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EXAMINING SOCIAL PROCUREMENT POLICY: PROGRESS, GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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This study examines construction social procurement policy in Wales, one of the nations of the UK, through the lens of Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be' (WPR) approach, based on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality. The research examines key policy documents from 2010 to 2023 including the groundbreaking Well-Being of Future Generations Act, which requires public bodies to consider the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of current and future generations. The policy analysis reveals that while Wales has taken progressive steps in social procurement, there are significant gaps between policy aspirations and implementation. The findings show tensions between top-down policy approaches, such as the Welsh Government's social partnership approach, where it has not been made clear how these arrangements include construction industry expertise and consider the needs of local communities. A focus on well-being goals could be used to achieve social value, share learning, and drive improvement. However, areas requiring attention are also identified, including improved community engagement mechanisms and the need to consider the capacity of the construction industry to deliver socially responsible public procurement.

Keywords: well-being goals; social value; governmentality

INTRODUCTION

The concept of social value remains contested, and its implementation through procurement policy is often complex and inconsistent (Raidén *et al.*, 2018). In Wales, this agenda has gained momentum with the introduction of the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023 (the SPPP Act), which aims to enhance public services and promote fair work by promoting socially responsible public procurement (Welsh Government, 2023). As noted by Raidén and King (2022), despite progressive legislation, challenges persist; social procurement legislation tends to be prescriptive rather than empowering, which may encourage seeking loops; implementation and enforcement can also be challenging. Wales's distinctive social justice agenda, exemplified by the Well-being of Future Generations Act (WFG Act) 2015, positions procurement as a key tool for achieving long-term social, economic, environmental, and cultural goals (Future Generations Commissioner, 2021). Wright *et al.* (2023) note that in the construction sector complex supply chains, limited community engagement, and unclear integration of industry expertise have hindered its implementation.

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The objectives of this research are: firstly, to analyse how social procurement policies in Wales construct and represent social problems; secondly, to identify the assumptions and power dynamics embedded in these representations; thirdly, to trace the evolution of policy framing over time; fourthly to highlight gaps in implementation particularly around community engagement and industry capacity; and fifthly to propose future directions for more inclusive and effective social procurement strategies in the Welsh construction context. The study applies Bacchi's (2015, 2016) core What's the problem represented to be (WPR) questions to the Welsh policy context to guide this analysis. These are the research questions, they are:

7. What is the problem represented to be in Welsh social procurement policies?
8. What assumptions or presuppositions underlie this representation?
9. How did this representation of the problem come about?
10. What is left unproblematic in this representation?
11. What effects are produced by this representation?
12. How is this representation being defended, questioned, or replaced?

By situating these questions within the Welsh context, this study contributes to broader debates on policy, social justice, and the role of industry and community voices in delivering meaningful social value.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social procurement refers to the intentional use of purchasing power to generate positive social outcomes, both directly and indirectly, through the acquisition of goods, services or infrastructure (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020). In the construction sector, this has led to a shift from traditional evaluation metrics, such as cost and time, to include social value (Raidén *et al.*, 2018). Raidén *et al.* (2018) highlight that in the UK, legislation increasingly requires construction bidders to demonstrate community benefits, positioning procurement as a strategic tool for social impact across projects. However, defining and measuring social value remains complex. As noted by Raidén and King (2022), social value is influenced by context and varies across different communities and over time, making standardised definitions and evaluations difficult.

A common feature of social procurement in construction is the emphasis on employment and training for marginalised groups. Loosemore *et al.* (2020) highlight the rise of indirect social procurement, where clients require supply chains to deliver social outcomes, most commonly through employment and training opportunities for marginalised groups. Delivering these outcomes is not straightforward. Loosemore *et al.* (2020) note that subcontractors are often tasked with implementation and face risks such as reduced productivity and increased costs. Loosemore *et al.* (2020) highlight the lack of subcontractor's voice in policy development. Raidén *et al.* (2018) caution that if capacity issues are not addressed, there is a risk that policy ambitions will outpace the industry's ability to deliver social value.

