et al.* 2006). In practice this means that public buyers are under pressure to maximize value for money while complying with laws and directives and supporting socio-economic goals. With regard to SME-friendly policy specifically, cost saving pressures have been shown to limit the ability and inclination of buyers to implement it (Cabras, 2011; Loader, 2007, 2011). The general observation has been that "...while procurement officers would like to do business with small firms, in practice their primary aim is to achieve value for money" (Loader, 2007, p. 313). The goals of efficiency, compliance and socio-economic objectives are not mutually exclusive, as Erridge and Hennigan (2012) have recently demonstrated, but "regularity ambiguity" presents difficulties for buyers (Morgan, 2008, p. 1246). Under such circumstances the implementation of SME-friendly policy is far from guaranteed.

Data collection

To examine SME-friendly policy implementation data was obtained from SMEs competing in the Irish public sector marketplace in December, 2013. As the intended policy targets SMEs are ideally placed to assess if SME-friendly policies have translated into practice. The selection of SMEs as key respondents is further justified as research to date has privileged buyers' views over those of other public procurement actors (Murray, 2009a). The data gathering process involved e-surveying the population of suppliers registered on Ireland's national public procurement portal. Adopting this approach ensured direct access to SMEs competing for public sector contracts. The survey instrument was initially piloted

with 20 Irish SMEs and designed in line with the best practice recommendations of Dillman (2007) in terms of design, length and user-friendliness. The research objective was to capture data on SMEs' experiences of measures articulated in Facilitating SME Access to Public Sector Contracts, which was by the Irish government in 2010 (Department of Finance, 2010). Among the measures it contains are the division of contracts into lots, proportionality and relevance in the use of qualification criteria, openness to SME consortium bidding, and ensuring that suppliers only have to initially declare their ability to satisfy financial capacity and insurance cover requirements. Approximately three-years had elapsed between policy adoption in 2010 and our testing of its implementation in 2013.

Political impetus for a more SME-friendly public procurement regime in Ireland resulted from a sharp economic contraction in 2007. SMEs were hit particularly hard, as data from the European Commission (2011) proves. Between 2007 and 2010 SMEs' contribution to the Irish economy fell five percentage points from 53 percent to 48 percent, employment reduced by 15 percent and final output decreased by 18 percent. All this had the effect of galvanising political efforts to leverage public procurement for SMEs' benefit. At the same time cutting public sector expenditure became an overriding political priority, and public procurement was identified as having a key contribution to make in delivering savings. Included among the various cost saving initiatives was a roll-out of national purchasing framework agreements designed to exploit economies of scale (NPPPU, 2009). In sum, adverse economic conditions in Ireland from 2007 onwards brought about simultaneous attempts to open-up the public procurement market to SMEs and to achieve cost savings in public purchasing.

Description of respondents

The data collection phase generated responses from 5816 firms. As an estimated 60,000 suppliers were registered on Ireland's public procurement portal at the time of the survey, the response rate approximates to 10 percent. The data was screened prior to analysis and substantially incomplete surveys were removed. The total number of incomplete responses was 2553, which left 3263 completed surveys. Large firms i.e. firms with 250 or more employees were excluded as they were not relevant for the purposes of the study. The total number of large firms was 253. The final usable SME sample was 3010. The characteristics of the 3010 SMEs are summarised in Table 1. The majority are micro enterprises, measured by the number of full-time employees. Reported turnover figures are consistent with this observation. Over seven out of ten SMEs reported annual revenues of less than €2 million. In terms of age, 42 percent have been operating for less than ten years and 58 percent that have been operating for more than ten years. The majority of firms either fall into the category of limited company or sole trader. The five main industries in which firms compete are professional & consultancy services (26 percent), construction (15 percent), information technology (11 percent), engineering (7 percent) and wholesale & retail (6 percent). Four out of five firms are domiciled in Ireland. In order of importance, the remainder is found in Britain, Northern Ireland, Europe, and Rest of World. Almost half of the firms compete at national level, 32 percent at sub-national level (local or regional markets), and 18 percent in international markets. The sample firms have on average eleven years of public sector tendering experience.

