



Navigating the Labyrinth: A Qualitative Analysis of Institutional Dysfunction in Public Procurement in Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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This research analyzes the micro-mechanisms behind the failure of public procurement in Punjab, Pakistan. Conducting qualitative interviews with procurement officials, we outline a self-reinforcing cycle of dysfunction caused by the interaction of political interference, capacity gaps, regulatory vagueness, technology deficits, and a culture of avoidance. This study also examined the impact of digital literacy on the prospects associated with its application in public procurement. These internal and external factors do not act in isolation, amplifying one another to create a systemic institutional problem, rather than a series of discrete problems. It is argued that the introduction of professional rules to the procurement cadre, the simplification of rules, and the strengthening of multi-way stakeholder oversight and engagement will ensure that intended reforms to the procurement system will succeed. The demand for computer-literacy curtails from the manner through which ICTs are dominating diverse characteristics in modern working environment These measures will address the gap between the informal and formal rules that govern procurement.

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1.0 Introduction

Within the scope of economic governance frameworks, public procurement operates at the intersection of economic planning, public service provision, and administrative management. It extends well beyond the simplistic understanding of an administrative function that focuses on the acquisition of goods and services. It is a public strategic function. As suggested by Thai and Piga (2007), public procurement systems can promote economic development, equity, and value-in-transfer public procurement. It is the value-for-money assessment that makes public procurement unique. Public procurement constituted 10-20% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in most countries as of the last OECD estimates (2019). It makes public procurement a management function of national importance. In the case of Pakistan, and in the developing world more generally, public procurement management is important for the value of public service protection and avoiding inefficiency that can render the state dysfunctional.

Cost savings are not the only benefits of procurement. More strategically focused public procurement can produce more positive environmental benefits, innovation, and social inclusion (Edler & Georghiou, 2007; Turley & Perera, 2014). Many developing nations, however, have been unable to meet these challenges. Complex systemic issues, the potential for high political capture, underdeveloped institutions, and uncertainty regarding the applicable technologies may amplify the challenges. As a result, under such circumstances, the process of public procurement often forgets its major objectives in empowering the local economic growth and enhancing the layers of governance of the systems of public procurement.

This is especially the case of Pakistan. In 2002, the country established the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) in order to provide an equal and fair competitive procurement access to the public sector. While the PPRA has set up standard protocols, there is evidence that the Authority has yet to incorporate more sustainable and effective governance principles (Zaidi, Mirza, & Fancy, 2019). The system remains imperfect in its public procurement governance layers, where political goals override public interest, resulting in the late and distorted implementation of procurement rules.

1.1. Contextualizing the Problem in Pakistan

Pakistan's procurement environment deals with political and economic risk and an absence of appropriate stewardship and institutional deficits. Decision-makers at the federal and provincial tiers can inappropriately shape procurement decisions, leading to unbalanced distortions and misallocation of resources (Khwaja & Mian, 2005). In Pakistan, the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) was established in the year 2002 to introduce fairness, transparency, and competition in the public procurement process. The 2004 PPRA Rules drafted the genesis of the principles of transparency and competition, but failed to provide the systems to monitor adherence to transparency and competition, to provide enforcement and enforcement of sanctions for breaching the principles.

Although the establishment of a regulatory framework is a positive move, part of the critics describes the disintegration of strategy around compliance, and the lack of a progressive aspect such as strategic sustainability, accountability, and value-for-money (Zaidi et al., 2019).

Moreover, the fragmentation of procurement activities and the lack of competence of a large part of the workforce contribute to the disarray. Surveys in the literature indicate that government agencies encounter the 'core' of organizational performance problems consisting of insufficient numbers of staff, ineffective technology, and poor integration of interagency silos (Ali, 2022). Internal problems are compounded by macroeconomic factors such as inflation and erratic currency values that create supply chain disruptions, cost escalation, and postponement of essential development initiatives (Khwaja & Mian, 2005).

1.2. The Internal-External Dichotomy in Procurement Governance

Public procurement performance results from the interaction of the internal organization and the external environment. Within the organization, the procurement function's internal efficiencies depend on leadership, organizational culture, the resources at the organization, and the skills of the staff. Leaders are required to galvanize innovative efforts and steer resourceful allocations (Callender & Matthews, 2002). In Pakistan, however, procurement leaders are often appointed based on 'loyalty' as opposed to 'competence', and this skews the vision and the equilibrium of the system (Khwaja & Mian, 2005). The organization's capacity also represents another important internal dimension. Inadequate institutions and personnel training will result in procedural inadequacies such as poor records, unmonitored contracts, and documentation to a greater extent (Ambe, 2019). Opaque accountability and transparency systems also increase corruption and wastage.

Outside political, legal and economic factors can work to influence the purchasing results. The political class is never absent and the politicians participate in the decision process that lead to rent seeking, giving of contracts to unqualified connected firms and lack of control (Dombrovsky, 2011; Straub, 2011). The regulatory obscurity is not much helpful to shed light on the situation, as rules exist but not all are equally interpreted and implemented across the silos of the government, as frequent audits allow the errors and abuses to flourish unnoticed (Zaidi et al., 2019). Lastly, the procurement entities encounter the issue of macroeconomic instability whose main concern revolves around the geopolitical environment and inaccessibility of predictable secondary and primary goods markets.

1.3. The Digital Imperative: E-Procurement

Regardless of the challenges mentioned above, legal systems in the world acknowledge the introduction of e-procurement as the part of digital transformation to increased efficiency and accountability. E-procurement systems can scan the entire procurement cycle, from bid publishing to contract management, which reduces ambiguity, cuts costs, and improves the audit trail (Presutti, 2003). Numerous case studies, such as the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) in India, and cited by the World Bank (2020), attest to improved vendor access and considerable time savings in procurement.

In Pakistan, though, the use of e-procurement systems has not progressed. There is a problem of unexploited potential with these systems owing to poorly developed infrastructure, the low level of digital literacy, or a lack of willingness to adapt to the digital world. Professionals point to the un-finetuned integration of e-procurement budget systems and their meaningless

connections to payment systems as a means of payment, technical illiteracy, and poor or cut-off internet connections as blocking the use of e-procurement systems. These poorly developed e-procurement systems offer symbolic rather than functional use.

