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Postgraduate Dissertation

Sustainable Private & Public Procurement: The supplier's  
perception

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Patras, Greece, March 2025

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# Sustainable Private & Public Procurement: The supplier's perception

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## **Abstract**

The procurement process plays a key role in the success of a business, and depending on the buyer, procurement is divided into public or private and can take on a strategic character. The literature shows that the two processes have similarities but also differences in their distinguishing characteristics. Moreover, the term sustainability has entered our everyday life with studies showing the multidimensional influence it has on the corporate environment, while its application in the procurement sector and its impact are of particular interest. This research focuses on the perception of suppliers who supply both the private and the public sector in Greece, drawing from their experiences important information about both processes, their benefits, their challenges as well as how they are carried out. Through interviews, a holistic picture is formed regarding the familiarity of companies with the concept of sustainability, the reasons that drive its adoption and the challenges that are hidden in the process of implementing such practices. The suppliers' perspective on selection criteria set by buyers and linked to sustainability requirements, as well as the influence on their goals is discussed, leading to possible suggestions from their side for future smooth implementation of sustainability practices in the field of procurement. Some findings of the research confirm studies in the existing literature, while other findings are of particular interest and concern. As reflected in the research, public procurement is characterised by bureaucracy and complexity (particularly reflected in public e-procurement procedures), while private procurement is characterised by instability and uncertainty, which should be of concern to public and private purchasers, as well as to new suppliers. The environmental dimension of sustainability steals the show, while an important finding is the failure of some economic operators to enter into a supply contract due to such sustainability requirements on the part of buyers. It is apparent from the interviews that the philosophy and culture that permeates a supplier's operation is the most influenced as the profit objective remains steadfast, presenting a shift in the way it is achieved and in particular a more long-term planning. Finally, limitations and barriers of this research are outlined to provide a springboard for future researchers.

## **Keywords**

Procurement, Public Procurement, Sustainability, Suppliers

## Βιώσιμες ιδιωτικές και δημόσιες προμήθειες: Η αντίληψη του προμηθευτή

Ηλίας Θάνος

### Περίληψη

Η διαδικασία των προμηθειών διαδραματίζει κομβικό ρόλο στην επιτυχία μιας επιχείρησης, ενώ ανάλογα με τον αγοραστή οι προμήθειες διακρίνονται σε δημόσιες ή ιδιωτικές και μπορούν να λάβουν στρατηγικό χαρακτήρα. Η βιβλιογραφία δείχνει πως οι δύο διαδικασίες παρουσιάζουν ομοιότητες αλλά και διαφορές στα χαρακτηριστικά που τις διακρίνουν. Επιπλέον, ο όρος βιωσιμότητα έχει εισέλθει στην καθημερινή μας ζωή με μελέτες να αποτυπώνουν την πολυδιάστατη επιρροή που ασκεί στο εταιρικό περιβάλλον, ενώ ιδιαίτερο ενδιαφέρον παρουσιάζει η εφαρμογή της στον τομέα των προμηθειών και ο αντίκτυπος που έχει αυτή. Η παρούσα έρευνα επικεντρώνεται στην οπτική προμηθευτών οι οποίοι προμηθεύουν τόσο τον ιδιωτικό όσο και το δημόσιο τομέα στην Ελλάδα, αντλώντας από τα βιώματά τους σημαντικές πληροφορίες για τις δύο διαδικασίες, τα οφέλη, τις προκλήσεις τους καθώς και στον τρόπο εκτέλεσής τους. Μέσω συνεντεύξεων σχηματίζεται ολιστική εικόνα σχετικά με την εξοικείωση των επιχειρήσεων με το κόνσεπτ της βιωσιμότητας, τους λόγους που ωθούν στην υιοθέτησή της αλλά και στις προκλήσεις που κρύβει η διαδικασία εφαρμογής τέτοιων πρακτικών. Η οπτική των προμηθευτών σχετικά με κριτήρια επιλογής που θέτουν οι αγοραστές και συνδέονται με απαιτήσεις βιωσιμότητας, καθώς και η επιρροή στους στόχους τους γίνεται αντικείμενο συζήτησης καταλήγοντας σε πιθανές προτάσεις από πλευράς τους για μελλοντική ομαλή εφαρμογή πρακτικών βιωσιμότητας στο πεδίο των προμηθειών. Ορισμένα ευρήματα της έρευνας επιβεβαιώνουν μελέτες της υπάρχουσας βιβλιογραφίας, ενώ άλλα ευρήματα παρουσιάζουν ιδιαίτερο ενδιαφέρον και προβληματισμό. Όπως αντικατοπτρίζει η έρευνα, οι δημόσιες προμήθειες χαρακτηρίζονται από γραφειοκρατία και πολυπλοκότητα (στοιχείο που αντανακλάται ιδιαίτερα στις δημόσιες ηλεκτρονικές διαδικασίες προμηθειών) ενώ οι ιδιωτικές προμήθειες από αστάθεια και αβεβαιότητα, κάτι το οποίο θα πρέπει να απασχολήσει δημόσιους και ιδιωτικούς αγοραστές καθώς και να κρούσει τον κώδωνα του κινδύνου σε νέους προμηθευτές. Την

παράσταση κλέβει η περιβαλλοντική διάσταση της βιωσιμότητας, ενώ σημαντικό εύρημα αποτελεί η αδυναμία ορισμένων οικονομικών φορέων να συνάψουν σύμβαση προμήθειας λόγω τέτοιων απαιτήσεων βιωσιμότητας εκ μέρους των αγοραστών. Διαφαίνεται από τις συνεντεύξεις πως η φιλοσοφία και η κουλτούρα που διαπερνά τη λειτουργία ενός προμηθευτή δέχονται τις μεγαλύτερες επιρροές καθώς ο στόχος του κέρδους παραμένει ακλόνητος, παρουσιάζοντας μεταβολή στον τρόπο επίτευξής του και συγκεκριμένα ένα πιο μακροπρόθεσμο σχεδιασμό. Τέλος, περιορισμοί και εμπόδια της παρούσας έρευνας διατυπώνονται ώστε να αποτελέσουν εφαλτήριο για τους μελλοντικούς ερευνητές.

### **Λέξεις – Κλειδιά**

Προμήθειες, Δημόσιες Προμήθειες, Βιωσιμότητα, Προμηθευτές

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## List of Abbreviations & Acronyms

CERPP	Central Electronic Public Procurement Registry
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
CPV	Common Procurement Vocabulary
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
ESPD	European Single Procurement Document
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HSPPA	Hellenic Single Public Procurement Authority
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MEAT	Most Economically Advantageous Tender
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
TED	Tenders Electronic Daily
VAT	Value-Added Tax
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development

## **1. Introduction**

This section aims to briefly present the fields that are analysed in the research, demonstrating the background and context of the research and then the objectives and questions that the research will interpret are presented. In addition to this, the structure that the research will follow is outlined in order to provide a guide for easy understanding of the chapters that will follow.

### **1.1 Research Background**

Very often nowadays we hear about the procurement process, private partnerships and public procurement contracts which have the ultimate aim of serving the needs of society as a whole. According to literature sources, the procurement process has been quite underestimated without being considered important for the smooth functioning of the supply chain. Nowadays, its catalytic role has been recognized both at private and public level, being of strategic importance for organizations (Mena et al., 2018). Both processes have many benefits and challenges, and each of them its own characteristics (Alford & Greve, 2017).

The term sustainability is embedded in our daily activities, our habits and our philosophy, bringing about changes and the necessary adjustments. The Sustainable Development Goals promoted by the United Nations guide the implementation of sustainability practices that address economic, social and environmental aspects in business too (Pedersen, 2018). The implementation of these sustainability practices in business is not simple and requires a change of philosophy, the understanding that money is not the only driving factor and that professionals who will be involved in the field of procurement are able to contribute with their involvement a little bit, realizing that the quality of our future life is directly affected by our current actions (Schooner & Speidel, 2020). Particularly in public procurement contracts in Greece in the past, the non-implementation of actions capable of developing sustainability elements in them has contradicted the European plan and the regulations governing this field for Socially Responsible Public Procurement (Lamprinidis, 2023).

Having taken the above into account and considering the viewpoint of professionals who are active and directly involved in the field of procurement to be particularly important, this

paper explores the perception of suppliers who are involved in private and public procurement contracts, and how sustainability is implemented in these processes. Further deepening on their perception of public and private procurement and the characteristics surrounding each of them, knowledge of the concept of sustainability and its application in the field of procurement is a central part of the research, bringing to light challenges and obstacles in their endeavour as well as opportunities and room for improvement.

## **1.2 Research Aim, Objectives and Questions**

This research aims to investigate and compare suppliers' perceptions of sustainability implementation in procurement as well as the associated benefits and challenges in public and private sector procurement. With the above in mind, the study examines suppliers' views on procurement, their level of familiarity with the concept of sustainability, as well as their adoption of sustainability practices, the drivers and the challenges they faced. Finally, it is explored whether they have been confronted with buyers' requirements that are related to sustainability criteria.

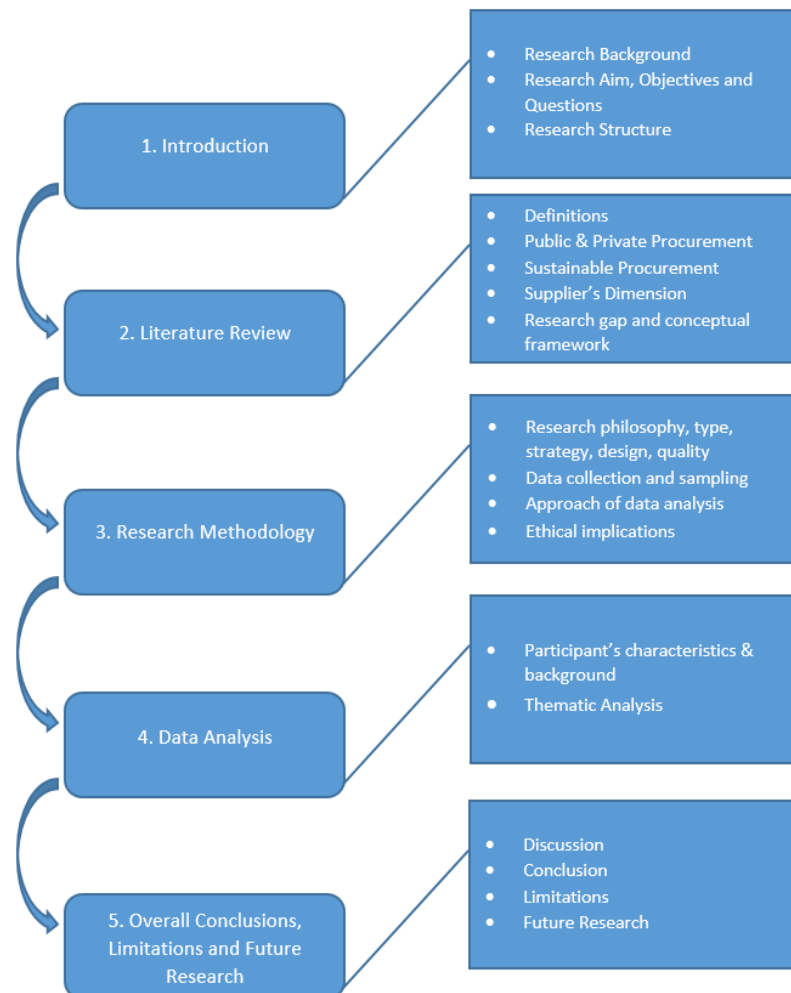
In view of the above, the following questions will be addressed:

- What is the suppliers' view on public and private procurement and the characteristics of each process (benefits, challenges, e-procurement)?
- What differences can be identified between public and private procurement?
- Is there knowledge of the principles of sustainability?
- What are the drivers and challenges for suppliers to adopt sustainability methods?
- What are the differences in terms of sustainability principles implementation in procurement in public and private buyers?
- How are suppliers' goals affected by the implementation of sustainability practices?

## **1.3 Research Structure**

This research consists of five main chapters which are divided into sub-chapters as shown in Figure 1.1. The first section marks the introduction to the research, demonstrating the

background of the field under research, its objectives, as well as the questions that will be posed afterwards. Subsequently, the second section includes the literature review where important terms useful for understanding the research are analysed, and the existing literature on procurement, sustainability and how sustainability is applied in the field of procurement is cited. This is followed by the third chapter which is connected to the methodology of the research, where the philosophy, type, strategy, design and quality of it are mentioned, while at the same time the way the data will be collected and the approach with which the analysis will be carried out are described. This is followed by the fourth chapter in which the data analysis is carried out through thematic analysis, while the fifth and last section presents the results of the overall research in relation to the existing literature, while any limitations and suggestions for future researchers are also mentioned.