In devolved UK nations like Wales and Scotland, procurement is increasingly used to promote social value and fair work. Legislation such as the SPPP Act embeds community benefits into public contracts (Wright *et al.*, 2023). Wright *et al.* (2023) note that while these policies aim to reduce inequality and improve working conditions implementation is often hindered by limited resources, legal complexity, and recruitment challenges. Conversely, Wright *et al.* (2023) highlight that with

strong political will and collaborative networks, public procurement holds the potential to drive meaningful social change.

This study adopts a critical policy analysis framework grounded in Foucault's (2019) concept of governmentality and Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach. Together, these perspectives offer a powerful lens for examining how social procurement policy constructs problems, allocates responsibility and shapes social outcomes. Foucault's (2019) theory of governmentality shifts the focus from top-down government control to the more diffuse ways in which modern states govern populations. Foucault (2019) argues that governance operates not just through control but through norms and practices that shape how people live and interact. In social procurement, this means policy influences market behaviour and social outcomes through contractual mechanisms.

Building on this, Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach challenges the assumption that policies respond to pre-existing problems. Bacchi (2009) argues that policies actively shape and define problems based on underlying assumptions, power structures, and ideological frameworks. Bacchi's (2009) approach, involves questioning 'How is the problem represented here, and with what effects?' Bacchi's (2009) approach reveals how policy discourse shapes not only what is seen as the problem but who is responsible, who is affected and what solutions are considered legitimate.

In the context of social procurement, the WPR approach is particularly useful for examining how terms such as 'social value' and 'disadvantage' are defined and operationalised. It enables a critical examination of whose voices are included and excluded and how certain groups, such as construction organisations or marginalised communities, are positioned within policy narratives. For example, framing unemployment as a skills deficit may lead to training-based interventions while ignoring structural inequalities.

While the WPR approach can be a powerful tool for analysing policy, it has limitations. Cordeiro and Mello (2020) suggest that the focus on discourse may underplay material constraints such as institutional inertia or economic pressures. Moreover, Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) explain that the approach is more reflective than prescriptive; it does not offer ready-made solutions but instead fosters a deeper understanding and reflexivity. This conceptual framework is further informed by social justice theories (Fraser, 2009; Sen, 2009), which emphasize the importance of redistribution, recognition and participation. These principles align with the goals of social procurement and support the use of WPR to assess whether policies genuinely engage with the lived experiences of marginalised communities and promote equitable outcomes.

In summary, the WPR approach provides a rigorous and reflective framework for analysing how social procurement policy in Wales constructs problems, shapes power relations, and influences practice. It is particularly well-suited to the field of social procurement, where definitions of social value are far from settled.

METHOD

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 13 policy documents published between 2010 and 2023. These documents were chosen for their relevance to social procurement, construction, and the well-being goals outlined in the WFG Act. These documents represent a cross-section of perspectives from government, oversight

bodies, and industry stakeholders, including legislation, policy frameworks, guidance documents, and commissioned evaluations. The sample includes:

- 4 documents published by the Welsh Government (e.g., Community Benefits policies from 2010 and 2014, consultation responses and the explanatory memorandum of the SPPP Act).
- 2 legislative documents from Senedd Cymru, including the SPPP Act.
- 2 strategic reports from the Future Generations Commissioner (2020, 2021).
- 5 documents from third-sector organisations and industry bodies (e.g., Constructing Excellence in Wales, Cwmpas).

The analysis was structured around Bacchi's six WPR questions and the additional reflexive step (Step 7). The documents were examined using a hybrid approach that combines thematic and discursive analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the policy documents, enabling the researcher to capture both explicit content and underlying meanings related to social procurement discourse. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns and shifts in discourse, while discursive analysis was applied to examine how language constructs power relations and legitimises specific policy directions. The analysis was conducted manually, with codes and insights organised according to each WPR question.

Based on Bacchi's (2009) guidance on how to apply the WPR approach, the analysis proceeded in three iterative stages:

1. Document familiarisation: Each document was read multiple times to identify key themes, discursive patterns, and shifts in framing.
2. WPR coding: Bacchi's six questions were applied systematically to each document. This included identifying explicit problem representations, underlying assumptions, historical trajectories, silences, and discursive effects.
3. Cross-document synthesis: Representations were compared across time and institutional sources to trace the evolution of policy discourse and identify tensions, contradictions, and gaps.