1.4. Problem Statement and Objectives

A comprehensive analysis of the research on public procurement in developing worlds shows a skyline of documented problems on the political, regulatory, and capacity issues in geographies such as Schapper, Veiga Malta, and Gilbert (2006) and Gesuka and Namusonge (2013). In Pakistan, the literature points to poorly developed systems, and the critique of the literature on the legal frameworks of the procurement regulatory authorities shows deeply rooted institutional weaknesses (Zaidi, Mirza, & Fancy, 2019; Ali, 2022). There is a considerable distance on the macro level, and often quantitative analysis of diagnostic work, to a certain contextual understanding of the inefficiencies that manifest and operate in the daily work and lived experiences of procurement professionals.

Three specific gaps within the current body of knowledge illustrate this limitation unambiguously. The first limitation and the most prominent one is the reliance on policy analysis, aggregate-level corruption indices, and surveys that simply quantify the presence of a problem (for example, "80% of officials report political pressure"). But the qualitative accounts of the processes underlying these influences are void. For example, how is political pressure actually exercised on a procurement officer? Is it a direct phone call? An implicit suggestion during a meeting? Or a pre-ordained tailoring of technical specifications? These micro-mechanisms must be understood if strategically sound and practically viable anti-corruption policies are to be designed. This study addresses this by shifting the focus from macro-diagnosis to micro-analysis, employing qualitative interviews to expose the tacit processes and informal institutions that govern procurement in practice.

In addition, there is a tendency for the literature to consider Internal Factors (e.g., capabilities, leadership) and External Factors (e.g., politics, economy) as independent of one another. However, these forces are fundamentally interconnected, and there is a critical gap in understanding the interrelating and compounding effects. For example, in what ways does uncertainty in regulation (an external factor) create openings which are taken advantage of because of an internal factor (poorly trained procurement executives). What about macroeconomic turbulence and weak organizational stability? This research seeks to determine the siloed view to construct a framework to account for the situation in Punjab.

Lastly, the underrepresentation of studies regarding procurement officials as knowledgeable stakeholders whose perspectives are essential to developing meaningful solutions is surprising. What are their constraints? How do they justify their actions in the face of ethical conflicts? What logistical issues do they face regarding e-procurement? With the qualitative research contributing to bringing the voice of these practitioners to the fore, this research builds grounded theory and practical recommendations that have been formulated by the people who are most involved in the processes of the procurement policy implementation. As such, the research aims to achieve:

- Examine and characterize the impact of internal organizational issues and determinants (e.g., leadership, capacity, and transparency) on the efficacy of procurement functions in Punjab.
- Analyze the influence of external factors (political, economic, and regulatory) on the procurement functions and their interplay with internal organizational weaknesses.
- Analyze the current status of digital procurement and the practical challenges of digital procurement as experienced on the ground.
- Propose actionable and evidence-based recommendations to improve the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of public procurement processes. These recommendations are to be grounded in the theory developed and the insights of practitioners.

1.5. Study Contribution

This study would help to address above identified critical gaps and add value to existing literature in the following context.

First, it offers comprehensive, field-based, coordinated, and empirical accounts of the Punjab procurement dynamics that construct and outline the system. Secondly the findings of this study suggest evidence-based actionable plans for procurement policy makers and practitioners. The study employed thematic analysis in advancing the argument, and a sense that gives a clear insight into endemic procurement processes inefficiencies.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1. The Strategic Imperative of Public Procurement

Public Procurement is not merely a mere administrative role of purchasing services and goods. It can also be a strategic instrument towards attainment of socioeconomic goals as well as good governance. Canopy systems of procurement are invaluable to the delivery of the state services, construction of public infrastructure, and integrative economic development in the less developed world, where capacity of the state is at the lowest level (Thai & Piga, 2007). It is a significant part of the economy since the portion of public procurement takes up 12-20% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in OECD countries and an even greater part in less developed countries (OECD, 2019). So, its efficient and good management directly influences the economy, the degree of trust of people in the state, and the overall progress of a nation (Rhee, 2012). A brief account theoretical explanation of procurement governance is provided in the section ahead.

2.2 Theoretical Lenses for Understanding Procurement Governance

The analysis of public procurement within a purely administrative context has changed. Procurement is now understood within a range of theoretical approaches. Using the Principal-Agent Pair theory to assess public procurement corruption and inefficient service delivery is still widely accepted (Prier & McCue, 2010). Under this approach, the public (the principal) delegates certain powers to public procurement officials and a procurement officer (the agent). Public procurement officers are often critiqued for failing to consider the best interests of the principal, instead focusing on the personal interests of the agent, such as greed and corruption (bribery and collusion with the connected procurement). In such relationships, the agent is motivated to act with opportunism.

Institutional theory explains procurement as the interplay of laws, formal regulations, norms, cultures, traditions, and informal and formal institutions. Organizations within them adopt similar practices, whether they are dysfunctional or efficient, isomorphic coercive (laws), mimetic (copying), and normative (professional) (Flynn et al., 2016). In the context of Pakistan, the PPRA regulations are often secondary to informal institutions of patronage and kinship.

Transaction Cost Economics provides a basis to understand the costs incurred during the procurement process— supplier search, tender preparation, contract negotiation, and enforcement monitoring. Efficient procurement works to minimize all such transaction costs. Consecutive sections will show the regulatory complexities and the uncertainties of the procurement process, which can hugely increase all the costs, and in turn, the whole process becomes inefficient (Williamson, 1981).

These theories move the analysis beyond the mere technical checklist and instead look at procurement as a governance problem, which is complicated by the multidisciplinary heads of self-interests, regulatory frameworks, and market failures. After discussing the theoretical foundations of public procurement, we summarize the determinants of performance of public procurement in developing countries.