**Figure 1.1 Research Structure (Source: Author)**

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to present the literature that is relevant and was utilized in the context of this dissertation. The compilation of literature was conducted through various sources such as the University Library, Google Scholar, Scopus. Some free public data have also been recovered which are accessible on official websites of the European Union and the Greek State.

Initially, an effort is made to ensure that the reader is smoothly integrated and understands basic terminology that will be used throughout the research, while particular emphasis is placed on the characteristics that characterize the process of public and private procurement and the concept of sustainability in the context of the corporate environment. Sustainability in the context of the procurement process and its key features are outlined, while its applications in both the private and public sectors are discussed.

Finally, it is understood that the procurement process would not be possible without suppliers. For this reason, it presents the suppliers' perspective on the procurement process, the opportunities, challenges and requirements they face in trying to integrate sustainability elements into it.

### **2.2 Definitions**

For the reader's easy understanding and interaction with this dissertation, the assimilation of the basic terminology is required to limit the room for ambiguity.

#### **2.2.1 Definition of Procurement**

The procurement process is a complex multi-stage operation that can start with market research and end with managing relationships with suppliers and has the ultimate goal of acquiring the needed supplies for the company (Sanderson et al., 2015). However, to reach

this point, the supplier selection process, negotiations and the conclusion of the contract with the specification of the necessary terms must be intervened (Beil, 2011). The objective of the procurement process is to ensure the flow of the required goods-sources at the optimum price, to the highest quality standards and in the desired time. The effectiveness of the procurement process depends on cross-departmental cooperation within the business, thus making procurement a strategic function for the smooth and orderly operation of any business entity (Bag et al., 2020; Mena et al., 2018).

### **2.2.2 Definition of Public Procurement**

Public procurement has many similarities with the above mentioned, except that the party wishing to receive the goods which are procured is a public body under the control of a public authority. The supplies or services are intended to meet the operational needs of the public bodies or to serve society as a whole in the form of benefits (McCrudden, 2004). Unlike private sector procurement, the framework within which public procurement is conducted adheres to strict regulations and laws, trying to eliminate any form of corruption or waste of public funds. Governments want to acquire goods, services or works and to achieve this aim they ensure transparent procedures, usually through public tenders which set certain specifications and a budget within which the financial offers of interested parties must fall. Within the European Union, Directive 2014/24/EU and Directive 2014/25/EU have been established, to which the national laws of the Member States must be aligned (e.g. in Greece, public procurement is regulated by Law 4412/2016.) (*Public Procurement - European Commission*, n.d.).

### **2.2.3 Definition of Sustainability**

The term sustainability is increasingly common in our daily lives, both in our habits and in the academic and business fields. It aims to generate results that produce a balance between economic success, environmental protection and social prosperity, without these results being limited to the present but having a broader horizon in the long term (WCED, 1987).

Adequate training, cultural and policy diversification both at the organisational and individual level must be carried out in order to put sustainability methods into practice,

especially in the field of procurement, which is a complex issue with influences on various aspects of socio-economic life (Schooner & Speidel, 2020).

In addition to all the above, sustainability also offers resilience, which is essential in the increasingly changing landscape in which risks lurk, providing a shield against possible disruptions (Roberta Pereira et al., 2014). A typical example is the disruption of the international supply chain during the COVID-19 period.

## **2.3 Public & Private Procurement**

### **2.3.1 Public procurement: importance & implementation**

Public procurement is a particularly important process, as it is estimated that in the European Union around 14% of GDP is spent on public procurement, whether it be for supplies, services or works (*Public Procurement - European Commission*, n.d.). Public procurement plays a key role in the functioning of all government services which, as is well known, have as their ultimate goal the serving of the citizen, the development of public infrastructure and the highest quality of service delivery. But in addition to the above, public contracts can develop local economies as well as create employment opportunities (Lamprinidis, 2023). The inclusion of SMEs in a dynamic field of entrepreneurship as well as their transformation into long-term public sector partners is as important as the above. Moreover, due to strict regulations, transparency is maintained and there is control over the way in which European and State funds are spent, leaving no loopholes for corruption (Walker & Brammer, 2012). Thus, public money is used for the benefit of the people, to which the competitive nature of most public contracts contributes. Last but not least, public procurement attempts to promote the concept of sustainability to society, while sustainability elements and criteria are set for the award of public contracts. In particular, the latter are discussed in the remainder of this dissertation (*Public Procurement - European Commission*, n.d.).

As already mentioned above, public procurement is subject to a strict legal framework, ensuring in this way high levels of transparency (Arrowsmith & Kunzlik, 2009). Whereas in the private sector, in most cases a negotiation process is used, this is not particularly common in the public sector, where the contract is awarded to the economic entity which

meets certain technical specifications and at the same time offers the lowest price (Bajari & Mcmillan, 2009; *Legal Rules and Implementation - European Commission*, n.d.).

The European directives, which Member States must also comply with by adapting their national legislation, aim to ensure transparency, competition, broad participation and to motivate the supplier market to develop and contribute to the development of society. The effort to simplify procedures favours the participation of more small and medium-sized enterprises and eases the work of the public purchasing bodies that have to run the procedures, reducing bureaucracy, encouraging the participation of non-national companies, making the process international and increasing competition (*Legal Rules and Implementation - European Commission*, n.d.).

Directive 2014/24/EU, 2014/25/EU & 2014/23/EU consist the main legislative framework that regulates the public procurement process in the European Union. Greece, for its part, has incorporated these directives into national law (such as 4412/2016).

The steps that are followed in the Greek public sector for the execution of a public procurement are as follows:

- Identification of needs, market research, selection of the appropriate type of procurement procedure.
- Publication of the Call for Tender, thus informing potential suppliers about business opportunities.
- Bidding period, during which the bid dossier is prepared, containing supporting documents relating to the participation, the technical specifications covered and the price offered by the economic operator.
- Evaluation of bids, where the contracting authority examines the completeness of the files submitted, the fulfilment of the requirements set out in the contract notice and selects the contractor, usually on the basis of the most economical offer.
- Signing of the contract and execution of the contractual obligations. Monitoring by the Contracting Authority of the fulfilment of the contractual terms, enforcement of any penalties in case of non-compliance and receipt of the final contract deliverables.

Public bodies can choose a series of tendering procedures, such as the open procedure, the framework agreement or even the dynamic purchasing system and others, each of which has its own characteristics and requirements. According to the complexity of the procurement,

the corresponding procedure can be chosen either it is a request for information, proposal or quotation. The most common procedure chosen is the open procedure, where a contract notice is published informing about a required procurement/service and setting a specific time period in which interested parties can submit tenders, while the most common award practice is the Most Economically Advantageous Tender (MEAT). Another criterion for the award of public contracts is the Price - Quality ratio, which takes into account the qualitative characteristics of the technical capacity and the extent to which the economic operator can meet the requirements of the Public Authority (Stilger et al., 2017). One such requirement in many cases is the lead time, so economic operators are graded according to the shortest delivery time they can guarantee.

A special analysis of the terms and requirements of the contract notice is required in order for the economic operator concerned to ascertain whether there are specific grounds for exclusion and whether it fulfils the selection criteria set out in the contract notice. In this respect and in order to simplify the procedures, the European Single Procurement Document (ESPD), which is a declaration of compliance with the selection criteria and the absence of grounds for exclusion, must be submitted at the stage of submission of offers (Bobowski & Gola, 2019). In addition to these, certain technical requirements and a maximum budget are set. The collection of the supporting documents for participation, the technical documents (such as some technical prospectus, data sheets and certifications) which prove that the technical requirements have been met, and the financial aspect of the tender, in other words, the price offered by the company, is decided. Finally, basic participation document in most cases is the participation guarantee, which may not exceed 2% of the budget excluding VAT. The above are categorized in the respective subfolders as provided for in the tender notice, usually in the subfolder for the supporting documents for participation - technical offer and in the subfolder for the financial offer (*ΕΑΑΔΗΣΥ-Ν.4412-Υπερκείμενο*, n.d.).

### **2.3.2 Characteristics of public and private procurement**

As already mentioned above, the issue of transparency in public procurement is a particular positive area of public procurement, which offers transparency to the suppliers concerned and to the community (Arrowsmith & Kunzlik, 2009). Also, through a public procurement contract, suppliers are given access to a stable market without fluctuations in demand, allowing them to invest in longer-term planning (Aschhoff & Sofka, 2009). Public

purchasers want a high level of participation in order to get enough bids and lower the price and costs, leading in many cases to increased competition (Tátrai et al., 2024).

Above, extensive reference has been made to aspects relating to public sector procurement. Similarly, a shorter report on private sector procurement follows in order to cover any aspects that have not been mentioned so far.

To begin with, effective management of the procurement function reduces the risks inherent in the supply chain, as strong supplier-customer relationships are developed, gives greater variety and windows to the market and can absorb market volatility which is quite high. It also gives a strategic competitive advantage when an efficient procurement function is achieved which can reduce costs, give large profits and also increase the company's reputation (Althabatah et al., 2023).

Cost management is a major challenge as it requires thorough market analysis and continuous negotiations to achieve high quality and stay within budget. Managing and maintaining relationships with partners is also a challenge, as competition is looming and transparency between relationships can be tricky especially in such a dynamic environment. Buyer pressure to reduce prices is also often a barrier which, combined with unpredictable demand, can have a significant impact on inventory and production (manpreets, 2024; White et al., 2016).

### **2.3.3 E-Procurement in Public & Private sector**

The era we live in is characterized by a strong entry of technology into our everyday life. The same is happening in the field of business, and as a result, public procurement cannot be an exception. Thus, there is a shift towards digitalisation with the introduction of electronic platforms, e-invoicing and digital tools in general. In this way there is more transparency and wider participation. In addition, potential suppliers save time and money as they can participate in a process from the comfort of their couch, and there is also an environmental footprint by reducing the amount of written material due to the digitisation of procedures (Chen et al., 2021). It is clear that training in the use of the new systems is needed, as well as ensuring the confidentiality of information shared through these channels and safeguarding commercial confidentiality in order to maintain the level of competition. In this way, efficiency is increased and incentives are provided for participation even for

companies that are not particularly familiar with the technology (*Digital Procurement - European Commission, n.d.*).

The introduction of a common code characterising procurement tenders on the basis of the goods to be procured helps in this direction. The EU Common Procurement Vocabulary (CPV) thus makes it easier for potential suppliers to identify targeted business opportunities in the field of their interest (*Common Procurement Vocabulary - European Commission, n.d.*). Also in this direction is the Tenders Electronic Daily (TED) platform where notices are posted which can provide information to interested suppliers about business opportunities across the European Union. There is an adequate database on this platform, through which market analysis can be carried out as well as trends and the history of public sector needs can be identified (*Tenders Electronic Daily - European Commission, n.d.*).

Greece, for its part, has developed an integrated information system which is managed by the Ministry of Digital Governance and aims to facilitate and modernise the public procurement process, enabling public bodies - Contracting Authorities and businesses to interact. The National Electronic Public Procurement System (ESIDIS in Greek) is developed for this purpose by enabling public bodies to design electronic tendering procedures where interested economic operators can participate and submit bids (Bitzidis et al., 2020). The above is carried out under the supervision of the Hellenic Single Public Procurement Authority (HSPPA) which ensures the integrity of the procedures and compliance with European and National legislation. At the same time, all Greek public tender notices, regardless of the method of conduct and budget, are published in the Central Electronic Public Procurement Registry (CERPP). In this way, the business world can take into account opportunities that it can exploit and become a supplier to the public sector (*ΕΑΑΗΣΥ - ΑΡΧΙΚΗ, n.d.*).

As mentioned above, technology has had an impact on procurement processes in public sector, contributing greatly to their digitalization, same is happening to the private sector too. Key points focus on automating procurement processes, reducing certain costs and increasing transparency (Egwim et al., 2024). Electronic tendering systems are used to make it easier for companies to accept offers, evaluate partners and facilitate processes by speeding up procedures. In addition, there is a plethora of cloud based programs, ERP platforms that connect many supply chain functions, part of which is e-procurement (Gamal Aboelmaged, 2010).