Table 1 SME Respondent Characteristics

No. of Employees	Frequency	%	Age	Frequency	%	Tendering Experience	Frequency	%
1-9	1889	62.8	0-5 years	716	24	0-2 years	756	25.1
10-49	760	25.2	6-10 years	529	17.7	3-6 years	768	25.5
50-249	361	12.0	11-20 years	760	25.5	7-13 years	722	24
Total	3010	100	21+ years	980	32.8	14+ years	764	25.4
			Total	2985	100	Total	3010	100
Turnover (€)	Frequency	%	Country	Frequency	%	Firm Type	Frequency	%
< 2 million	2180	72.8	Ireland	2400	79.9	Sole trader	710	23.7
2-10 million	537	17.9	Northern Ire.	134	4.5	Partnership	132	4.4
10-50 million	232	7.8	Britain	334	11.1	Ltd	2094	69.8
50 million+	44	1.5	EU	80	2.7	Unlimited	37	1.2
Total	2993	100	Rest of World	55	1.8	Charity	27	.9
			Total	3003	100	Total	3000	100

Results

SMEs' reported experiences of policy implementation are reported in this section. All variables used in the analysis are listed in the Appendix. Analysis of SMEs' reported experiences by size, age, and tendering experience was also undertaken. Previous research by Flynn *et al.* (2013a), Karjalainen and Kemppainen (2008) and Pickernell *et al.* (2011) has found SME size to be a significant predictor of tendering behaviour and outcomes. Firm age and tendering experience have also been linked to tendering outcomes (GHK, 2010). A three-way ANOVA that combines size, age, and tendering experience was used for interval and scale variables and Pearson's Chi Square test was used for categorical variables.

SMEs were questioned about their knowledge of Irish SME-friendly policy. The majority of SMEs were found not to be familiar with policy in place for their benefit. Seventy-seven percent claimed to be unaware as against the 23 percent who were aware. SME size ($p < .05$) was found to be a significant predictor of policy familiarity. Micro-enterprises evinced a lower level of policy familiarity than either small or medium-sized enterprises. Tendering experience ($p < .05$) was also significant. SMEs with low levels of tendering experience were less aware of SME-friendly policy than SMEs with high levels of tendering experience. Age was not a significant predictor of policy awareness ($p = .157$).

SMEs were asked if it was their experience that four key SME-friendly measures had been implemented. The four measures were (i) division of contracts into lots (ii) buyers' flexibility over proof of financial capacity (iii) the use of relevant and proportionate qualification criteria (iv) and buyers' openness to SME consortium bidding. The results indicate that implementation has been limited (Table 2). On all four measures the percentage of SMEs that expressed a negative view is greater than the percentage that expressed a positive view. Buyers' flexibility over the type of financial proof sought is the least implemented measure, followed by the use of relevant and proportionate qualification criteria. In addition to expressed negative assessment, a significant percentage of SMEs were unsure as to whether each of the four measures had been implemented.

On the first measure, dividing contracts into lots, 34 percent of SMEs did not agree that it had been implemented and 39 percent were unsure. Only 27 percent agreed that efforts have been made to divide large contracts into smaller lots. An even more negative assessment was given on buyers' flexibility over proof of financial capacity. Forty-two percent stated

that they had experienced little flexibility on the part of buyers versus 25 percent who stated the opposite and 33 percent who were unsure. In respect of the third measure, the use of relevant and proportionate qualification criteria, 39 percent did not believe that it had been put into practice versus the 36 percent who answered in the affirmative. Approximately 25 percent were unsure. On the fourth and final measure, openness to SME consortium bidding, 32 percent stated that it had not been implemented, 22 percent stated that it had been implemented, and 45 percent were unsure.

Table 2 Reported Experience of SME-friendly Measures

Policy Measure	Strongly Disagree%	Disagree%	Not Sure%	Agree%	Strongly Agree%
Contracts are split into lots	14.5	19.4	38.8	18.8	8.6
Procurers are flexible in the type of proof of financial capacity they accept	16.5	25.5	33.1	19.5	5.4
Pre-qualification criteria are relevant & proportionate	16.2	22.8	24.3	28.2	8.3
SME consortium bidding is encouraged	11.7	20.4	45.7	17.7	4.5

Further statistical analysis was carried out to determine if size, age, and tendering experience predicted SMEs' reported experiences (Table 3). SME size was found to be significant in respect of three of the four key measures: division of contracts into lots ($F(2, 2895) = 3.194, p < .05$), flexibility over proof of financial capacity ($F(2, 2892) = 4.9, p < .05$) and the use of relevant and proportionate qualification criteria ($F(2, 2891) = 7.9, p < .05$). For each of these three measures post hoc comparisons revealed significant differences between micro and small enterprises ($p < .05$) and micro and medium-sized enterprises ($p < .05$) but not between small and medium-sized enterprises. Neither SMEs' age nor tendering experience acted as predictors for these three measures. On the fourth measure concerning buyers' openness to SME consortium bidding tendering experience was significant ($F(3, 2880) = 3.074, p < .05$). SME size was slightly outside the level of acceptable significance ($F(2, 2880) = 2.583, p = .076$) and age was not significant ($F(3, 2880) = .224, p = .880$).