2.3 The Procurement Quandary in Developing Countries

In developing countries, public procurement problems are worse due to more self-inflicted systemic weaknesses. The literature identifies a triad of barriers that are always present, namely weak institutional frameworks, inadequate human and technical resources, and political influence (Gesuka & Namusonge, 2013; Schapper et al., 2006). This causes systemic dysfunctions, project delays, cost escalation and corruption. Under such conditions, the procurement systems tend to become ineffective in the performance of any of its main functions but instead to be used in the promotion of rent seeking and distribution of patronage (Khwaja & Mian, 2005). Pakistan is a fine illustration of these tendencies that are characterized by regulatory uncertainty and politically entrenched process and resembles developing economies like India and Nigeria.

2.4. Internal Determinants of Procurement Efficacy

The internal environment of a procuring entity has determinantal effects on the performance of the entity.

2.4.1. Organizational Culture and Leadership

Effective procurement is based on openness, accountability and ethical integrity. Organizations that support these ideals experience good outcomes where chances of misappropriation of resources are reduced (Coggburn & Schneider, 2003). This culture is facilitated through leadership. Ethical visionary leaders give their employees empowerment, encourage new ideas, and provide protection to the processes against external forces. Conversely, in stark contrast, the deficiency of leadership brings about organization inertia whereby obsolete, useless and inefficient practices become entrenched. The corrupt political procurement activities of leaders are a threat to the professional accountability and integrity of the procurement system in Pakistan (Khwaja & Mian, 2005).

2.4.2. Resource Allocation and Staff Capacity

It requires specialization in all the areas of procurement. In spite of this, in a number of developing countries, there is scarcity of personnel and resources in the public agencies. Lack of training and development of professionals usually leads to poor record-keeping, substandard market research, and poor contract management (Ambe, 2019). Untrained and poor staff have to learn through doing and this brings about errors that cancel processes or leave gaps to abuse. Without training, unskilled staff will result in value loss in the procurement at government level, and reforming procurement depends on human capital and training.

2.5. External Pressures Shaping Procurement Outcomes

2.5.1 Political Interference

This has been empirically proved in Pakistan where companies having political affiliations enjoy unequal access to government contracts and funding (Khwaja & Mian, 2005). This does not only corrupt the way procurement is done and raises the perception of mistrust among people, but it also completely changes procurement into a public service system to a profit-driven one. One of the more threatening influences that may result in the manipulation of the procurement processes is political relationships.

2.5.2 Regulatory and Legal Framework

It must have a clear and definite and a constantly followed scope of law to be effective. To some extent, the PPRA regulations in Pakistan can be viewed as a legal framework; nevertheless, it is full of ambiguous claims, contradictions, and no enforcement devices whatsoever (Zaidi et al., 2019). Unclear definitions of what should be done and how provide an opportunity to authorities to implement other interpretations, corrupt and create an overarching culture of non-compliance without any imposed penalties.

2.5.3. Economic Volatility

Procurement planning is interfered with by a volatile macroeconomic condition, which is inflation, currency devaluation and budget cut. Anyway, unpredictable input prices and untrustworthy supply chains have an influence on the viability of long-term contracts that can and frequently do lead to the delay of important projects with severe consequences on the supply of public services (Zhu et al., 2013). When the economies are in a recession, the institutional patterns, which are already weak, become even smaller.

2.6 E-procurement

E-procurement is lauded for its potential positive effect on transparency, corruption, efficiency, and costs of public procurement (Laryea & Ibem, 2014; Presutti, 2003). There are many success stories of implementation of e-procurement in many developing countries such as Chile, Korea, and India's Government e-Marketplace (GeM).

In Pakistan, as in many other developing countries, the adoption of the remains has stalled. Barriers identified in the literature consistently include: poorly developed technological infrastructure (i.e., unreliable internet), gaps in personnel's core technical skills (e.g., due to low levels of education), lack of staff motivation, institutional inertia, and lack of system interoperability (Watuleke, 2017). Somasundaram and Damsgaard (2005) argue that technology,

by itself, is not a panacea. In Pakistan, e-procurement platforms are not functional systems that reinforce the institutional pathologies they are meant to address. They are, in a sense, functional systems that reinforce the institutional pathologies they are meant to address.

2.7. The Persisting Shadow of Corruption and Exclusion

Corruption remains the single most important obstacle to efficient procurement. Fazekas and Kocsis (2020) discuss complex methods of bid rigging, collusion, and the discriminatory design of technical specifications to exclude other bidders. In Pakistan, weak supervision and low levels of civic engagement permit these anti-social practices to thrive (Ali, 2022).

2.8. Synthesizing the Gap for the Present Study

The literature indicates an established understanding of the broader challenges faced in public procurement in developing countries. Political interference, weak administrative capacity, ambiguous regulations, and corruption, particularly in the spatial context of Pakistan, have also been thoroughly analyzed (e.g., Zaidi et al., 2019; Ali, 2022). Nevertheless, there remain important missing contributions to the literature. The predominant literature in this context continues to rely on policy documentation and quantitative surveys that measure and count the problem, and in the process, misses a qualitative, first-hand understanding of the procurement professionals lived experiences. There is a lack of studies that:

First, understand the micro-mechanisms of the political pressures, rule circumventions, and internal capacity deficits that are routine and day-to-day.

Second, analyze the internal (e.g., leadership, staff capacity) and external (e.g., political, economic) complexities that constrain and shape procurement results.

Third, examine the practical, on-the-ground limitations to the adoption of e-procurement that extend well beyond just technology access.

This research aims to fill the gap. This research aims to collect rich empirical evidence and perform qualitative analysis on the experiences of procurement officers within Punjab to transition from macro-diagnosis to a micro-analysis of procurement dysfunction.

3.0 Methodology

3.1. Research Philosophy and Design

For this study, the key government departments within the Province of Punjab, Pakistan, which are major actors in the procurement of goods, services, and works, were selected. Punjab was chosen because it is the most populated province in Pakistan and it is also one of the biggest public expenditures, making the procurement system a most important one to study. The chosen departments include, but are not limited to, Public Health and Education, and are essential in the delivery of public services and the development of public infrastructure. These were selected because of their large annual volumes of procurement and their direct influence on public service delivery. These also operate under a consistent, albeit not uniform, regulatory structure governed by the Punjab Procurement Rules (2014).