## **2.4 Sustainable Procurement**

Every organisation, whether it is a private enterprise or a public body, chooses how it will operate and the strategy through which it will approach its various functions. In the case of public bodies in most cases there is a direction from the higher authorities, which they must follow faithfully. One such approach is sustainable procurement, which attempts to incorporate environmental, social and economic parameters into decision-making in the procurement process, giving it a long-term perspective (Renukappa et al., 2015). In this section, important elements and fields of sustainability in procurement, both in the private and public sector, are analysed.

### **2.4.1 Concept and Principles**

The term sustainability has become increasingly common in recent years and its main focus is on growth in the present without burdening the future. For example, use of energy sources to heat the present generation, but without depleting and burdening future generations. All sustainability concerns carry over to the procurement field where they can be summarised in the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998). These are the principles that make up sustainable procurement and are discussed below.

#### ***Environmental View***

The procurement process is a multi-level effort that involves various aspects of the supply chain. Correct management can bring positive results and reduce the environmental footprint, while bad decisions can have huge implications for maintaining or even improving environmental conditions. Choosing suppliers that adhere to high environmental standards such as green production or transport methods or even the use of green raw materials works in this direction (Miemczyk & Luzzini, 2018). A typical example is energy saving at all levels of the supplier's supply chain and the implementation of a lean policy that avoids excess stock that may end up being unusable or requiring further energy to maintain, as well as high quality levels that will eliminate defective products that would end up as waste (Ramanathan & Ramanathan, 2014). By implementing these policies, the business world,

through the procurement process, does not erode existing ecosystems, leaving room for future exploitation of energy resources and limiting the impact of their actions on climate change.

In addition to the above, the European Commission has developed tools that relate to the life-cycle costing of the goods supplied, taking into account not only the purchase price but also the total costs that will be incurred during the use and withdrawal of the products (*Life-Cycle Costing - European Commission*, n.d.). This has a result better maintenance and savings on energy usage. Green public procurement adopts principles of the circular economy, encouraging resilience, developing the innovation of new environmentally friendly green products and further raising awareness of environmental issues in society (*Green Public Procurement - European Commission*, n.d.; *ΠΡΑΣΙΝΕΣ ΔΗΜΟΣΙΕΣ ΣΥΜΒΑΣΕΙΣ - ΓΕΝΙΚΗ ΓΡΑΜΜΑΤΕΙΑ ΕΜΠΟΡΙΟΥ*, 2023).

### ***Social View***

Unlike traditional procurement, sustainable procurement tries to add a social dimension, encouraging suppliers and buyers to think about the benefits they can bring to society. Part of this concept is the creation of new jobs, full compliance with labour legislation and workers' rights in terms of wages, insurance and working conditions, and finally the inclusion of marginalised social groups in the labour market (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017).

In the field of public procurement, socially responsible public procurement is being promoted, where state money is used by purchasers - public bodies - to enhance social welfare by ensuring the above-mentioned objectives (*Social Procurement - European Commission*, n.d.).

### ***Economic View***

Most business activities are profit-driven, often violating basic principles and causing social inequalities or environmental disasters at the altar of money. Sustainable procurement combines economic objectives with social and environmental ones. Making a 'green' shift will bring about a reduction in bills in the long term, while a good social face can gain a greater share of the market, as a good reputation wins customers while this dimension also includes investing in innovative ideas that can provide resilience. Economic growth, long

term planning and stability are parts of this pillar (Meehan & Bryde, 2011; Miemczyk & Luzzini, 2018; Walker & Phillips, 2009).

#### **2.4.2 Drivers and Challenges**

Drivers are the causes which push for the adoption of sustainability methods.

A key driver for the adoption of sustainable procurement is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which includes a series of actions that promote the ethical face of a company or a governmental organisation. It is due to the particularly growing awareness of consumers of the ethical dimension of their choices, whether this relates to social or environmental issues, turning the lack of corporate social responsibility into a huge shortcoming, thus giving a head start to the competition (Tilt, 2016).

Another factor that influences - if not imposes - the implementation of sustainability practices in the procurement process is the regulations and legislation that are introduced and promote and sometimes impose sustainability elements in various areas such as entrepreneurship. Furthermore, climate change which is increasingly affecting human lives with natural disasters being more frequent, is motivating the influx of sustainable methods of sourcing environmentally friendly products (Pouikli, 2021).

Implementing sustainable procurement practices hides a number of challenges that can arise and cause problems. First of all, there are challenges on the financial side as green procurement of eco-friendly raw materials increases costs while transporting products by green means requires a large initial capital investment (Malin, 2000). Certainly in the future both of these factors offer sustainability, but at present there is a lot of money to be made out of the coffers. To be successful, the implementation of sustainability must penetrate all departments of an organisation, from customer service to distributors. The lack of sufficient knowledge by the executives of an organization requires enough time and training to assimilate this culture which will be the common ground of all those who work towards this goal (Schooner & Speidel, 2020). Respecting the rights of employees, improving working conditions, as well as creating partnerships with entities that have similar principles and ethics, may often require a large initial investment to create the right mechanism with the right staff (Bilderback, 2023) . As already mentioned above, the procurement process is a multidimensional process which requires the cooperation of various parties.

Suppliers/manufacturers are key participants without whose contribution sustainability cannot be achieved. A particularly important role is played by the willingness of existing partners to comply with certain sustainability requirements. In the absence of such willingness, it is imperative to seek new parties who meet the relevant requirements (whether socio-ethical or environmental), which can be costly, time-consuming and risky (Gupta et al., 2020; Qazi & Appolloni, 2022). The above mentioned concern both suppliers and buyers.

### **2.4.3 Public Procurement and Sustainability**

Public procurement set certain selection criteria which must be met by participants in order for their bids to be accepted. In many cases these criteria are closely linked to sustainability practices that public bodies wish to implement, such as the reduction of the environmental footprint, the promotion of the circular economy, social responsibility and the ethical impact that the execution of a contract will have on society and the environment (Behraves et al., 2022).

Such selection criteria relate to the economic and financial soundness of the entity, technical capacity as well as quality and environmental management standards (*ΕΑΑΔΗΣΥ-Ν.4412-Υπερκείμενο*, n.d.). The sustainability of a procurement depends on the financial viability of the supplier, for example its ability to cope with difficult situations which may affect liquidity, especially in strange circumstances such as Covid-19. This is why many tenders require participants to meet a minimum level of turnover or to satisfy certain creditworthiness levels or financial ratios.

It is also common for participating economic operators to be required to comply with quality management systems such as ISO 9001 and environmental management systems such as ISO 14001, thus emphasising the environmental impact of the procurement (Arimura et al., 2011). In order to obtain the latter certificate, the companies are subject to a rigorous audit by approved bodies which confirm their ethical and environmentally friendly way of operating. At the same time, there are also criteria that require the supplier to have previous experience in performing similar contracts in order to avoid discrimination and ensure equality and accessibility, thus leading to significant results in society. Incentives or requirements to employ long-term unemployed or disabled persons during the execution of

the contract also work in this direction, absorbing vulnerable social groups into the labour market (Diófási-Kovács & Valkó, 2015; Rainville, 2022).

#### **2.4.4 Private Procurement and Sustainability**

The culture of corporate social responsibility is highly visible, thus setting high standards to which stakeholders must meet (Tilt, 2016). As in the public sector, in procurement related to private buyers, they set criteria for the selection of suppliers which are often linked to sustainability elements. In addition to the financial aspect of the offer received by a buyer, other parameters are often put on the negotiating table and are aimed at reduced delivery times, good communication and high quality results with the supplier (Pattnaik & Schäfer, 2023).

Beyond this, however, the supplier is often assessed in terms of its response to society, compliance with labour law and respect for human rights, as well as the ethical nature of its operation. In addition, the smallest possible environmental footprint of the cooperation, the reduction of pollutants, waste management make the environmental background a major criterion for the selection of the supplier (Carter & Liane Easton, 2011).

## **2.6 Supplier's Dimension**

In the procurement process, apart from the buyer's satisfaction, there is also the supplier's side which plays its own important role, having its own objectives and challenges.

First and foremost, no business entity would waste man-hours if it had not identified an opportunity that could provide it with some positive impact. No company would enter into the process of gathering documents and preparing a bid if it had not identified a business opportunity for a public procurement contract, while in the private sector, if it did not consider it to be a particular opportunity, it would not prepare its negotiating strategy or pricing policy. Profit and its margins are the main objectives that motivate a supplier to take part in a procurement, but it is not the only driving force (Hong & Kwon, 2012). Developing relationships and further networking are key factors to doing business as new doors can be opened and newer partnerships can be formed. The supply chain, due to its complexity, can

hide many disturbances that can affect the operation of a business. By expanding the portfolio of customers with variety in scope e.g. various public bodies as well as private companies, a shield is raised to the supplier against such risks (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012; Peenstra & Silvius, 2018).

The adoption of sustainability practices is necessary and poses many challenges as already mentioned above in this dissertation. Strict audits and measurements are carried out to examine the sustainability of suppliers in order to close a deal. To be able to meet these requirements and to integrate sustainability elements in the products they produce/trade, in their mode of transport as well as in every aspect of their activity, suppliers undergo rigorous procedures which result in certifications (Yusoff et al., 2016). In addition, sustainability brings more transparency between supplier-buyer relationships, develops new technologies due to the new first-hand situations they face which results in information sharing with partners and mutual development (Patil et al., 2022).

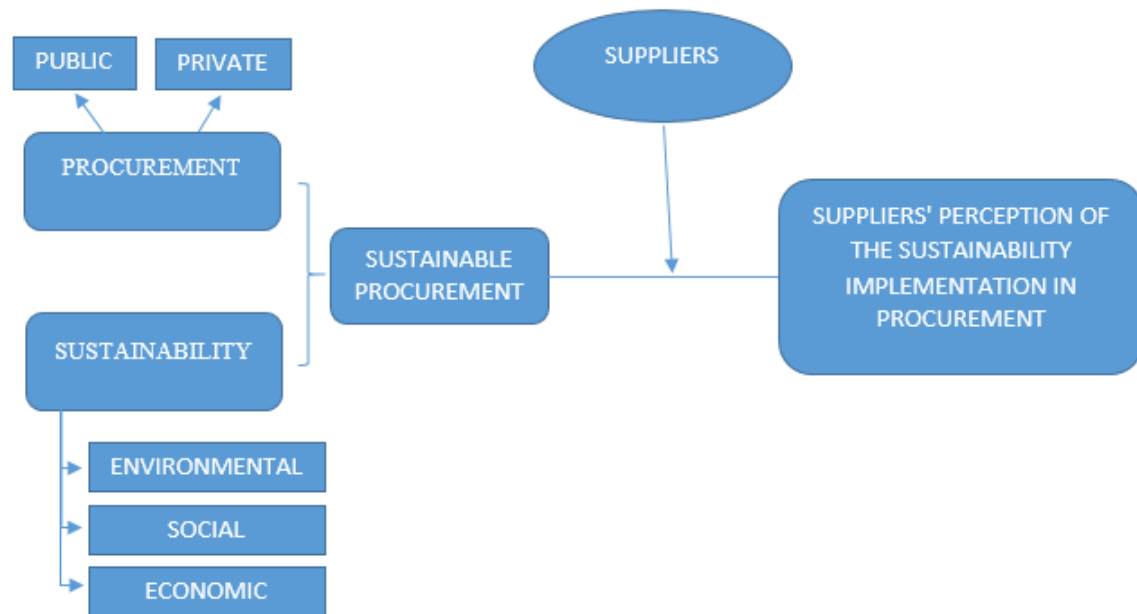
## **2.7 Research gap and conceptual framework**

This section points out the research gap identified while key research questions as well as the conceptual framework are outlined.

There are several research studies that revolve around the field of procurement and sustainability but there are some gaps in the research. How sustainability issues are approached between buyers - suppliers and deepening the suppliers' perspective as well as addressing SMEs in the sustainability agenda needs further research (Walker & Brammer, 2012), while the potential impact of sustainable procurement can be further explored through systemic views (Walker & Phillips, 2009). Furthermore, experiences, practices and impacts of implementing sustainability practices in the field of procurement require investigation along different regions and industries (M. Cooper, 2024).

For the above reasons, it was chosen to research the perception of suppliers who are operating in Greece and what this implies for the economic situation of the country, each in a different region of the country, each in a different sector of entrepreneurship but all supplying the private and public sector. In this way a more holistic perspective of the issue is explored,

through real experiences studying beyond the field of procurement and the various characteristics around it, how sustainability and its implementation affects suppliers in practice, as shown in Figure 2.1.



**Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework (Source: Author)**

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This section focuses on the methodological framework within which the research was conducted, the philosophy on which it was based, as well as each parameter that was taken into account during its implementation, thus constituting a guide that makes it easily understandable and accessible to the reader. Further, the choice of research strategy, the way of data collection and its quality, as well as ethical considerations are discussed.

#### **3.2 Research Philosophy**

The research philosophy reflects the methodology followed by the study as well as its approaches, thus expressing certain beliefs, opinions and assumptions of the researcher (Saunders et al., 2019). There are a number of pillars that underpin the research methodology. Such pillars are positivism and interpretivism as well as critical realism, postmodernism, and pragmatism (Blumberg et al., 2014). Positivism, stems from the natural sciences, focusing on objectivity and deriving laws of universal validity through empirical research (D. R. Cooper & Schindler, 1998). Interpretivism, on the other hand, dominates the social sciences, accepting the subjectivity of reality, placing particular emphasis on understanding and interpreting meaning from the perspectives of those involved (Burrell & Morgan, 2019). Ontology, epistemology, and axiology are the cornerstone of research philosophy. They define assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge acquisition, and ethical considerations. Ontology helps researchers understand reality and choose research objects and phenomena (Saunders et al., 2019). Epistemology is the study of how knowledge is perceived and communicated. Axiology is connected with the ethical values and principles that influence the researcher's ethical stance and decision-making throughout the research process (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

The present research uses interpretivism epistemology as its philosophy, as through qualified personnel who are involved in the field of procurement and are suppliers of both the public and private sector, it attempts to draw information about the experiences, benefits

and challenges of the interviewees in the field of private and public procurement, while focusing on the implementation of sustainability practices in their operation and the impact on their goal. Due to the varying years of experience, different fields of activity, each participant in the research has a different perspective on the issue under investigation, thus making social contact and interaction an essential tool for the recording and interpretation of different views.

### **3.3 Research Type**

A wide range of approaches, each providing their own perspectives are included in the research methodology. The types of research can be divided on the basis of their reasoning into inductive and deductive research. Drawing general conclusions from specific research and observations, adopting a bottom-up approach, is part of inductive research (Zalaghi & Khazaei, 2016). It has more elements of freedom as it is dominated by a small portion of structured methodologies, thus allowing the examination of various outputs without specific defined assumptions (Sutrisna, 2009). Inductive reasoning is useful when the field under research is unknown and the data may not be plentiful (Woo et al., 2017).

On the other hand, there is the case of deductive research which, by attempting an analysis of the literature, aims to confirm or disprove hypotheses based on fundamental theories (Saunders et al., 2019; Zalaghi & Khazaei, 2016). A top-down logic is followed here, making this method ideal for research based on positivism, emphasizing the validation of hypotheses (Zalaghi & Khazaei, 2016).

In the case of this research, the inductive method is applied as while according to the theory sustainability elements can be applied in the field of procurement, their impact is different in each case depending on the experiences of each participant in the research, while at the same time the friction with the procurement process is different per participant. For this reason, no specific hypothesis scenarios can be defined.

### **3.4 Research Strategy**

Each research strategy has its own characteristics and offers its own advantages. For example, case studies delve heavily into the analysis and meticulous examination of real-life issues (Yin, 2003). Due to this meticulous examination of specific cases, there is a lack of flexibility in collecting a wider range of data (Rowley, 2002). Surveys on the other hand are a strategy which can collect a large amount of data e.g. through questionnaires but does not achieve effective in-depth exploration of specific data due to and predetermined structure (Fowler, 2009).

A more intermediate solution is qualitative research strategies, particularly with the adoption of semi-structured interviews where it is possible to collect a wide range of data but also to personalise and deepen the data (Doody et al., 2013). The discussion during this type of interview is not limited to a narrow framework of questions as according to the participants' answers to the predefined questions any aspects and perceptions of each participant can be further explored, thus achieving a comparative element. The chosen strategy prioritises the interpretations of each interviewee and is characterised by flexibility so that data collection leads to secure conclusions and avoids superficial and hasty false outcomes (Denzin et al., 2009).

The collection of data and information and their further analysis is directly related to the research strategy to be followed. In this research, semi-structured interviews are applied i.e. a qualitative strategy. The choice of the ideal research strategy is linked to the questions under investigation, as well as the expected results and the information available (D. R. Cooper & Schindler, 1998). Having as a starting point the exploratory role of this research, as well as the variety in the experiences of the participants, it is considered that a qualitative research is better suited to its requirements. The qualitative nature of the research, presents the extracted results through descriptive narrations transforming the differentiated understanding of the parameters into an easier task (Patten & Newhart, 2017).

For all the above reasons and in order to achieve flexibility in exploring the diverse views and experiences of the participating suppliers and to maintain consistency, semi-structured interviews are applied (Crouch & Mckenzie, 2006). In the context of the research strategy and the implementation of the qualitative research on suppliers' perception, an attempt is made to deepen and understand the experiences and ideas of the specialized participants,

which coincides with the objectives of the study, highlighting the multidimensional nature of sustainability in the field of procurement and the multifaceted nature of the public and private procurement process on each participant. In addition, through these interviews it is given the opportunity to create a framework for dialogue that will draw out more information about benefits, potential challenges and impacts faced by the interviewees (Hummelvoll, 2008).

### **3.5 Data Collection and Sampling**

A qualitative strategy has been chosen to conduct the research. This strategy involves a range of methods through which data can be collected where each of them has its own benefits depending on the question under investigation (Zikmund et al., 2013).

Such data collection methods are unstructured interviews which do not follow a strict format often providing a wealth of data due to the extended discussion but on the other hand are not easy to analyse thoroughly (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Another method is structured interviews which follow a predefined framework of questions without deviating from them not helping to deepen the data making the nature of the research more quantitative than qualitative (Kajornboon, 2005). Another method is that of focus groups where instead of individual focus groups there are group discussions where there is a moderator who guides the discussion in order to draw collective experiences and perceptions. The downside of this method is that sometimes the expression of individual views can be influenced or discouraged by the presence of the group (Bell et al., 2019). Finally, observations are a method of data collection where interactions and certain behaviours of the issue under consideration are recorded, however in some cases they may not be as effective a method as that of interviews (Kervin, 1992).

Data collection is a particularly important process for the extraction of results during which various experiences and opinions of research participants are recorded (Zikmund et al., 2013). Data collection in this research will be conducted through semi-structured interviews of a selected representative sample, where the participants are differentiated according to years of experience, knowledge and the field of procurement in which they are involved, while the common denominator is that they are public and private sector suppliers.

Regarding the research sample there are two paths that can be followed. Probability sampling and non-probability sampling. The first option uses a random sample and is primarily used in quantitative research strategies. On the other hand in non-probability sampling the research participants are selected based on certain criteria and can be better utilized in qualitative strategy researches. There are several non-probability sampling methods, some of them are discussed below. Convenience sampling is a method where research participants are selected because of their ease of finding them both in terms of availability and cost and time for the researcher. However, this sample is not representative of the entire population (Etikan, 2016). Another sampling method is snowball sampling, where when access to participants is limited, it can be achieved and increased through the participants themselves and communication with them. However, this technique may have characteristics of bias due to a possible lack of representativeness (Battaglia, 2008). Also, quota sampling is a technique that divides the population into groups and gets an equal portion of each group to investigate the perspectives of each stratum. Finally, purposive sampling is a basic technique of non-probability sampling, as participants are selected by the researcher according to who is considered suitable to participate in the research he/she is conducting, giving details on the subject under investigation (Etikan, 2016; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). The credibility of the researcher plays a big role in this as the knowledge and experiences of the participants can influence the result extracted, therefore it carries risks of ambiguity due to the possible bias of the researcher.

The sample should be such that the data is sufficient but does not saturate the data and the effectiveness of the resources (Robinson, 2014). For this reason this survey aims to receive feedback from 8 participants to cover a wide range of experiences, implications as well as future suggestions to research (Battaglia, 2008). The participants were selected according to the professional background of the researcher and the relationship developed during his work as a business consultant specialising in public procurement tenders.

### **3.6 Research Design**

The chosen method of research requires a good preparation in order to rationally structure the overall process, making the main themes as well as the questions through which the

dialogue will be shaped according to the answers received (Bazeley, 2020). In the first phase, some data of mainly demographic interest of the interviewees are recorded in order to understand their level of experience as well as their background, see Table 3.1. Then, their friction with procurement issues is explored, while particular emphasis is placed on sustainability awareness and adoption of such methods in their operation, while suppliers' perception on the implementation of sustainable procurement is examined through challenges, selection criteria they faced and impact on their goals. Through semi-structured interviews and a series of questions that turn the interview into a flexible process, the research becomes dynamic and can provide a wide range of results (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Furthermore, the questions are structured with such a content and style, in order to serve the objective of the research, seeking the interviewees' level of knowledge of key elements of sustainability, their applications in the field of procurement -private and public- while drawing out any advantages or challenges that accompany sustainable procurement.

<b>THEME</b>	<b>QUESTION ASKED</b>	<b>SECTION</b>	<b>OBJECTIVE/PURPOSE OF QUESTION</b>
<b>DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS</b>	1. Age?		The present questions focus on extracting information about the interviewee's profile and professional background.
	2. Gender?		
	3. Education level?		
	4. How many years of experience do you have with procurement?		
	5. What is your current role/position in the company?		
	6. What is the main activity of the company?		
<b>FEEDBACK ON PUBLIC &amp; PRIVATE PROCUREMENT</b>	7. Does the company supply both the private and public sector? If yes, what are the benefits and challenges in each of them?	2.3.1/2.3.2	The design of these questions aims to explore the benefits, challenges and differences around the field

	8. What is your perspective on the procedure for participating in public procurement tenders?	2.3.1	of public and private procurement.
	9. Are you familiar with public e-procurement? Do you face also in private procurement electronic processes and what are the differences between them?	2.3.3	
	10. Do you identify any differences between supplying a public entity and a private company?	2.3.1./2.3.2	
SUSTAINABILITY CONCEPT	11. Are you familiar with the concept of sustainability and its principles?	2.4.1	The specific questions aim to collect data on the knowledge of sustainability and its application in the suppliers' corporate environment.
	12. As a supplier, have you adopted sustainability principles? If so, which are the drivers for the adoption?	2.4.2	
	13. In case you have adopted sustainability principles, did you face any challenges?	2.4.2/2.6	
PROCUREMENT & SUSTAINABILITY	14. Regarding public procurement, is the application of sustainability requirements (supplier's selection criteria) noticeable? And if so, do you always fulfil these?	2.4.3	These questions are aimed exclusively at the implementation of sustainability in the procurement sector and how it is perceived by suppliers.
	15. Regarding private procurement, do buyers set	2.4.4	

	sustainability requirements? If so, do you always fulfil these?		
	16. Has the entry of sustainability into the procurement field affected your goals?	2.6	
	17. In the context of process optimization, can you make some suggestions that could facilitate the smooth implementation of sustainable procurement and improve relations with public or private buyers?		

**Table 3.1 Themes, questions and objectives of interviews (Source: Author).**

### **3.7 Approach of Data Analysis**

The choice of how to analyse the data recorded during the qualitative research is particularly crucial for the correct utilisation, interpretation and extraction of results. There are a number of theoretical frameworks that each respond to research objectives individually, like content analysis, ground theory, thematic analysis (Lacey & Luff, 2001). In the case at hand, thematic analysis is used, which is a widespread and recognised methodology for analysing qualitative data such as those obtained from interviews (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The proper application of thematic analysis requires a highly organised approach which starts with the meticulous recording of data to enable the researcher to extract elements, identify any patterns, themes, etc., as well as to maintain integrity throughout the research process (Boru, 2018; Schutt, 2009). Subsequently, the primary data are coded and categorised according to their content. The common elements and characteristics that are identified help to provide further understanding and clarity, while the analysis of the groups into which the data are categorised aims to create links that indicate the relationships

between them. In addition, at the beginning of the data presentation, statistics are depicted with the demographic characteristics of the interviewees. (Schutt, 2009; Wong, 2008).