Table 3 Summary of Factor Effects on SMEs' Reported Experiences

Variable	Sig. SME Size	Sig. SME Age	Sig. SME Tendering Experience	Sig. Size* Age* Tendering Experience
Division of contracts into lots	.041	.896	.113	X
Flexibility over proof of financial capacity	.008	.467	.161	✓
Relevant & proportionate criteria	.000	.407	.585	X
SME consortium bidding	.076	.880	.027	X
e-sourcing	.098	.873	.508	X

Implementation of measures relating to financial capacity and insurance cover declarations were also tested. These measures state that SMEs should only have to declare at the initial tendering stage that they satisfy financial capacity and insurance cover criteria. The analysis suggests that these measures have translated into practice to a moderate degree (Table 4). Fifty-nine percent of SMEs stated that a declaration of financial capacity was all that was requested of them at the initial competition stage and 61 percent claimed the same in respect of declaring their insurance cover. Firm size ($p < .05$) and tendering experience ($p < .05$) were found to act as significant predictors in respect of only having to make a declaration of financial capacity. Micro-enterprises and SMEs with little tendering experience were less likely to have had

the benefit of this measure than small or medium-sized enterprises and firms with high levels of tendering experience. Age was marginally outside the level of significance ($p = .056$). Tendering experience was also significant ($p < .05$) in explaining SMEs' reported experiences on declarations of insurance cover. Again, inexperienced SMEs were less likely to have benefited from this measure (54 percent) compared to experienced SMEs (63 percent). SME size ($p = .162$) and age ($p = .234$) were not found to be significant predictors. A summary of these effects, along with awareness of SME policy, is given in Table 5.

Table 4 Reported Experiences of Financial Capacity and Insurance Cover Measures

Policy Measure	Yes %	No %
At the initial tendering stage my firm only has to declare that its meets the financial capacity criteria	59	41
At the initial tendering stage my firm only has to declare that it has adequate insurance cover	61	39

The open advertising of all contracts worth €25,000 or greater on Ireland's national e-procurement portal is another strand of SME-friendly policy. To gauge the implementation of this measure SMEs were asked the percentage of contracts they tendered for over the last three years that were identified via this portal. On average 58 percent of contracts were identified by SMEs online (std. dev. 40.86). The median figure was 75 percent, which indicates that half of SMEs e-source three out of every four contracts. Additional analysis found that e-sourcing within the SME population was not contingent on size ($p = .098$), age ($p = .873$) or level of tendering experience ($p = .508$).

Table 5 Awareness and Experience of SME-friendly Measures

Variable	Pearson's Chi Square	Cramer's V	Sig.
Size and awareness of SME-friendly policy	11.54	.062	.003
Age and awareness of SME-friendly policy	5.205	.042	.157
Tendering experience and awareness of SME-friendly policy	40.19	.116	.000
Size and declaration of financial capacity	13.32	.068	.001
Size and declaration of insurance cover	3.635	.035	.162
Age and declaration of financial capacity	7.57	.051	.056
Age and declaration of insurance cover	4.26	.039	.234
Tendering experience and declaration of financial capacity	17.57	.078	.001
Tendering experience and declaration of insurance cover	13.97	.069	.003

Discussion and implications

SMEs have become central to debate over public procurement, as evidenced by growth in the number and sophistication of policy measures aimed at supporting them. The question posed here was whether these same policy measures have translated into practice. Based on SMEs' reported experiences it appears that there is a substantial gap between what

legislators and policy makers say should happen as regards facilitating SMEs and what actually happens in practice. As has been found with other aspects of procurement policy, including sustainability (Morgan, 2008; Walker and Brammer, 2009) and third sector commissioning (Murray, 2011), it is evident that the political and policy rhetoric over facilitating SMEs has not been matched by the behaviour and actions of public buyers. The division of contracts into lots, flexibility over proof of financial capacity, relevant and proportionate qualification criteria, and openness to consortium bidding are among the key policy initiatives designed to make public procurement more accessible to SMEs. Yet it is the experience of SMEs that these measures have not been put into practice in any systematic way. On the basis of SMEs' reported experiences procurement practice continues to lag policy pronouncements. So long as this situation persists public sector tendering will continue to be problematic for small suppliers.

The policy-practice divide was found to be most pronounced in the case of micro-enterprises. More than small or medium-sized firms, micro-enterprises report that support measures are not being implemented. This is a significant finding as it is the micro-enterprise cohort which is the principal target of policy support and, numerically, the dominant enterprise type in the economy. That their reported experiences are statistically different from both small and medium-sized enterprises suggests the need for a re-assessment of SME-friendly policy. The findings of this study imply that its impact is being felt by bigger SMEs more so than enterprises with only a few employees. While not as important as size SMEs' tendering experience also acts as a predictor on several measures. These include accommodating consortium bids and only having to declare financial capacity and insurance cover at the initial competition phase. The inference drawn is that more experienced firms are benefiting to a greater extent from SME-friendly policy than firms relatively new to tendering. The findings are not wholly negative, however, and some progress has been made, particularly on the recommendation that contracts valued at €25,000 and above are openly advertised on Ireland's e-procurement portal so as to increase their visibility to SMEs.