Bacchi (2016) includes a seventh step in the WPR approach, which encourages researchers to reflect on their own positionality in relation to the problem representations they identify. In this study, the author's professional experience in delivering community-based social procurement initiatives in Wales may have influenced a preference for locally driven approaches over centralised models. While this insider perspective provided valuable contextual insights, it also introduced the possibility of bias. To address this concern, the WPR framework was applied rigorously and consistently across all documents, and reflexive notes were maintained throughout the analysis to document interpretive decisions.

RESULTS

WPR Q1: What is the problem represented to be in Welsh social procurement policies?

Bacchi's (2015) first question explores what is perceived as the problem in a specific policy. The evolution of the Welsh Government's social procurement policies reveals a consistent focus on poverty as the central problematised issue, though the approach and emphasis have shifted over time. The Welsh Government's (2010) community benefits policy used tentative language, 'helping suppliers deliver maximum value', whereas the Welsh Government's (2014) policy adopted a more assertive stance,

‘delivering maximum value.’ Marking a shift from supplier-led approaches to a more centralised government role in directing procurement strategies.

The Welsh Government’s (2010) policy framed social value through a sustainable development lens, encouraging suppliers tendering for construction services and supplies contracts to address local socio-economic issues via training, employment, and community initiatives. The Welsh Government’s (2014) policy explicitly identified poverty as the problem and targeted disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed and workless households through targeted recruitment and training (TR&T); it also promoted tailored solutions based on community needs.

The Future Generations Commissioner (2020) in the Future Generations Report identified a lack of strategy to use public procurement to lever social, economic, environmental and cultural outcomes in line with the WFG Act. At the same time, it maintains poverty as a central concern through the goal of achieving a prosperous Wales and sees outcomes-driven social procurement as a way of tackling poverty (Future Generations Commissioner, 2020). This may indicate a shift in policy focus, highlighting concerns about the absence of a coherent strategy for leveraging social procurement to achieve social value.

The SPPP Act provided a framework linking social value to improving economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being. This legislation mandates a socially responsible procurement duty on significant construction contracts and social public work clauses in major construction contracts, with an estimated value equal to or greater than £2 million (Senedd Cymru, 2023). In the Act’s explanatory memorandum, the Welsh Government (2023) explains that the legislation explicitly addresses disadvantage, including age, employment status, race, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation. This comprehensive approach reaffirms poverty as the fundamental problem while recognising its intersectionality with other forms of disadvantage. Throughout the policy evolution, poverty consistently emerges as the core problematised issue that social procurement aims to address, with employment and training opportunities as the primary solution.

WPR Q2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie the problem representation outlined above

Bacchi (2015, 2016) suggests that answering question two involves understanding policy more deeply. Any presupposition about the construction industry tackling poverty should consider the Welsh economy. The Bevan Foundation (2020) highlights that public sector procurement in Wales is worth over £6.3 billion, with construction accounting for 28% of this spending. This gives the Welsh Government significant financial leverage. Several key assumptions underpin social procurement policies in Wales, reflecting a presupposition from the Welsh government about the industry’s role in delivering social value to communities.

Policy language suggests that the construction industry is seen as a key provider of training and employment for disadvantaged groups. Later policies assume that formal procurement is the most effective route to creating social value. The Future Generations Commissioner (2020) reinforces this by promoting an outcomes-based approach under the WFG Act, positioning public bodies as the main drivers of social outcomes. This could reflect an assumption that social value is best delivered through government-led mechanisms rather than industry-led initiatives. However, the Commissioner (2021) also noted inconsistent practice and industry concerns that

public projects, such as new schools, often overlook opportunities to support well-being goals.

WPR Q3 How did this representation of the problem come about?

Bacchi (2015) explains that to answer question three, policies must be examined to explore how the problem has developed and how power relations have changed over time. Constructing Excellence in Wales (2010) positioned the construction industry as the deliverer of essential infrastructure - roads, hospitals and housing - while public bodies were under increasing pressure to maximise limited resources. This framing established the construction industry's position of power as an indispensable partner in Welsh development by emphasising a 'holistic approach to value' (Constructing Excellence in Wales, 2010, 5). However, there was also evidence of government control through targets on waste, carbon emissions and community development (Constructing Excellence in Wales, 2010).