### **3.8 Quality of Research**

For a study to be considered of a high level of integrity, certain conditions of reliability and validity must be met. Validity can be divided into its internal and external dimensions, with the first one focusing on the consistency of the results-objectives of the research, while the second dimension focuses on the feasibility of generalising the outcomes. On the other hand, reliability aims to ensure the consistency of the research results, avoiding any possible bias (Alshenqeeti, 2014). In the context of this research, all necessary measures are put in place to maintain high levels of reliability and validity through a transparent data collection and analysis process. Analytical descriptions and interpretations contribute to this direction, which helps to generate themes and further enhance reliability (Lacey & Luff, 2001). In addition, the accuracy of data recording and interpretation plays a key role in ensuring validity. At the same time, the selection of participants as executives with experience and continuous friction with the industry works towards increasing validity and reliability (Brink, 1993). With this in mind, the selection of participants has been done in a very meticulous way so that they can support the validity and reliability of the research, while at the same time the approach is such as to build bridges of trust and construct a beneficial dialogue. In this way, honest responses are enhanced (Golafshani, 2003; Saunders et al., 2019, p. 4).

### **3.9 Ethical Implications**

Ethical considerations during research, especially qualitative research methods, are of key importance and respect for the rights of participants must be ensured (Flick, 2014; Fouka & Mantzorou, 2011). In the context of data collection through interviews, participants will be informed about the method of the research, its objectives and will be asked for their consent to participate in it. No reference will be made to personal sensitive information and data,

thus maintaining high levels of confidentiality and anonymity, assuring the exclusive use of all information for research purposes. Moreover, the interviews will be conducted with full transparency, clear questions and in any case with a primary concern to avoid discomfort for the participants (Blumberg et al., 2014).

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter constitutes a roadmap of research methodology and its constituent parameters, from research philosophy to its ethical underpinnings. It illuminates detailed points that play a prominent role in understanding research, such as how data is collected and analysed.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to analyze the data collected from eight online semi-structured interviews. It presents some information about the background of the interviewees, their field of activity and through thematic analysis it attempts to draw conclusions and findings about the questions posed.

### 4.2 Sample Characteristics - Participant's Background

First and foremost, all interviewees are executives or owners of businesses that supply both the private and the Greek public sector. The average age of the interviewees is 43 years and 62.5% are men and 37.5% are women. Half of the interviewees hold a Bachelor Degree while the other half have advanced to the next educational level by holding a Master Degree as shown in Table 4.1.

INTERVIEWEE	AGE	GENDER	EDUCATION LEVEL
1	47	FEMALE	Bachelor in Economics
2	55	MALE	Bachelor in Business Administration
3	39	MALE	Master in Supply Chain Management
4	49	MALE	Bachelor in Accounting
5	43	FEMALE	Master in Logistics
6	37	MALE	Master in Applied Economics
7	40	MALE	Bachelor in Economics
8	33	FEMALE	Master in Supply Chain Manager

**Table 4.1 Participant's characteristics (Source: Interviews)**

All of them have little or a lot of experience in the field of procurement, ranging from 5 to 19 years as shown in Table 4.2, while the average number of years of experience is almost 10 years. These conditions favour the collection of data from different perspectives which provide a variety of answers. In addition in this direction, the field of activity of the suppliers is unique, resulting in data being collected from companies that experience sustainability elements in public or private procurement but in different supply sectors.

<b>INTERVIEWEE</b>	<b>EXPERIENCE WITH PROCUREMENT (YEARS)</b>	<b>POSITION/ROLE</b>	<b>ACTIVITY OF COMPANY</b>
1	12	Sales Manager	Trading of spare parts
2	19	Owner	Fuel trading
3	8	Business Development Manager	Import and trade of electrical appliances
4	12	Owner	Cleaning services and supply of cleaning equipment
5	9	Procurement Manager	Wholesale of hospital products
6	6	Head of Finance	Clothing trader
7	10	Sales Manager	Wholesale of frozen products
8	5	Supply chain manager	Furniture manufacturing

**Table 4.2 Interviewee's professional background (Source: Interviews)**

### 4.3 Thematic Analysis of Semi-structured Interviews

Initially, all the participants in this research who are representatives of companies operating in Greece expressed that companies supply both the private and the public sector.

#### 4.3.1 Benefits, challenges, differences & e-procurement in public and private procurement

In the interview, participants are asked about how they experience public and private procurement in terms of benefits, challenges & electronic procedures.

It becomes clear from the responses received, see Table 4.3, that the benefits between the two processes differ. In the context of public procurement there is a sense of stability both in terms of long-term contracts and the security provided throughout the contract period and the assurance of payment. Another point of view raised during the interviews is that in public procurement contracts the company receives, in addition to financial compensation, the pleasure of contributing to society as a whole.

On the private procurement side, it is undeniable according to the interviews that high profitability is the number one benefit as it was mentioned by all interviewees. In addition, the reputation gained through partnerships and the flexibility provided by private procurement are positive aspects of these.

PUBLIC								
BENEFITS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
STABILITY/SECURITY	X	X		X	X	X	X	
PAYMENTS	X				X		X	X
SOCIAL SATISFACTION			X			X		
CHALLENGES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
BUREAUCRACY (DOCUMENTATION/AUDITS/SPECIFICATIONS)	X		X		X	X		X

LOW PROFIT		X				X	
CONFLICTS WITH COMPETITORS				X		X	

**Table 4.3 Public procurement: benefits & challenges according to participants (Source: Interviews)**

However, there was no shortage of references to the challenges inherent in both processes as shown in Table 4.4.

Starting with public procurement, a large proportion of the research participants raised as a challenge the high levels of bureaucracy, both in terms of documentation, audits and specifications that are imposed in public procurement. Also while many had referred to the guaranteed consistent profits as a positive aspect, it was reported to me that the profit margin is quite low due to high competition. Also, this competition often results in legal conflicts which delay the conclusion of the contract.

The private sector for its part faces a number of challenges according to research participants. Firstly, instability and volatility is common according to 4 out of 8 participants as it is a highly dynamic environment. High competition contributes to this which is a challenge according to a portion of the participants.

PRIVATE								
<b>BENEFITS</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
PROFITABILITY	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
REPUTATION			X					
FLEXIBILITY				X				
<b>CHALLENGES</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
COMPETITION	X					X	X	
VOLATILITY		X	X		X			X
TIME DURATION OF NEGOTIATIONS						X		

**Table 4.4 Private procurement: benefits & challenges according to participants (Source: Interviews)**

The survey participants were asked about the public procurement tendering process, where common views were observed among a large proportion of the interviewees as shown in

Table 4.5. To begin with, 75% of them added the element of complexity to these procedures and this was mainly based on the many documents they need to gather. This complexity, according to the interviewees, implies the dedication of many man-hours and the involvement of various parties to enable participation in the tender process. Finally, it was understood that a large proportion of the participants considered that transparency and equality were ensured through these procedures.

<b>PUBLIC PROCUREMENT TENDERS PROCESS</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
TRANSPARENCY	X		X			X		X
COMPLEXITY (extra documentation)	X	X	X	X	X		X	
TIME CONSUMING	X			X	X	X	X	

**Table 4.5 Opinion of the interviewees on the public procurement process (Source: Interviews)**

Participants were asked several questions, one of which concerned their familiarity with electronic procurement systems in the public sector and whether they encounter similar systems in the private sector. It can be seen from the answers, see Table 4.6, that in the private sector there is more familiarity with electronic procurement systems and at the same time simplicity in using them as ERP platforms are used as well as ordering or sending offers via e-mail. On the other hand, with regard to public procurement, the responses of the representatives of the companies that participated in the research showed that familiarity with electronic public procurement systems is not at a high level and there is in some cases complexity in their use.

It is characteristic that only half of the participants are even slightly familiar with electronic procurement systems and many have outsourced the handling of these tasks, in contrast to private procurement where 75% of the interviewees are quite familiar with the handling of electronic procedures.

<b>E-PROCUREMENT PROCESS</b>								
<b>PUBLIC</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
FAMILIAR	X			X		X	X	

NOT FAMILIAR		X	X		X			X
COMPLEXITY			X	X		X		
<b>PRIVATE</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
FAMILIAR		X	X	X		X	X	X
NOT FAMILIAR	X				X			
SIMPLICITY (ERP, MAIL)		X	X	X		X	X	X

**Table 4.6 Participants' familiarity with electronic procurement (Source: Interviews)**

When research participants were asked about the differences they identify as suppliers of public and private entities, it was found that differences emerged which could be categorised along four axes as shown in Table 4.7. First, with regard to profit margin, it was reported that there are higher profit margins in the private sector than in the public sector. Four of the eight interviewees referred to the difference in the financial aspect, and unanimously these four support the view that the private sector provides better remuneration to suppliers.

Another characteristic difference between private and public procurement is the nature of the contract and the relationship between supplier and customer. As was evident from the participants' responses, a large proportion have turned to public procurement contracts because of the security and stability that the signing of such a contract inspires, as opposed to the volatile environment of the private sector where many factors can contribute to its termination.

Another difference observed by some of the interviewees is the procedure to be followed in order to proceed with procurement in both the public and private sector. It becomes clear that in the public sector there is strict legislation but bureaucracy in some cases due to the large amount of documentation that must be submitted in the bids of potential suppliers. On the other hand, in reaching an agreement with the private sector, interviewees mention evidence of greater flexibility. Both the reputation of the company and the resulting negotiation are often sufficient to reach an agreement with the buyer. In addition, offers are made in an easier and more direct way without the need for a plethora of documentation.

Finally, in public procurement there is a high degree of transparency both in the criteria used by potential suppliers and in the financial offers they submit. On the other hand, a private

purchaser may decide to award a contract to a supplier on the basis of its prestige, regardless of price or even on the basis of acquaintances.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PROCUREMENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
STRICT LEGISLATION & DOCUMENTATION (PUBLIC) VS FLEXIBILITY (PRIVATE)	X				X	X		
HIGH PROFIT MARGIN (PRIVATE) VS LOW PROFIT MARGIN (PUBLIC)	X	X	X					X
TRANSPARENCY (PUBLIC) VS COMPANY'S INTERESTS (PRIVATE)				X	X	X		
STABILITY (PUBLIC) VS VOLATILITY (PRIVATE)		X					X	X

**Table 4.7 Public and private procurement differences according to interviewees (Source: Interviews)**

#### **4.3.2 Sustainability familiarity – adoption – drivers – challenges**

In the discussion with the interviewees, a series of questions were asked regarding sustainability, their familiarity with it, the adoption of sustainability in the company they represent and the reasons that led to it as well as the challenges they faced.

On the positive side, all interviewees stated that the term sustainability is familiar to them, with 25% of them expressing partial knowledge of the principles behind it.

Taking into account the responses received, see Table 4.8, the environmental dimension of sustainability is the most familiar to the surveyed companies as all of them have implemented sustainability practices that involve the environment either to a lesser or greater extent. According to the interviewees, such practices have to do with the use of greener vehicles, buildings, raw materials and partners. The adoption of social sustainability principles has also been well received, with around 63% of participants stating that they have taken actions that have a positive impact on society. Such actions include the recruitment of human resources who are long-term unemployed or disabled or even people from the local community. Working conditions that focus on the employee and his or her needs were also mentioned as examples of such practices. The least applied sustainability methods are those of economic sustainability, as only a quarter of the research participants

reported that they have adopted such principles in their business. As mentioned by the interviewees such practices have to do with considering the financial situation of the partners in order to build a long-term relationship, but also implementing innovation that will give a competitive advantage in the tough market battle.

It is clear from the participants' responses that each company, based on its objectives and the scope of its activities, has been driven to adopt sustainability practices for a number of different reasons. It is observed that a large proportion of the participants have been led to take such actions in order to contribute to the protection of the environment. Furthermore, consumer awareness and sensitivity towards environmental and ethical issues has increased and as a result, companies are trying by all means to retain their customer base so that they do not switch to competing brands (38% of respondents said that competition is a reason that has led them to adopt sustainability practices). Their reputation plays a big role in this and is also one of the reasons that have driven many companies to adopt sustainability practices. An important reason that led - perhaps even forced - the companies participating in the research to adopt sustainability strategies is the current legislation and strict regulations on both the social impact of companies and their environmental footprint, even threatening them with fines.

Finally, the desire of companies to please and support the local community as they are directly dependent on it, but also to improve the working conditions of their employees have been the springboard for the adoption of sustainability practices that are mainly related to the social face of the company.

When the interviewees were asked about the challenges and obstacles they had to overcome in order to achieve the aforementioned, we find that here too the challenges differ depending on the field of activity and the size of the company. A common challenge of the largest share of the participants was the high costs they had to bear in order to make the sustainability transition, as it turns out that they had to make high-cost investments. A further challenge was presented in relations with existing partners e.g. suppliers, transporters, as the adoption of sustainability practices requires them to join a common line. According to interviewees, this led to a crisis with partners or even to the termination of long-term partnerships which also brought about an increase in costs.