3.2. Research Setting and Participant Selection

The study was done in major government departments in the Province of Punjab, Pakistan, which are the major players in the acquisition of goods, services and works. The choice of Punjab

is because it is the most populated province and contributes to a large proportion of the national spending on the populace so the procurement system here is of paramount importance. The departments, among others, Public Works, Health, and Education, are important to the delivery of services to the population, as well as the development of infrastructure. These departments have been selected due to the large volumes of procurement that they engage in every year and because they directly affect the delivery of services to the population. They have a regulatory environment of the Punjab Procurement Rules (2014), which offers a consistent, but not unified, setting of operations.

Purposive sampling was used in this research, where criterion sampling was optimally applied to select participants who would provide significant insight into public procurement process and determinants of its efficiency (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015).

Identifiers of information-rich participants are the following:

Role. The respondents' current roles had to be directly involved in the procurement process (Examples: Procurement Officer, Director of Finance, or Section Officer responsible for tenders).

Experience. A minimum of three years of hands-on public procurement experience within the Punjab government. This was to ensure participants had experience that was sufficient and to consider exposure to institutional practices and reforms.

Scope of Responsibility. The respondents had to participate in one or more of the core procurement functions, particularly the preparation of tender documents, evaluation of bids, selection of suppliers, and management of contracts.

This approach eventually formed a cohort of twelve (12) individuals. The qualitative research was preferred as it gives deeper understanding of the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This sample size also aligns with qualitative thematic analysis, that focus on the depth of understanding since data saturation is achievable. Here, saturation is defined as the point at which the researcher has enough data and no new thematic information is observed (Hennink et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2018). A description of the participants is included in Table 1, below.

Table 1. Profile of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Department	Designation	Experience
P01	Health	Deputy Director (Procurement)	8 years
P02	Public Works	Procurement Manager	10 years
P03	Education	Assistant Director	5 years
P04	Agriculture	Procurement Officer	4 years
P05	Health	Contract Manager	7 years
P06	Public Works	Executive Engineer	12 years

Pseudonym	Department	Designation	Experience
P07	Education	Section Officer (Procurement)	3 years
P08	Health	Medical Superintendent	9 years
P09	Public Works	Sub-Divisional Officer	6 years
P10	Agriculture	Deputy Director	11 years
P11	Education	District Education Officer	15 years
P12	Agriculture	Procurement Assistant	4 years

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were the main method of data collection. This method ensures that all participants address the core research themes while allowing the interviewer the freedom to delve deeper into issues that arise (Kallio et al., 2016). The use of a predetermined interview guide permits the researcher to explore interesting avenues that emerged during the conversation (Adams, 2015). An interview protocol was developed and piloted with one academic expert and one retired procurement officer, after which it was adjusted. The protocol focused on the key domains that were aligned with the research objectives:

- Perceptions of internal organizational capacity and leadership.
- Experiences with external pressures (political, regulatory, economic).
- Challenges and experiences with e-procurement systems.
- Perceived solutions and recommendations for reform.
- No e-procurement-related system challenges and experiences were reported.
- No solutions to the identified challenges were provided.

The interviews were carried out over a three-month time span with either a telephone interview or face-to-face interview in a private office depending on the availability and choice of the participant. The length of each interview was 45-70 minutes that was fitting the extensive discussions that were needed. A consent process was done prior to each session. This was done through explanation of the purpose of the study, anonymization and protection of participant confidentiality, clarification that it was voluntary and written consent. One interview was held through secure video call, and 11 face-to-face interviews were done in a private office at the workplace of the participant. The recording of all the interviews was done on tapes with the written consent of the interviewee prescribed in the study guidelines. The interview was held in the language of his or her choice; either English or Urdu so as to create a rapport with the interviewee. Five interviewees selected English and other seven selected Urdu. Transcription of all the Urdu interviews was done as per the originality and thereafter the translation of English as a bilingual expert, but in conceptual rather than literal sense (Twinn, 1997). All the transcripts were anonymized by deleting the identifiers. The principal investigator in terms of conceptual accuracy

checked the translations. To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, all transcripts were anonymized, and all the identifying information was eliminated, including names, project details and locations.

3.4. Data Analysis

- The six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) was used to conduct data analysis. The technique was selected because it is theoretically flexible and has the ability to reveal and attract attention to trends (themes) inherent in the data. NVivo 12 software employed the thematic analysis carried out by Braun and Clarke to help make the coding process easier.
- The steps comprised:
- To get acquainted and record the preliminary ideas, the researchers read the transcripts multiple times and compared them with the corresponding audio recordings.
- An overall coding of the data was carried out systematically, by paying attention to aspects of the data that were relevant in responding to the questions of the research. Over 150 original codes (e.g., political phone calls, lack of training, system lag) were obtained in this exercise.
- The codes were sorted in probable themes. The codes such as political phone calls, superior pressures, and favoritism during awarding, etc., were grouped under the themes such as Political Interference.
- Coded information and the whole dataset were reviewed to make sure that the candidate themes created a system of meaning. This cyclic process entailed collapsing, splitting, and refining themes.
- The nature of each theme was condensed, and a brief title developed. The fundamental themes were determined as 1. Pervasive Political Interference, 2. Acute Deficits in Institutional Capacity, 3. Regulatory Ambiguity, 4. Technological Limitations, and 5. Organizational Culture, which is hierarchical.
- Final analysis narrative was interlaced with the compelling anonymized quotes of the dataset which were contained in the Findings.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Rigor

- In this research, the criterion of trustworthiness applied was that of trustworthiness in qualitative research as developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) according to which credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research. Trustworthiness was handled in the following way:
- Credibility (Internal Validity). In the case of member checking, I gave four respondents a summary of the preliminary findings and ensured that they agreed that the interpretations were in line with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). I found triangulation through making comparisons on the information provided by participants in different departments and in cases that I could, reviewing secondary data such as annual reports that were consistent with the interviews.