The Welsh Government's power dynamics changed with the introduction of the SPPP Act. One of the objectives of this legislation is to make Wales a fair work nation (Thomas, 2022). This legislation marked a decisive shift in power relations, particularly for the construction sector. Regarding fair work, the Welsh Government (2023) specifically targeted construction's long and complex supply chains, identifying them as a risk of poor compliance with social obligations, including those concerning unfair and unlawful employment practices (Welsh Government, 2023). This may reflect a strategic use of social procurement legislation to extend the Welsh Government's influence over labour practices, potentially addressing limitations associated with devolved power. This also represents a shift from the Welsh Government's (2014) community benefits policy, moving from broad encouragement of workforce development to specific, legally mandated requirements.

The SPPP Act strategically uses this purchasing power to impose specific duties on major construction contracts worth £2 million or more (Senedd Cymru, 2023). Over time, the problem representation has evolved, and power has shifted. The analysis of the policies shows that the construction industry has gone from just a provider of buildings and infrastructure to an industry that creates social value through providing employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups. The policy evolution suggests a shift in governance dynamics, with the Welsh Government assuming a more directive role in shaping social procurement practices.

WPR Q4 What is left unproblematic

Bacchi (2015) suggests that question four involves identifying what is left unexamined in policy representations. In Wales, a key omission is the lack of a clear definition of social value. Research by Cwmpas (2022), based on interviews across 18 organisations, revealed widespread confusion about its meaning and strategic implementation. While the SPPP Act tasks contracting authorities with improving economic, social, environmental, and cultural well-being in line with the WFG Act, it leaves the concept of social value open to interpretation, often illustrated only through examples like employment for disadvantaged groups.

There are also silences around community engagement. Cwmpas's (2022) research highlighted that organisations often assume what constitutes social value for communities without direct consultation. While the aim of the SPPP Act is to strengthen social partnership arrangements working through trade unions, employer representatives, and government, it leaves questions about meaningful community involvement in determining social value priorities (Senedd Cymru, 2023). Welsh

Government's (2023) equality impact assessment explains that social partners, particularly trade unions, will provide a mechanism for capturing lived experience. However, concerns have been expressed about the skill profile of Social Partnership Councils and whether they possess adequate expertise in procurement, contract management, and construction - areas crucial for effective implementation (Cwmpas 2022, Welsh Government 2021). The observed omissions and ambiguities within Welsh social procurement policy may indicate a need for more comprehensive and inclusive approaches to policy design and implementation.

WPR Q5 What effects discursive, subjectification, lived are produced by this representation of the problem?

Bacchi (2015) suggests that understanding question five involves examining how policy descriptions influence our understanding and identity, and how these descriptions shape our perceptions of ourselves and others. The social procurement policies were examined to denote the subject positions of the intended beneficiaries of social procurement policies. Welsh Government's (2014) policy focuses on providing targeted recruitment and training opportunities for disadvantaged groups, focusing on workless households and the short and long-term unemployed. However, the policy also suggests that the decision on what groups to target should be based on the socio-economic needs of the local area and the activities that the contract or project will require (Welsh Government, 2014). Within the SPPP Act, the subject position of beneficiaries of socially responsible procurement is still one of disadvantage. The Act explains that employment opportunities should be provided to 'younger people, older people, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities or people who may otherwise be disadvantaged (for example, because of their race, religion or belief, sex, gender identity or sexual orientation)' (Senedd Cymru, 2023). The policy documents provide limited guidance on how to effectively support the diverse needs of these groups in accessing employment within the construction sector.

The construction industry seems positioned as the deliverer of community benefits for the disadvantaged. Previous policies discussed training, education, community initiatives, employment, and targeted recruitment and training (Welsh Government, 2010, 2014). The SPPP Act mandates the industry provides employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Therefore, social procurement policies seem to be positioning the construction industry as a provider of employment opportunities to disadvantaged groups.

WPR Q6 How and where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced?