Finally, a quarter of the interviewees had a problem with the culture of the company's own staff who either had no knowledge of sustainability or could not integrate this knowledge in practice and achieve the required targets. Thus several man-hours were spent on training to ensure that everyone was aware of and able to meet the requirements of the transition to sustainability strategies.

SUSTAINABILITY FAMILIARITY	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
FAMILIAR		X	X		X	X	X	X
PARTIALLY FAMILIAR	X			X				
NOT FAMILIAR								
SUSTAINABILITY ADOPTION - DRIVERS- CHALLENGES								
PRINCIPLES ADOPTED	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
ENVIRONMENTAL	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
SOCIAL		X		X	X	X		X
ECONOMIC			X			X		
DRIVERS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
REPUTATION	X		X				X	
LEGISLATION	X				X		X	
IMPROVEMENT OF WORKING CONDITIONS		X				X		
REWARD TO COMMUNITY		X		X	X			X
CUSTOMER AWARENESS	X		X		X	X	X	
COMPETITION			X		X	X		
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION		X	X	X			X	X
CHALLENGES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
STAFF PHILOSOPHY	X		X					
CRISIS IN PARTNERSHIPS		X		X			X	

HIGH COSTS	X			X	X	X		X
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**Table 4.8 Participants's opinion regarding sustainability concept (Source: Interviews)**

### 4.3.3 Application of sustainability in the field of procurement

Participants in the present research were asked whether they identify sustainability criteria in the field of public and private procurement and whether they can meet the supplier selection criteria set by public procurement tenders.

As can be seen from the respondents' answers as shown in Table 4.9, all of them have at least once been faced with selection criteria in public procurement tenders that include sustainability requirements. In particular, almost all participants encountered environmental criteria which restricted participation in tenders to those economic operators who did not meet the requirements. Such requirements as mentioned are environmental management certificates, ISO certificates and the provision of evidence of "green" manufacturing partners.

Also visible according to interviewees were in public procurement contracts the supplier selection criteria related to the economic aspect of sustainability. Such criteria are mainly the turnover levels of the candidate economic operator, liquidity indicators and the completion of similar contracts and projects in previous years.

Finally, regarding the social pillar of sustainability, the opinion of a representative of a company that participated in the research was mentioned that in order to conclude a supply contract with the Greek state, the products had to come exclusively from Greek producers, in this case fishermen.

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT SUSTAINABILITY CRITERIA								
ENVIRONMENTAL CRITERIA	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
FINANCIAL CRITERIA		X	X			X		X
SOCIAL CRITERIA							X	

**Table 4.9 Public procurement sustainability criteria faced by interviewees (Source: Interviews)**

Once the above information on the criteria set by the public authorities had been gathered, the extent to which the economic operators participating in these tenders were able to meet these requirements and to submit a bid in the tender procedure was examined in greater depth. Half of the respondents had never encountered any problems as shown in Table 4.10, and having developed and introduced sustainability elements into their business operations, they met the requirements of public procurement. In addition, some of them only a few times and occasionally encountered issues that made it impossible to participate in public procurement which was mainly due to certifications that they or their partners did not have, while finally a part of the participants highlighted the fact that several times they were not able to participate in public procurement due to the sustainability elements and the strict selection criteria as well as the partnerships with certified manufacturers (more expensive products) and some events that limited their turnover (e.g. Covid) did not work in this direction.

FULFILMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY CRITERIA IN PUBLIC PROCUREMENT								
NEVER								
SOMETIMES	X							X
ALMOST ALWAYS				X	X			
ALWAYS		X	X			X	X	

**Table 4.10 Fulfilment of sustainability criteria in public procurement according to participants**  
(Source: Interviews)

Turning to similar questions related to private procurement, some interviewees had not been exposed to sustainability requirements as they argue that lower offers and speed of delivery are more important. As in public procurement, sustainability elements related to the environment are also very prominent in private procurement. 63% report that customers demand environmentally friendly products, recyclable, with the necessary certifications, without burdening the plant and animal kingdom. In addition, a similar proportion of interviewees, as shown in Table 4.11, have observed social sustainability requirements in private procurement. According to the submitted opinions, corporate social responsibility sets priorities that have to do with the ethical side of procurement, support for the local community and traceability of the final product to ensure ethics and support for local

entrepreneurship. I was struck by the fact that none of the representatives of the supplier companies mentioned financial sustainability requirements in private procurement. I rate this on the basis of the thorough research and assessment of a prospective supplier's risks and financial condition that buyers conduct before entering into negotiations with a prospective supplier. Having ascertained that a potential partnership with them is assured by the financial solvency and soundness they project, they do not make further financial requirements for entering into the contracts.

PRIVATE PROCUREMENT & SUSTAINABILITY CRITERIA								
NO CRITERIA	X	X						
ENVIRONMENTAL CRITERIA			X		X	X	X	X
SOCIAL CRITERIA				X	X	X	X	X

**Table 4.11 Private procurement sustainability criteria (Source: Interviews)**

As part of the research, interviewees were asked about the impact of sustainability on the goals of the companies they represent. As expected, the majority stressed that profit is and remains one of the main targets, see Table 4.12. However, all of them expressed the view that the philosophy in which the companies they represent operate has changed and that profit is not an end in itself. They have now integrated environmental protection and social welfare practices which they try to combine with profitability. Furthermore, of particular interest is the view expressed by a small number of interviewees that they place great emphasis on long-term planning rather than on the short-term benefits of doing business. Thus, it was emphasised by interviewees that new investments involving a more 'go green' strategy are being made, but that this results in cash outflows.

IMPACT OF SUSTAINABILITY ON THE GOALS								
PROFIT IS THE GOAL	X	X		X		X	X	
LONG-TERM PLANNING	X						X	
NEW INVESTMENTS	X					X		

PHILOSOPHY								
CHANGE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Table 4.12 Impact of sustainability implementation on participants' goals (Source: Interviews)**

Taking into account the answers received from the respondents, it can be seen that their suggestions focus on two main axes, which are staff training and two-way communication between buyer and supplier as shown in Table 4.13. The first suggestion aims to spread the knowledge and practices of sustainability along the company and its partners, while the second one aims at the cooperation between buyer and supplier so that there is a common approach to the issue.

In addition, there are other factors which, according to interviewees, need to be improved in order to introduce sustainability elements in procurement. Flexibility and clarity in the terms of contracts, whether with public or private partners, can help both sides, while reducing bureaucratic procedures would help to facilitate economic operators. Finally, some of the survey participants expressed the view that the willingness and ability of companies to adapt to change also plays an important role in the proper implementation of sustainability practices.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SMOOTH IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABILITY IN PROCUREMENT								
REDUCTION OF BUREAUCRATIC PROCEDURES	X							
ADAPTABILITY TO CHANGE		X			X			
FLEXIBLE & CLEAR CONTRACT TERMS			X	X			X	
STAFF TRAINING		X			X	X		X
TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION BETWEEN BUYERS-SUPPLIERS	X		X			X	X	

**Table 4.13 Suggestions from the side of interviewees for smooth application of sustainability methods in procurement (Source: Interviews)**

#### **4.4 Summary**

This section focused primarily on analysing the information obtained through the semi-structured interviews and further exploring the perspective of the supplier-participants in the research on the public and private procurement concept, the sustainability concept and on the elements of sustainability in procurement. Initially, the demographic data of the participants such as age and gender were briefly presented and their backgrounds were analysed both educationally and professionally in order to understand the perspective of each participant. From the thematic analysis some key issues can be distinguished: benefits, challenges and e-procurement process in public and private procurement, public procurement tenders process, differences between public and private procurement, sustainability familiarity - adoption - drivers - challenges, sustainability criteria in public & private procurement, impact of sustainability on the goals, suggestions for smooth implementation of sustainability in procurement. Regarding the benefits and challenges of both public and private procurement, there is a variety of views and this may be due to the different perspectives of each participant's area of interest. In public procurement the feeling of stability and security is an important benefit, while in private procurement the profit margin, which is quite high, is a driving force. On the other hand, the majority of participants presented the public procurement process as bureaucratic, while the instability and constant variability of conditions in the private sector hides pitfalls. The interviews were of particular interest in the area of public procurement, where a more common approach was observed among suppliers, despite the fact that they operate in different sectors. The complexity which leads to the dedication of many man-hours is a common denominator of their perspectives, while regarding electronic procurement systems in the public sector only half of the participants are familiar with them, in contrast to the private sector where most of the participants have friction and acknowledge that they are characterised by simplicity. Concluding with the characteristics of the two categories of procurement which are distinguished by the recipient whether it is a private or public entity, a summary of the differences observed by the participants when trying to procure from both categories of recipients is provided. These differences, if we were to categorise them, would be said to relate to issues of profit, flexibility, transparency and also stability.

Regarding the term sustainability, it is a very encouraging sign that all participants are familiar with this term, even if only a little, while the most common sustainability practices

implemented by the economic operators represented in the research are related to the environment, followed by the adoption of practices that encourage social sustainability. The incentives that motivate economic operators to adopt the above practices show particular variation and are related to different reasons in each case, such as environmental protection, consumer awareness, legislation, etc. There are also challenges such as primarily high initial costs as a large proportion of participants stated. When comparing the sustainability-related criteria for supplier selection between public and private operators, there is a certain amount of rigour and thoroughness when it comes to working with a public operator. Environmental requirements (e.g. ISO), financial adequacy (e.g. turnover levels) and social terms (e.g. use of local resources) are examples of requirements found in procurement with the public sector. On the other hand, there is more flexibility in working with the private sector but similar criteria are not lacking in many cases. Finally, it is clear that while profit continues to be a goal of companies, a major change has occurred with the introduction of sustainability elements in the philosophy with which they operate, while participants believe that in order to achieve a smooth transition and the introduction of sustainability in procurement, there should be cooperation between buyers and suppliers and adequate training should be provided.

## **5. Overall Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this section focuses on summarising the findings of the research in relation to the aim and questions that were posed at the beginning of this paper. Some points from the initial literature review are set alongside the findings of the research to approximate the results, to fill gaps in existing knowledge. In addition, some limitations which may have influenced the findings of this research are mentioned, and suggestions are made to future researchers to put these limitations aside.

In order to achieve the above, it must be remembered that the aim of this study was to investigate suppliers' perspectives on public and private procurement and how the element of sustainability fits into them, having as a starting point the existing literature which was presented in order for the reader to understand basic terminology and to identify any gaps. Subsequently, with data collection through semi-structured interviews, the research was conducted as presented in the previous chapter.

### **5.2 Discussion**

#### **5.2.1 Discussion about benefits, challenges, differences & e-procurement in public and private procurement**

According to the literature review, the main benefits of public procurement are the stability and long-term planning that it can offer, while at the same time providing opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to take a share of the market and all business activity is aimed at serving social needs (Arrowsmith & Kunzlik, 2009; Aschhoff & Sofka, 2009). The above is fully confirmed by the survey participants as stability was a common denominator in their responses while a contract with the State ensures security of payments throughout the contract period.

Public procurement is characterised by a rigorous legislative framework and efforts are undertaken to simplify procedures and achieve high standards of transparency (Legal Rules and Implementation - European Commission, n.d.). Taking into account the interviewees' responses, it is obvious that public procurement is riddled with bureaucracy. It is important to stress here that although, as mentioned above, there is an attempt to simplify procedures, this is often not reflected in the opinion expressed by the survey participants. Further challenges mentioned relate to conflicts with competitors, which often lead to legal disputes that block the signing of contracts, to the detriment of both the public interest and the companies themselves.

There is a shift towards the digitalisation of public procurement procedures with the creation of electronic platforms and digital tools in general, thus reducing the time required for participation and the collection of documents (Chen et al., 2021). The findings are of particular interest as only half of the participants are familiar with e-procurement for the public sector and a higher percentage describe these platforms as complex. While it may be that efforts to simplify processes and the use of the platforms provide great facilitation, training is nevertheless required to enable staff to meet the demands of using the electronic environment and to manage the time and workload pressure.