- Transferability (External Validity). The paper does not purport to have a statistical generalizability. Instead, in Geertzian (1973) sense, it provides thick descriptions of the research context, profiles of the participants, and results so that the readers could deduce how the results could be applied to other pertinent contexts.
- Dependability (Reliability). In the dependability audit, I would have prepared a reflective journal where all research decisions and steps in the analysis process would be recorded to enable another researcher to have a clear audit trail.
- To further elaborate on this construct the NVivo software enabled a proper audit trail to the coding exercise. The researcher also practiced bracketing as the researcher kept on reflecting and putting aside preconceptions about the procurement practices at all times so that the results were solely based on the data presented by the participants and not influenced by the biases of the researcher.

According to the standards, presented in this section, the research will aim to illustrate the validity, reliability, and complexity of the subtle evidence of the different factors that affect the public procurement in Punjab, Pakistan.

4.0 Findings and Results

Thematic analysis of the twelve dozen semi-structured interviews gave some information on the underlying factors contributing to the effectiveness and integrity of public procurement in Punjab, Pakistan. The data was brought together in 5 broad themes which are all consolidated in Table 2. These five themes are (1) Political Interference, (2) Institutional Capacity Deficits, (3) Regulatory Ambiguity, (4) Technological Limitations, and (5) Leadership and Organizational Culture.

Table 2. Summary of Key Themes and Supporting Codes

Theme	Sub-Themes / Codes	Sample Participant Quotes
Political Interference	Political pressure, favoritism in contract awards, and supplier vetting	"Sometimes we receive 'guidance' from above to favor a particular supplier with political connections." (P7)
Institutional Capacity Deficits	Lack of training, staff shortage, poor documentation, and high turnover	"We are generalists, not procurement specialists. We learn on the job, which inevitably leads to procedural mistakes." (P3)
Regulatory Ambiguity	Conflicting rules, unclear guidelines, inconsistent application, and weak enforcement	"The PPRA rules are open to interpretation. What one department approves, another might reject, creating confusion." (P11)
Technological Limitations	System malfunctions, lack of integration, poor training, and resistance to change	"The e-procurement portal is more symbolic than functional. It crashes often, and we keep paper records as a backup." (P5)
Leadership &	Lack of autonomy, rigid hierarchy,	"The fear of audit objections paralyzes us. We

Theme	Sub-Themes / Codes	Sample Participant Quotes
Organizational Culture	risk-aversion, and informal practices	wait for months for approvals because no one wants to take responsibility." (P9)

The following section details each theme, supported by direct participant quotations and contextualized within existing literature.

4.1 Thematic Analysis

4.1.1 Theme 1: Political Interference

The most prevalent challenge that was cited and encountered most frequently was political influence. The workers in different departments reported that they felt direct and indirect pressure especially when awarding high value contracts. The interference was usually in the form of favoring a politically oriented, and in some instances, not qualified, supplier as opposed to the ones with the required technical and financial qualifications.

As one of the top officers noted, the technical appraisal is a mere formality where it comes to strategically important contracts. Another place is where the actual decision is made" (P10). The mentioned practice is against the very principles of transparency, competition, and value-of-money. The results of this research are consistent with the findings reported in existing literature of the developing economies in the public procurement arena where the capture and patronage networks based on politics are identified to be the obstacles to efficiency and integrity (Faccio, 2006; Khwaja & Mian, 2005). Such forms of interruption lead to undesirable performance and is used to encourage the demotivation of the procurement personnel eager to uphold procedural fairness.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Institutional Capacity Deficits

The second most important theme was the institutional scarceness in government departments. This entailed, among others, absence of specialized training, inadequately recorded records, and absence of commitment procurement employees that led to critical deficit of institutional capacity. Knowledge and skills in procurement lost when generalist officers, with no procurement training, rotate and old staff leave.

"Procurement professionals do not possess a career ladder," noted the interviewee (P2). "They give us the job and four others. When I get moved, my replacement will have to start learning from scratch."

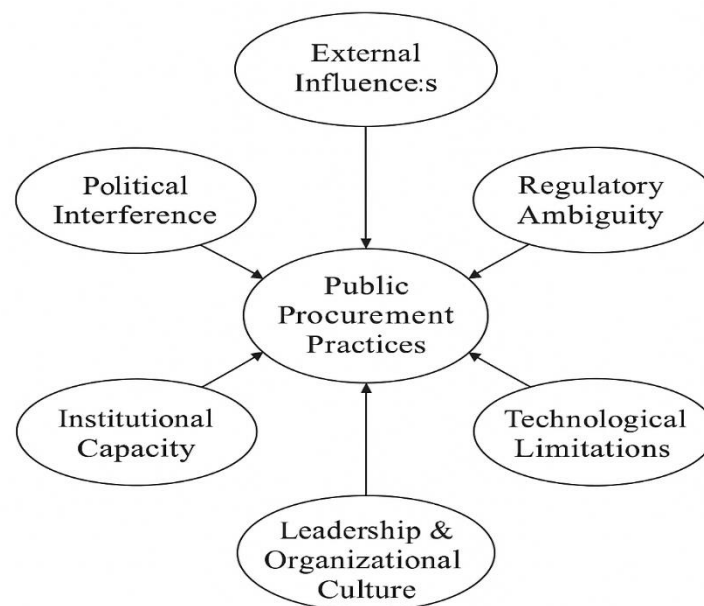
Complex contracts could not be managed. This has been documented and is echoed in the work of Ali (2022), whose research outlines the importance of the experience and continual training of personnel to improve organizational performance within public procurement. Corruption within the system provides poorly defined flows and processes that will produce outcomes that will, in turn, erode trust and institutional knowledge.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Regulatory Ambiguity

For the Punjab Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) rules, there are supposed to be regulations, and participants pointed out the inconsistencies in be application. They are ambiguously defined, blurred lines, all the while changing, and open to interpretation. This

jumbled mess leaves officers walking on eggshells.