Question six of Bacchi's (2015) approach involves examining where else the problem has been produced to understand problem shaping and find alternative perspectives. Construction Excellence in Wales (2012) examined the supplier's views on the Welsh Government's community benefits policy. They found that the construction industry was already delivering community benefits but highlighted concerns about focusing on short-term targets and the need to apply community benefit targets better to ensure sustainable employment outcomes. Interestingly, in Construction Excellence in Wales's (2012) research, the industry was problematising the effectiveness of community benefits policy.

Construction Excellence in Wales (2019) in 'Constructing for Future Generations' explains that they were spearheading the campaign for real change alongside the industry and the office of the Future Generations Commissioner. Construction Excellence in Wales (2019) stressed the importance of aligning the activities of the

construction industry with the seven well-being goals while recognising the construction industry's impact on people's lives by building homes, schools, hospitals and infrastructure. Construction Excellence in Wales (2019) highlights the complexities involved in aligning construction sector activities with the well-being goals outlined in Welsh policy frameworks. The document reads as a call to action. It stresses the need for the construction industry to recognise its impact on people's lives while recognising that a commitment to social value and community benefits is becoming the norm (Construction Excellence in Wales, 2019). Interestingly, there was a shift from Construction Excellence in Wales (2012), which explained that the construction industry wanted better application of community benefits targets to ensure sustainable employment outcomes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Bacchi's (2015, 2016) WPR approach provided a valuable framework for critically analysing social procurement policy in Wales by examining how policy problems are constructed, thereby uncovering deeper insights into the underlying assumptions and power dynamics that shape policy development over time. The legislative approach to social procurement in Wales has increasingly emphasized centralised governance, which may limit the extent to which the expertise of the construction industry and the perspectives of local communities are incorporated into policy development and implementation. This positioned social procurement as primarily guided by government frameworks with less emphasis on delivery mechanisms involving the construction industry and local communities. Both Cwmpas's (2022) research and the Welsh Government's (2021) consultation on social procurement raised concerns that an increasingly top-down legislative approach to social procurement in Wales is failing to consider the expertise of the construction industry and the voice of the communities that benefit from social procurement interventions.

Using Bacchi's WPR approach, has proven to be a valuable method for uncovering the assumptions and power dynamics in social procurement policy in Wales. This analytical lens also has the potential for broader application in construction management research. This study offers a critical framework for examining how problems are constructed in policy and practice, revealing the discursive and institutional forces that shape industry behaviour. Future research could apply this approach to other areas of construction management, such as workforce development, sustainability or digital innovation. This application would enhance the theoretical foundations of construction management and promote more reflective and inclusive policymaking.

While this study focuses on a Welsh context, Bacchi's conceptual approach offers valuable insights that are transferable to other national and regional settings. Bacchi (2009) explains the WPR approach encourages forms of cross-cultural and cross-national comparison to tease out distinctions among problem relations. Social procurement policies across different jurisdictions often share implementation challenges as well as challenges in defining and delivering social value. By critically examining how problems are represented in policy discourse, this approach can be applied to explore social procurement policies in other parts of the UK, Europe or globally. Future research could adopt the WPR lens to compare how different governments conceptualise social value, engage with industry, and include community voices in procurement processes.

In conclusion, the Welsh Government's approach to social justice, from securing community benefits to socially responsible public procurement, reflects a growing commitment to leverage public sector funding to achieve social value and tackle poverty. However, the policy analysis shows that significant gaps remain, particularly in community engagement and the integration of industry expertise. The analysis showed that the construction industry has consistently expressed concern about the practical application of social procurement policies. Research by Construction Excellence in Wales (2012) highlighted the industry's desire for better-targeted community benefit initiatives to ensure sustainable employment outcomes. A focus on well-being could provide a valuable framework for advancing outcomes based social procurement to achieve social, economic, environmental and cultural goals. However, the policy analysis showed that industry stakeholders had concerns about the current policy direction. Particularly there is a perception that the existing approach may over rely on prescriptive legislation, which may overlook the expertise and experience of construction professions and communities. The new social partnership arrangement in Wales should include mechanisms to amplify the voice of the construction industry, enabling them to benefit from their expertise in social procurement. This could contribute to improved accountability mechanisms and support the delivery of social value outcomes that align with the needs of Welsh communities.

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