As far as procurement in the private sector is concerned, it is recognised as a particularly important process in reducing costs, generating profits and combating risk (Althabatah et al., 2023). Managing relationships with partners is a major challenge due to the unpredictable element that governs the world of business (manpreets, 2024; White et al., 2016). It is undeniable that the profit field is one of the main drivers and benefits of private procurement as there was unanimity among the participants. It is surprising that although the literature review presents it as an activity that reduces risks and strengthens relationships with partners whether they are customers or suppliers, this view is not reflected by the participants. On the contrary, due to high competition and volatile conditions in the global market (perhaps due to pandemic, energy crisis, conflicts in some parts of the world), fragile and unstable conditions are created which can often bring uncertainty and disruption to the operation of a business and its relations with the external environment if not managed in the right way.

The use of electronic procurement systems through technologically advanced environments (blockchain, cloud, ERP) adds transparency and reduces time and costs (Egwim et al.,

2024). There are high levels of familiarity with e-procurement systems in the private sector as 75% of participants consider them user-friendly and have used them at least once. It is worth noting that this may be due to the fact that most participants represent small and medium enterprises which have not so far expanded into investing in state-of-the-art systems which require a lot of training to use them, but mainly use catalogues, e-mail and ERP programs which are more or less standard in use and this may be why the element of simplicity is given on the part of the participants.

Taking into account the answers to the above questions posed to the research participants, it is clear that there are differences between public and private sector procurement. In order to summarise these and in an effort not to forget any important aspects, it was deemed appropriate to ask the interviewees to list some of the differences they identify thus increasing the interaction with them and their contribution to the extracted results of the research. The results obtained should be of concern to public and private buyers and motivate them to find possible room for improvement. For example, the profit margin is a significant difference between the public and private sectors according to the research as the budget of public procurement is specific and limited. Perhaps a better economic costing before the publication of the relevant notices would balance the situation. On the other hand, as far as private buyers are concerned, the support of their partners, and the development of trust and long-term strategic relationships would be a springboard to overcome the perception of a highly volatile environment for private procurement.

### **5.2.2 Discussion about sustainability familiarity – adoption – drivers – challenges**

The term sustainability consists of three pillars, environmental, economic and social sustainability (Elkington, 1998). All participants are familiar with the term sustainability and its principles, however there is a percentage of 25% who do not feel fully informed and may need additional training to become aware of the multifaceted dimension of sustainability.

The adoption of environmental sustainability practices aims to protect the environment and includes a shift towards green methods such as vehicles and raw materials that meet high environmental standards (Miemczyk & Luzzini, 2018). This dimension of sustainability is certainly the most prevalent among the participants as all of them have implemented sustainability practices related to the environment, having invested in the purchase of new

vehicles, the creation of new facilities and the establishment of relationships with new partners who are environmentally aware.

Social sustainability plays a key role in the operation of a company as the inclusion of socially vulnerable groups, the improvement of working conditions and compliance with labour legislation can help society as a whole (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). It appears from the participants' responses that the social dimension of sustainability has not been implemented to the same extent as the environmental dimension, as 63% have introduced practices in the operation of companies. There is agreement in the literature and research on the practices followed, however it would be useful to further examine the potential for providing benefits to society as the above percentage shows that there is significant room for improvement. It is worth mentioning the low rate of implementation of financial sustainability practices within their activity which makes the environment and the partners they rely on quite unsafe as there is no thorough research and examination of their financial health.

According to the literature, there are a number of reasons that drive companies to adopt sustainability practices. Corporate social responsibility and whatever it involves and the risk of tarnishing the company's reputation are motivators (Tilt, 2016). But beyond the above, there are regulations and laws that drive the implementation of sustainability practices, while the climate crisis and environmental preservation contribute in the same direction (Pouikli, 2021). As expected, judging from the dimension of sustainability that most of the survey participants were aware of, the reasons for implementing such practices are related to their environmental awareness and their desire to protect the environment. Particularly striking is that 38% reported that competition was one of the reasons for incorporating sustainability elements, in the sense of the risk of losing market share that is socially, ethically and ecologically aware. The reputation of the company which plays an important role in its success as mentioned by the interviewees and the desire to contribute to the local community in return are also reasons that prompted the adoption of sustainability practices. Finally, a portion of the interviewees confirmed literature sources as they mentioned that legislation and the existence of regulations regarding the environment, working conditions, pollutants, etc. was a springboard to start the process of implementing sustainability practices. This could also be translated as a way of avoiding any fines as some regulations not only encouraged the adoption of these practices but provided for fines for violators.

Challenges arise when companies try to achieve high levels of sustainability. The financial aspect is certainly one of them as many changes need to be made in terms of infrastructure, hardware and intangible equipment. It also requires the contribution of all the members that make up a company's network, from its employees to its external partners, which means a common philosophy which, in order to achieve, requires thorough training which translates into time and money to be spent (Gupta et al., 2020; Qazi & Appolloni, 2022). The disruption to the financial situation of the company due to the investments needed to be made was a common view of a large number of participants. In addition, at least 25% faced internal staff philosophy problems which needed to be addressed in order to bring the company's objectives to a successful conclusion. The view expressed by some representatives of the companies that participated in the survey is very interesting and should be further explored as to the consequences that such situations may have. In particular, in their efforts to integrate elements of environmental protection, social benefits, etc., they have experienced a crisis in their relationships with partners and one in four have terminated long-term strategic partnerships as they do not meet the high standards they now set as conditions for entering into agreements. This by their admission has also led to financial turmoil.

### **5.2.3 Discussion about the application of sustainability in the field of procurement**

In the context of public procurement contracts, public purchasers set supplier selection criteria related to sustainability. Compliance with environmental standards and proof by certificates, as well as the economic and financial standing criteria, seek on the one hand to introduce sustainability elements into the public contract, while at the same time limiting participation only to those economic operators with such characteristics. Finally, social criteria are often not excluded, which aim to strengthen local entrepreneurship, employment and inclusion (Diófási-Kovács & Valkó, 2015; Rainville, 2022). First of all, taking into account the responses of the participants, it is evident that sustainability requirements are becoming visible in all sectors of public procurement. The show is stolen by the criteria related to the environment, such as, as mentioned during the research, the possession of an ISO 14001 certificate, but also various other requirements that present a 'green' shift for the achievement of which, however, the appropriate partners (producers, manufacturers) must be involved. Regarding the financial criteria for public procurement, at least half of the interviewees have been confronted with such requirements, which are mainly related to the

turnover of previous years as well as to the execution of relevant procurements in the past with a similar budget. In this way, public purchasers ensure that the economic operators submitting bids are financially sound and have the necessary experience in the management and execution of similar projects to ensure that the contract is successful. There is a low percentage of criteria related to the social dimension of sustainability in the context of public procurement, as only one participant in the survey expressed that he had encountered similar requirements and specifically these requirements were aimed at strengthening the Greek agricultural primary sector, i.e. farmers and fishermen. This low percentage should in no way be interpreted as a failure to introduce the relevant criteria by public bodies, as the range of research participants is specific and the sectors in which they operate are limited, so that despite the effort to cover a wide range of business activity, there is certainly no overall picture for each different sector.

It is problematic that only 50% of the research participants stated that in all cases they met the selection criteria set by the contracting authorities. The remaining half of the participants when trying to bid for a public procurement contract encountered a wall as they did not meet the requirements. The reasons for the barriers to their participation varied from the absence of the necessary certificates related to the management of environmental standards, to not meeting the minimum turnover requirements of previous years, to hard-to-find partners (producers-manufacturers) who have high sustainability standards. In the latter case in particular, even in cases where, for example, producers were found who met all the requirements, this condition added value to their products, making them unaffordable for the companies wishing to bid in the tender, as it would be financially unviable for them to do so, given the limited budget of the contracting authority.

Criteria are also set by private buyers who aim for high quality standards and short delivery times. The social and environmental footprint is often a subject of discussion (Carter & Liane Easton, 2011). All of the above is also reflected in the views expressed by the survey participants with the exception of the requirements of economic sustainability, which is probably due to the prior assessment of the situation of the potential suppliers by the buyers.

In general, throughout the research, there are some similarities with the literature but also some points that need interpretation or possibly further future research. Thus in the investigation of what influence the introduction of sustainability had on their objectives considering all the literature presented we can draw similarities and differences. It is not

surprising that profit has been and will remain one of the companies' objectives which was evident through the responses received. This is also extracted from the literature where profit, along with developing partnerships to combat complexity are goals that suppliers are trying to achieve (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012; Peenstra & Silvius, 2018).

Without questioning the importance of profit as a goal for companies, all research participants directly or indirectly stated that by introducing sustainability elements into their operations or trying to introduce such elements there is a great influence and change in the philosophy with which they operate, with a greater emphasis on long-term results. All this change in philosophy and strategic decisions through long term planning and new investments entail significant upfront costs and new processes that take time to carry out, which relates to the challenges reported in the literature. These include meticulous audits, certification procedures, and financial disruptions (Patil et al., 2022).

### **5.3 Conclusion**

To summarize, this paper provides important insights and shares experiences of 8 representatives of companies active in the Greek business world, being suppliers to both private and public buyers. Common points, differences and areas for further investigation between the literature and the suppliers' perspective were identified. Through the interviews conducted, very important information is obtained about companies' experiences on how they perceive the procurement process in the public and private sector and all the parameters around it such as benefits, challenges and electronic procedures. Much of the interviews reflect the literature, however, there is a differentiation in the interviewees' view on the high levels of bureaucracy and several times the complexity of using public sector electronic platforms, while the view that private procurement is characterised by volatility and instability is also worth mentioning. The differences between the two processes are highlighted by the participants of the research which can be quite useful to someone new to the world of business, whether for example to choose the path of a more stable course with limited profit margins or a more unstable one with higher profit margins but more risks. Furthermore, the issue of sustainability was explored, both in terms of how familiar the research participants were with it and whether the companies represented adopted sustainability principles. It appears that there are several reasons that drive them to invest a

lot of effort and to a large extent they have succeeded in adopting and implementing sustainability elements in their operations - the vast majority focused on the environmental aspect - while confronted with challenges. Particular attention was given to the study of the application of sustainability requirements by buyers as criteria for supplier selection, and to the extent to which suppliers were able to meet them and how the introduction of new sustainability practices changed their objectives. The introduction of sustainability-related selection criteria in both public and private procurement is visible and in line with the literature, while it is of particular surprise and concern that many participants reported that there were cases where they were not able to bid in a public procurement tender as they did not meet a number of requirements as discussed above in this paper. Beyond the above, it is confirmed that profit remains the main objective but the philosophy, culture and mode of operation through which profit is achieved has been significantly influenced by the implementation of sustainability practices. The suppliers' perspective is particularly crucial in order for us as observers and modern business people to understand the dimension that public and private procurement has taken and how the application of sustainability affects them. For this reason, as market people who are involved in the practical part of the issue under investigation, they were asked to put some suggestions to the attention of the stakeholders in order to smooth the situation and make a gradual transition to sustainable procurement. Education of all parties involved, cooperation and two-way communication between buyers and suppliers were mentioned by a large part of the research participants as possible ways to avoid obstacles.

## **5.4 Limitations and Future Research**

Although this research presents a variety of insights into suppliers' perspectives on public and private procurement and the sustainability in them, there are a number of limitations that i must disclose so that they can be considered for future research.

Initially, data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with eight individuals involved with the research subject, each participant representing a company that operates in a different field. The above conditions, i.e. the number of interviewees and the eight different subjects probably put a limitation on the generalizability of the results as

despite all the useful information and the different perspectives with which the issue of sustainability in public and private procurement was approached, in a future survey a larger number of participants and wider business sectors would probably reflect more viewpoints and strengthen the basis of the results, while even the inclusion of two or more participants per sector could confirm the claims made, as often opinions are subjective and depend on one's own experiences.

Also, although anonymity is ensured and no data on the companies represented by the interviewees is provided under any circumstances, not expressing sensitive corporate data on any potential challenges they may have faced or even implementing innovative practices related to sustainability in procurement may have played an inhibiting factor. This hesitancy could probably be solved with a questionnaire and a more impersonal approach to providing responses in general. In addition, the research includes representatives of companies operating in Greece. A future research could include companies from different countries in order to overcome any geographical limitations.

Having taken into account the above limitations and the application of the suggestions to possibly overcome them, I believe that future research will enhance the reliability and the wealth of results that will be extracted.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions for Semi-structured Interviews**

Before we begin the main part of the interview, I would like you to give me some information about your background.

Q1. How old are you?

Q2. What is your gender?

Q3. What is your education level?

Q4. How many years of experience do you have with procurement?

Q5. What is your current role/position in the company?

Q6. What is the main activity of the company?

**Information about benefits, challenges and differences around the field of public and private procurement.**

Q7. Does the company supply both the private and public sector? If yes, what are the benefits and challenges in each of them?