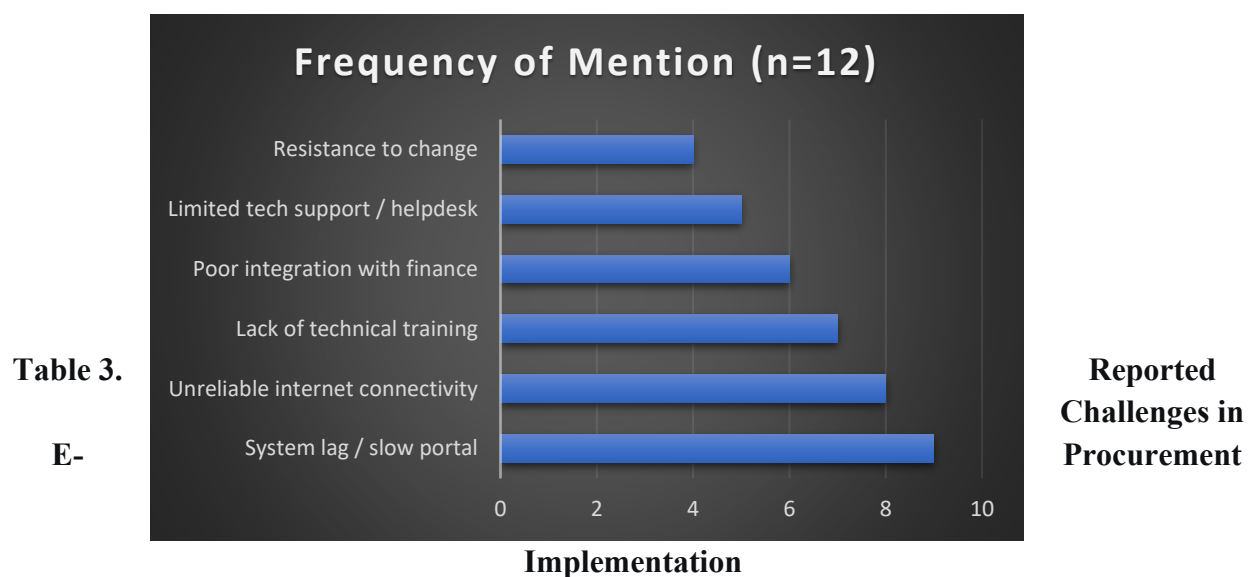
A prevailing frustration and a repeatable comment were the application of 'rules' or, at least, of the interpretation of 'rules', not just from one department to the next but from one unit of a department to another. "We often don't know which interpretation is correct," one officer acknowledged (P6). "So, we choose the most conservative path to avoid future audit objections, which usually means more delays." This lack of reasonable guidance increases the sense of uncertainty. An overabundance of uncertainty is counterproductive and problematic. These findings are comparable to the study done by Zaidi et. al (2019), where the lack of implementing rules and unstable regulations is a major contributory factor to the slow modernization of the public procurement system in Pakistan.



(Note: Fig. 1 is a conceptual diagram showing boxes for each of the 5 themes, with double-headed arrows connecting all of them, visually representing how each problem exacerbates the others. For example, an arrow from "Regulatory Ambiguity" to "Leadership & Culture" labeled "Promotes risk-aversion"; an arrow from "Political Interference" to "Institutional Capacity" labeled "Demoralizes staff")

4.1.4 Theme 4: Technological Limitations

The problems came as a result of efforts to introduce E-Systems that aimed at promoting transparency and efficiency. Respondents disclosed the challenges facing digital systems, including bad and untrustworthy infrastructure. E-Systems, especially the e-procurement portal, is slow and in most cases not connected to all digital financial management systems. As summarized in Table 3, the quantitative data derived from coding interview responses reveal the issues. Figure 2 summarizes the most common technical and adaptive problems reported.



Challenge	Frequency of Mention (n=12)	Example Quote
System lag / slow portal	9	"Uploading a single tender document can take hours due to the unbearable lag." (P8)
Unreliable internet connectivity	8	"The internet connection in our office is unstable. We often lose connection during critical uploads." (P1)
Lack of technical training	7	"We received a one-day demo. It was not enough to confidently use the system for complex tenders." (P4)
Poor integration with finance	6	"The procurement system doesn't communicate with the finance system. We have to manually re-enter all data." (P12)
Resistance to change	4	"Senior officers are uncomfortable with the digital trail. They find manual, paper-based files more 'controllable'." (P9)

Fig. 2: Common E-Procurement Challenges Faced by Public Departments (n=12)

In such situations, e-procurement is only a "tick-box" exercise. As Presutti (2003) argued, "The digitalisation of procurement activities is mainly a one-sided stakeholder initiative, where the procurement function is strongly digitalised, and the reverse is the case for the rest of the business." The lack of appropriate infrastructure, insufficient training, and the absence of a

conducive organizational environment all contribute to the lack of the system's full potential to transform the organization's processes. The prevailing system inefficiencies compel staff to keep parallel records in paper form. This, instead of alleviating, adds the burden of extra administrative work.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Leadership and Organizational Culture

The internal culture of government departments, influenced by the leadership, was an amplifying cross-cutting theme for all other challenges. An almost omnipresent culture of risk aversion, primarily stemming from fears of audit objections and an inflexible, top-down approval structure, was singled out as the key reason for delays. Participants expressed a lack of autonomy, with even the most inconsequential decisions needing approval from several layers of the hierarchy.

The approval sequence, as synthesized from the interview data, is outlined in Table 4 and Figure 3, which presents the typical bureaucratic pathway of a procurement file.

Table 4: Hierarchical Approval Layers in Public Procurement

Approval Stage	Responsible Officer	Commonly Reported Delay	Purpose / Role
1. Initiation	Procurement Clerk / Assistant	1–2 days	Prepares basic requests and documentation
2. Technical Review	Section Head / Engineer	3–7 days	Verifies technical specifications and needs
3. Financial Approval	Finance Officer	3–5 days	Certifies budget availability and cost reasonableness
4. Administrative Scrutiny	Deputy Director	4–7 days	Confirms compliance with all internal rules
5. Final Sanction	Director / Head of Department	5–10 days	Final sign-off and assumption of responsibility