Several factors are relevant when explaining the observed gap between SME-friendly policy rhetoric and procurement practice. Firstly, implementing SME-friendly policy is only one of a number of demands made of public sector buyers (Erridge, 2007; Schapper *et al.* 2006). In Ireland's case public buyers are also under obligation to purchase from central framework agreements, which are "...targeted at securing best value for money and facilitating contracting authorities to deliver services within their budgetary constraints" (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2013, p. 1). As Loader (2007, 2011) has already demonstrated, a value for money imperative and an emphasis on demand aggregation is likely to undermine attempts to divide contracts into lots, encourage consortium bidding or accommodate smaller suppliers. The necessity of reducing public expenditure as a condition of its financial rescue by international creditors in 2010 is likely to have amplified this effect in Ireland. Secondly, facilitating SMEs is morally governed unlike, for example, EU Public Procurement Directives which impose legal obligations on public buyers. The latter will always take precedence whenever conflicts of interests arise.

Thirdly, a lack of professionalism in public purchasing can impede SME-friendly policy implementation, as it can with the implementation of procurement policy generally (Morgan, 2008). It should not be forgotten that public buyers are policy implementers (Beyer *et al.* 1983) and the successful realisation of SME-friendly policy, or any other procurement policy, depends on the individual skills and motivation of buyers as well as the organization support structures available to them (Cogburn and Rahm, 2005; Soudry, 2007). If one or more of these elements is missing policy implementation suffers. Fourthly, the possibility that a not sufficient time period had elapsed for policy to take full effect cannot be discounted.

While our study allowed for a three-year gap between policy adoption and the testing of its implementation, it might be that a longer time period is required for SME-friendly procurement to become fully embedded in practice.

A number of implications for SME-friendly procurement arise from this paper. In the first instance there is an onus on central government to give clearer direction to public buyers on what they should prioritise and how they should act. If maximising value for money is the overriding imperative, then the consequences for the SME agenda in public procurement need to be acknowledged. A confused mix of procurement policy is not in the interest of any public procurement stakeholder. A clear sense of purpose should also extend to the policy formulation stage and new procurement policies should not undermine current policy directives. A second onus on central government is to professionalize purchasing across the public sector. So long as purchasing is carried out on an ad hoc basis by public servants principally employed in other roles, as observed by Flynn *et al.* (2013), then the likelihood of policy translating into practice is slim. In contrast, having a cadre of dedicated buyers with the requisite qualifications, commercial experience and organizational support will lead to more value-adding purchasing across the public sector (McCue and Gianakis, 2001).

Emerging from the findings is a lack of policy awareness on the part of SMEs, which is suggestive of a failure of communication on the part of central government. SME-friendly policy needs to be widely promoted to the business community and their representative bodies, and not just to public sector organizations. A more informed SME population will be better positioned to judge if public buyers are adhering to their policy obligations. In itself this could act as an upward pressure on public sector organizations and their buyers to become more responsive to small suppliers. Finally, a reassessment of generic SME-friendly policy is advisable in light of the finding that micro-enterprises seem to benefit less from its implementation than larger SMEs. SMEs are a heterogeneous group when it comes to public sector tendering and policy should reflect this fact (Flynn *et al.* 2013a; Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008). The findings presented here raise challenging questions for all those with an interest in making public procurement more conducive to SME participation. They do, however, represent a particular perspective, that of SMEs who find themselves vying for business in an increasingly competitive market. Going forward, evidence on public buyers' reported behaviours is needed so as to arrive at a balanced assessment of the extent of SME-friendly policy implementation.

Appendix 1: List of variables and their operationalization

Variable	Measure	Scale
SME Size	Number of employees	Micro (1-9) Small (10-49) Medium (50-249)
SME Age	How long is the firm established	0-5 years 6-10 years 11-20 years 21+ years
SME Tendering Experience	Number of years tendering for public sector contracts	0-2 years 3-6 years 7-13 years 14+ years
Policy Awareness	Awareness of SME-friendly policy	Yes No
Declaration of Financial Capacity	Only have to declare financial capacity initially	Yes No
Declaration of Insurance Cover	Only have to declare insurance cover initially	Yes No
Division of Contracts into Lots	Contracts are divided into lots in order to facilitate SME access	5 point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree-Agree)
Flexibility over Proof of Financial Capacity	Buyers are flexible over proof of financial capacity	5 point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree-Agree)
Relevant and Proportionate Qualification Criteria	Qualification criteria are relevant and proportionate	5 point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree-Agree)
Openness to SME Consortium Bidding	Buyers are open to consortium bidding	5 point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree-Agree)
e-Sourcing	Percentage of contracts sourced online over the last three years	0-100%

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