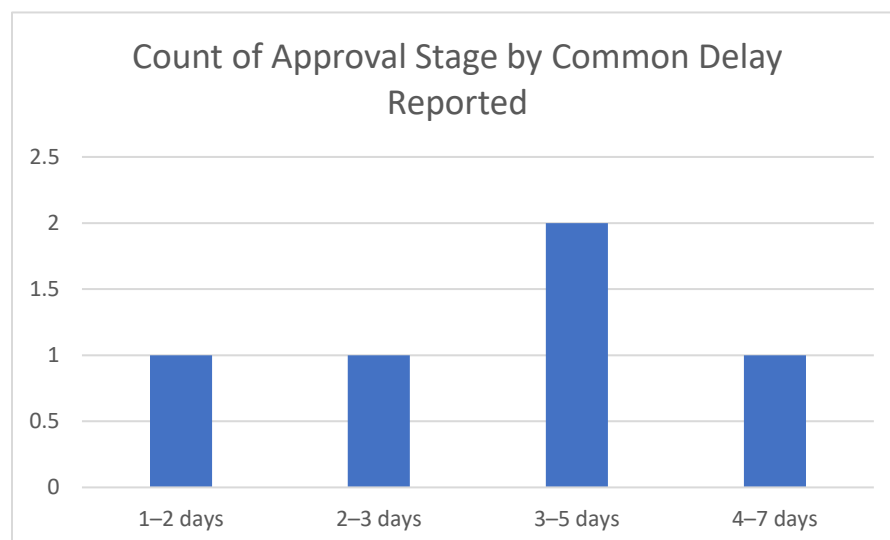


Fig.3 Hierarchical Approval Layers in Public Procurement and Delays in Approval Days

Even though this multi-layered structure is supposed to offer agency and control, it may also result in paralysis, where officers would be encouraged not to make decisions. According to one of the participants, nobody is rewarded when they have made a quick and successful procurement and everybody is punished by just one mistake. Hence, it is the safest policy to wait and wait (P9). In this culture of delays, innovation is also choked and evading responsibility as well. The necessity of efficient leaders that will lead the change through empowering his/her civil servants and establishing a culture of positive risk-taking and ethical performance is crucial in overcoming such inertia, as Schapper et al. (2006) firmly believe.

The discussion exposes the interwoven relationships with regard to the challenges facing the public procurement in Punjab. Political-level interference demoralizes and deplazes the ability erosion, but ambiguous regulations and lack of capability make the avoidance culture and make it resistant to adaptive change. Even stagnant and inefficient technologies are likely to further diminish the erosion of the ability. It implies that, to have a reasonable chance of success, the reform in the area of public procurement cannot be single issue-driven in one or the other area, but it must act in a coordinated manner to continue to develop institutions simultaneously. This entails demystification and stabilization of the degree of governance to which the legal provisions are targeted, integration of sophisticated technologies, and required training that goes along with the same. Most importantly, political will to ensure that procurement is not politicized and that leadership is allowed to practice discretion is important. This has been proven to be the sole method of enhancing the performance of procurement.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

It is found in this study that a combination of both internal organizational variables and external contextual factors determines Punjab, Pakistan, public procurement practices and systems. This is in line with institutional theory that emphasizes the effects of formal and informal rules in shaping organizational practices. The presence of political interference in the procurement decisions is the second example of how informal institutions can override the official regulations, leaving a gap between the purpose of the policy and its implementation. This conclusion supports the conclusion made by Grandia and Volker (2023) that one of the places where several inter-complementary and contradictory policy goals act at a national and international level and is located within a multi-level and multi-layered system is public procurement.

The analysis concluded that there are numerous and interrelated effects of the problem of ineffectiveness of procurement, which are: (1) political interference, (2) institutional capacity, (3) ambiguity of the regulations, (4) lack of technology, and (5) organizational culture. These results guide the discourse of the public value in procurement by showing the value trade-offs (i.e. efficiency versus patronage) in the implementation gap of the value procurement in a developing context. This paper brings out the main points of the procurement theory. It means that procurement systems should pay attention to maintaining the integrity of the procedures and balancing opposing purposes. Table 5 summarizes the repetition of the findings of the present

research as well as the findings of the preceding research and the theoretical frameworks.

Table 5: Comparative Analysis of Key Findings with Existing Literature

Finding	Supporting Literature	Contrasting Literature	Theoretical Contribution
Political interference undermines procurement efficiency	Faccio (2006); Khwaja & Mian (2005)	-	Validates institutional theory regarding informal institutions
Capacity deficits create implementation gaps	Ali (2022); Zaidi et al. (2019)	-	Extends the resource-based view of procurement organizations
E-procurement systems face adoption barriers	Presutti (2003)	Some studies overestimate technology adoption	Highlights the socio-technical nature of procurement systems
Regulatory ambiguity fosters risk-aversion	Grandia & Volker (2023)	-	

The results about the intervention of politics in the procurement are in line with the results of other developing economies. The research can also be compared to a study conducted by Faccio (2006) on politically affiliated companies, where the winning suppliers were also provided with political favoritism and contracts awarded thus creating no competition and value depreciation in the procurement process. These dynamics still exist regardless of the regulations, such as the Punjab Procurement Rules (2014). This paper further recommends that the shift in legislations could not work alone, and institutional shifts of a less formal character might be needed.

The problems reported in the procurement system of Punjab reflect capacity shortage in the procurement system elsewhere. According to Ali (2022), the lapses in the organizational performance during the activities of public procurement depend on the experience and training of the workers. The current paper expands on this knowledge by demonstrating how a high employee turnover, combined with the absence of committed procurement cadres, creates a self-supporting phenomenon where the institution is destroying knowledge and, thus, is prone to committing procedural mistakes and having risk-averse behavior.

On the issue of technological limitations, the results are in line with the previous researches, which confirmed that e-procurement systems, despite good intentions to bring the benefits they aim to bring, fail to realize their benefits when the system is not properly supported by infrastructural and change management support. The digital systems in Punjab, the least utilized ones, are in scope with the global trends that are witnessed in most of the developing economies whereby poorly designed technologies are implemented as a technical solution to the issue without consideration of the institutional and socio-cultural dynamics.

5.2 Conclusion

The present study explains the intricate nature of forces that influence the nature of the public procurement in Punjab, Pakistan. For instance, the problem of regulatory gaps, technological shortages, political interference, institutional inertia, and organization culture, all are interconnected. These connections require more coordinated, and not fragmented investigation. This study transcends the comparative scope of the public procurement issues within Punjab, Pakistan and records the theoretical basis of the systemic linkages within the issues. The key lesson is that inefficiency is not caused by inefficiency of any one element, but rather by a cycle of institutions failure that is cumulatively destructive in nature, such as the shortages of one area are magnified by shortages in others. This is incorporated into the applicable literature and furthered to have similar level of relevancy to public procurement in other developing economies.

The discussion confirms that the institutional theory is the best way to explain the procurement dynamics in Punjab. Political patronage systems, hierarchies and risk aversion norms are among the informal systems that still dominate. This kind of coexistence of two versions of the institution is what is known as institutional duality. The findings also explain the critical correlation that exists among the three pillars of the institutional theory.

Regulative pillar (rules/laws) - the formal regulative pillar remains weak, due to ambiguous and complex rules that remain unenforced. There is an absence of regulation that is clear, legitimate, or consistently applied, leading to a regulatory vacuum.

Normative pillar (norms/values) - this regulatory vacuum is filled by the normative pillar, particularly a culture of risk aversion and compliance for survival, rather than performance. The dominant expectation is to avoid audit objections rather than achieve optimal value.

Cultural-Cognitive pillar (taken-for-granted) - the pervasive taken-for-granted notions that political interference is an inevitable process in the system perpetuates the dysfunctional status quo. Such notions become self-fulfilling prophecies that inhibit the initiation of reform.

Introducing an e-procurement system as a change within the regulative pillar of the system is futile if the underlying normative cultures of resistance to change and the cognitive belief that the system is manipulable are not simultaneously addressed. The specific actor of "political influence" may change, e.g., tribal affiliations in other contexts, or in resource-rich economies, corporate patronage may apply, yet the presence of informal networks that undermine formal systems is a global constancy of developing and transitional economies' procurement systems. Thus, the findings about Punjab procurement system may be considered relevant to public procurement system practiced in the other developing countries.

5.3 Policy Implications and Future Research Directions

These proposed recommendations are practical and designed to be implementable within the present governmental framework of Punjab.

5.3.1. Institutional and Capacity-Building Reforms

- The government should cease considering procurement as the job of a common cadre. Within each Punjab Civil Service cadre, professionally trained, full-time procurement

- specialists should be deployed, with opportunities for advancement, competitive pay, and continuing education opportunities within the procurement profession.
- As a stopgap, all officers responsible for procurement should be required to obtain and retain certification from the Punjab Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) and complete the necessary training.
 - Set up a small expert cell within Finance or the Services and General Administration Departments. This cell helps procurement officers in each department by offering timely and definitive guidance and interpretations with respect to the legal ambiguity of the procurement regulations. This function reduces the risk-averse time delays and ensures the timely and equitable application of the procurement regulations.

5.3.2. Regulatory and Process Reforms

- The present study explains the intricate nature of forces that influence the nature of the public procurement in Punjab, Pakistan. This study transcends the comparative scope of the public procurement issues within Punjab, Pakistan and records the theoretical basis of the systemic linkages within the issues. The key lesson is that inefficiency is not caused by inefficiency of any one element, but rather by a cycle of institutions failure that is cumulatively destructive in nature, such as the shortages of one area are magnified by shortages in others. This is incorporated into the applicable literature and furthered to have similar level of relevancy to people procurement in other developing economies.
- The discussion confirms that the institutional theory is the best way to explain the procurement dynamics in Punjab. Political patronage systems, hierarchies and risk aversion norms are among the informal systems that still dominate. This kind of coexistence of two versions of the institution is what is known as institutional duality. Here the incumbents are playing against formal regulations of the game and against the non-formal but stronger regulations of practice. The findings also explained the critical correlation that exists among the three pillars of the institutional theory.

5.3.3 Technological Reforms

- Critical upgrades that should be done are beginning with trustworthy and user-friendly systems. This will involve offering good servers and internet connectivity. Consolidating the e-procurement system and the financial management system of the government (e.g., SAP) in order to eliminate the problems of the presence of two data entries.
- Constructing a 24/7 technical helpdesk with live chat assistance for immediate portal interventions. Before the large-scale adoption of a new digital instrument, a cohort of working procurement officers should be allowed to attempt to "break" the system or find workarounds. This approach will prevent usability issues and system resistance from becoming deeply entrenched problems.

5.3.4. Governance and Transparency Reforms

- For evaluations regarding contracts above certain monetary values, a committee composed of a PPRA representative, one civil society personnel of note (e.g., Transparency International Pakistan), and one relevant academic will observe the evaluation. While the authority remains with the department, the addition of this committee will reinforce political opacity and limit the potential for political gain.
- Every award decision should have a justification document for contracts above a certain monetary threshold. This justification document should be available for public view and for contracts where the lowest bidder was not selected. This document will rationalize the subjective award decision and will be posted to the e-procurement portal.
- Realignment of the Cultural-Cognitive pillar is the longest-term expectation of achievement, possible through strong inspirational leadership. Initiating a visible shift through the public endorsement of strategies that reward character and output will bring about the required change. Gradually, the success stories bound to be generated through rule observance will help shift the narrative to the desired public orientation.

5.4 Future Research Directions

This study proposes an advanced research agenda for future studies. This research agenda suggests the use of mixed-methods and quantitative approaches to assess the impact of particular elements, such as political transfers or training on procurement results. The use of longitudinal and comparative studies is suggested to assess reform adoption temporally and to evaluate other Pakistani provinces comparatively. In addition, other areas that require research, include the influence of gender on procurement, the introduction of environmentally sustainable procurement, and the use of behavioral science “nudges” to facilitate decision-making. Most importantly, this research demonstrates the importance of treating procurement as an intricate institutional problem in order to construct adequate, multi-layered strategies to shift from diagnosis to reform uptake.

Khurram Iftikhar Kisana: Literature review, problem identification and theoretical framework
Nisar Ahmad: Discussion of results, conclusion, policy recommendation, revision of final draft and overall supervision.

Yasir Jamshed: Data collection and analysis and preparation of initial draft.

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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