Q8. What is your perspective on the procedure for participating in public procurement tenders?

Q9. Are you familiar with public e-procurement? Do you face also in private procurement electronic processes and what are the differences between them?

Q10. Do you identify any differences between supplying a public entity and a private company?

**Information about sustainability concept and its application in the suppliers' corporate environment.**

Q11. Are you familiar with the concept of sustainability and its principles?

Q12. As a supplier, have you adopted sustainability principles? If so, which are the drivers for the adoption?

Q13. In case you have adopted sustainability principles, did you face any challenges?

**Information on the implementation of sustainability in the procurement sector and how it is perceived by suppliers.**

Q14. Regarding public procurement, is the application of sustainability requirements (supplier's selection criteria) noticeable? And if so, do you always fulfil these?

Q15. Regarding private procurement, do buyers set similar sustainability requirements?

Q16. Has the entry of sustainability into the procurement field affected your goals?

Q17. In the context of process optimization, can you make some suggestions that could facilitate the smooth implementation of sustainable procurement and improve relations with public or private buyers?

## **Appendix B: Transcripts and Summaries of Semi-structured Interviews**

### **Interview 1:**

Answer to Q1: 47

Answer to Q2: FEMALE

Answer to Q3: Bachelor in Economics

Answer to Q4: 12

Answer to Q5: Sales Manager

Answer to Q6: Trading of spare parts

Answer to Q7: Yes. In my experience the main benefit of public procurement is the stability it provides as if we win a procurement tender then we will receive a guaranteed payment for the whole contract period, while the main disadvantage that often gets in the way of our participation is bureaucracy. On the private sector procurement side, the main advantage is based on the fact that higher levels of profit can be achieved as the buyer is basing the success of their business on you and can invest in you. The challenge is increased competition as well as often the culture of a portion of buyers who see you as a means of reducing their costs instead of a partner.

Answer to Q8: Certainly transparency is ensured but the formulation of the offer and the collection of documents requires many man-hours.

Answer to Q9: In the private sector I have been dealing with electronic procurement procedures in recent years so I don't have enough experience to compare. In the public sector the main platform we use is ESIDES and the truth is that we faced some systemic issues, but we overcame them thanks to the help of technical support. .

Answer to Q10: Certainly one main difference is the strict legislation that applies to public procurement, as opposed to private procurement which is more flexible. It is primarily only with the private sector that we are able to negotiate areas of agreement. Also, in the public sector we most often undertake to carry out the procurement, bearing in mind that we will be paid on completion, thus raising the issue of liquidity, whereas in the private sector we

are sometimes paid part of the contract fee in advance and the rest in parts. In any case profits are higher in private sector.

Answer to Q11: To be honest, in recent years I have encountered this term, and it is mainly the environmental dimension that relates to our activities.

Answer to Q12: Yes, as I said the environment is a field which is directly related to our activity. We have renewed our vehicle fleet with new greener vehicles, and we meticulously select manufacturers of either lubricants or spare parts so that their labels are environmentally friendly. Certainly some regulations that push us towards sustainability have led us to implement such methods, and no less important is the image you present to the consumer. Finally, if we were not guided by such sustainable principles our exclusion from public processes would in most cases be certain.

Answer to Q13: For me the most difficult part was to get the philosophy of sustainability across to the entire staff. From there it goes without saying that it took a lot of funds to be able to reach high levels of sustainability.

Answer to Q14: Yes, in the tenders we participate in there are some selection criteria related to sustainability. To give you an example from the recent past, a tender had as a condition that the spare parts to be supplied must be manufactured by companies that have environmental management certifications. We try to meet these requirements, which is often not possible, as these manufacturers have higher prices which, combined with the contracting authority's budget, leave us with no profit.

Answer to Q15: I wouldn't say the same for private companies as they pay more attention to a better economic offer or even a shorter lead time.

Answer to Q16: Undoubtedly the long-term element has been added to every aspect of the company. Profit may still be at the heart of our business but we no longer operate on the basis of short-term profitability but how we can combine environmental and social well-being with the growth of the company. All this translates into an impact on both financial indicators which have been disrupted by capital outflows for investment in new vehicles, new infrastructure that is more environmentally friendly, but also on partnerships that have been terminated or new ones that are now being built.

Answer to Q17: Initially, in many cases, proving that we are a sustainable supplier required the existence of a certificate whose issuance was delayed, resulting in lost business opportunities. So I believe that either the inspection and issuance of the relevant certificates should be more expedited by the relevant bodies or even public and private buyers should provide partnership opportunities by carrying out inspections themselves by examining whether they are covered by our standard.

### **Interview 2:**

Answer to Q1: 55

Answer to Q2: MALE

Answer to Q3: Bachelor in Business Administration

Answer to Q4: 19

Answer to Q5: Owner

Answer to Q6: Fuel trading

Answer to Q7: Yes. Our main volume comes from the private sector. In recent years, due to the insecurity caused by changing prices, we have also turned to partnerships with the public sector. The positives of these partnerships are the stability provided by a contract with a public entity while the negative is the low profit margin as the budget is tightly planned in most entities. On the other hand, the private sector is what has kept us going over the years, having earned the trust of our clients and bringing us significant profits. The tense situation in many parts of the world such as the Middle East and Ukraine have a serious impact on the price and demand for our products.

Answer to Q8: We are trying in every way to facilitate the work of the office that is undertaking the procedure by providing as much documentation as is requested. Sometimes several certificates are required, which I see only as a positive thing, as we have all the necessary documents that make us a high-quality supplier.

Answer to Q9: I am not familiar at all, the whole process is handled by an external office. Due to limited time and workload I have not been engaged at all. We have some ERP

programs through which we receive certain orders but that's it. Generally there is more direct communication with customers in the private sector by phone or e-mail.

Answer to Q10: To a large extent no, I don't see any differences as the commodity we trade is specific and not susceptible to differentiation and our profit margins depend on our own supplier. So public procurement contracts are most often financially unviable and the only reason why we have resorted to them is because of volatile market conditions.

Answer to Q11: Without wishing to praise our company, we have understood for many years the importance of adopting sustainability practices. We have worked hard to ensure that we can acquire the necessary facilities, staff and working conditions.

Answer to Q12: We place great importance on people, so our employees are a priority. We noticed that many of our employees were not happy with their working conditions, due to working hours and salary. We have invested heavily in human resources and provide higher wages than any other company of our type. We also give flexibility in working hours as most employees have children and have obligations. We strengthen the local element in our workforce as we recruit local people in our three branches to strengthen the local community.

Answer to Q13: In addition to what I mentioned before, at an environmental level we have made a huge effort to trade fuels that have the smallest possible environmental footprint. To give you an idea of the challenges we have faced, we have terminated a multi-year partnership with a major fuel producer as we would not have the necessary certificates.

Answer to Q14: Judging by what we are asked to provide in the majority of the tenders we participate in, I understand that there is a particular emphasis on sustainability elements relating to the environment and the financial aspect. We have never encountered a problem.

Answer to Q15: I wouldn't say that. However, having integrated sustainability practices throughout our operations, they inevitably enjoy practical and moral advantages through our cooperation.

Answer to Q16: Let's make no mistake, the company's goals are profit and further growth. However, realising that people and the environment are part of this growth, protecting them and improving conditions is not a change of objectives but an integration of parameters in achieving the existing ones.

Answer to Q17: I believe that any self-respecting business entity should show adaptability to change and best practices. In our experience, it was worth the effort so I would suggest patience and diligence as well as understanding on the part of the buyers. Many obstacles can be encountered but certainly the gradual adoption of sustainability practices can contribute to a more resilient business. All this could not be achieved without the contribution of our personnel. So hard training is needed to achieve sustainability.

### **Interview 3:**

Answer to Q1: 39

Answer to Q2: MALE

Answer to Q3: Master in Supply Chain Management

Answer to Q4: 8

Answer to Q5: Business Development Manager

Answer to Q6: Import and trade of electrical appliances

Answer to Q7: Yes. Beyond the business benefits, there is also an emotional benefit as the devices we supply are intended to serve the community in the interest of the public. The challenge is the sheer volume of technical documentation that we have to gather to submit our bid, while we have partnerships with certified manufacturers. In any case, supplying private companies, let alone giants, expands our network and gives our company reputation and prestige. However, constant monitoring and analysis of market data is required due to its volatile nature in the private sector.

Answer to Q8: It is not a simple process, but since it is regulated by state bodies we have to obey it. It involves a lot of legislation and there is always the risk that a competitor will come against you.

Answer to Q9: We tried once with company staff to bid in an online tender but missed the deadline due to technical issues or lack of knowledge on our part. For this reason we have outsourced the submission of the documents we are collecting. However, from the financial department there is an executive who is doing market research on public sector platforms

on items that are likely to attract our interest. In the private sector things are simpler as prospective buyers ask us for our offers via e-mail.

Answer to Q10: There are certainly differences, mainly in terms of profitability. Public buyers have a budget with a minimum level of product quality. In contrast a luxury hotel for example if we present the benefits and features of a more sophisticated state of the art device there is a chance that they will set aside the price allowing us to achieve higher sales.

Answer to Q11: I think I am quite familiar with this term as I have attended some seminars on sustainability in the business sector in addition to my experience at a professional level.

Answer to Q12: Yes, as a company we apply sustainability methods. Because we are involved in the trade of electrical appliances which are often large with complex systems, we have screened and selected our partner manufacturers to meet necessary requirements. For example, we only trade in state-of-the-art appliances that do not harm the environment, requiring the minimum levels of electricity to operate efficiently. In addition, as suppliers and dealers of spare parts and service of appliances, we also consider the economic data of our partners in addition to the environmental aspect. For example, we had a case where a manufacturing company ceased operations due to a difficult financial situation and as a result the products we had supplied to the market could not be kept in operation after a certain period of time due to a lack of spare parts. I think the catalyst was the huge awareness among consumers about environmental protection and their interest in saving electricity costs, as well as their satisfaction and the maintenance of the portfolio through trusting relationships.

Answer to Q13: The most important challenge we faced was our philosophy. The culture of employees, manufacturers and partners in general is the alpha and omega for us. For this reason, training has been provided to staff and negotiations have been conducted so that all those directly involved are on the same page regarding our philosophy and way of doing business.

Answer to Q14: Sustainability requirements are undoubtedly visible in public tenders as before we even submit our financial offer we have to prove that as suppliers we are "green" and that we meet financial conditions that will ensure the fulfilment of the project. Having built up some experience in this field, we have proceeded to the necessary ISO certifications,

but also, as I said before, to cooperate with suitable manufacturers so that we can take part in these procedures.

Answer to Q15: Private buyers prefer to place orders for products that consume less electricity and therefore leave a smaller environmental footprint. It is possible that in this way they are trying to reduce their electricity bills, but indirectly they are giving sustainability elements to the transaction between us as the environment and future generations benefit. It goes without saying that in order to meet the demands of our customers we seek and supply what they want, but the price is higher and therefore our profits are better.

Answer to Q16: As suppliers we had to adapt to the market, whether public or private. I wouldn't say that the goals have changed rapidly, but the philosophy with which we operate has changed. While we used to supply cheap products that were well designed but poorly performing requiring a lot of energy to operate, we have now settled on products that are well designed and efficient so we have a very targeted audience that can allocate capital as there is a plethora of cheap devices on the market. We face very regular audits which assure that we are a reliable supplier who integrated sustainability elements on its operations.

Answer to Q17: Due to the high level of expertise and competence of our company's members, I cannot say that we have encountered any serious problems. One suggestion that could be included in the dialogue between public/private buyers and suppliers would be to review the stifling lead times. As a springboard, I have a case where a huge hotel complex required us to deliver a highly sophisticated product in a very tight timeframe, but which needed to pass the necessary tests to guarantee its efficiency and installation in the respective facilities.

#### **Interview 4:**

Answer to Q1: 49

Answer to Q2: MALE

Answer to Q3: Bachelor in Accounting

Answer to Q4: 12

Answer to Q5: Owner

Answer to Q6: Cleaning services and supply of cleaning equipment

Answer to Q7: Yes. The good thing about the public sector is that once we sign the contract, we have a stable cooperation for the entire years of the contract, so we know that for example, we have this project for the next two years. The legal conflicts between the competitors-participants, which are very common for the slightest thing in the tenders of the sector in which we participate, are a challenge and often cause problems. The benefit with the private sector case is that there is flexibility and the gain can be much greater.

Answer to Q8: I find public procurement procedures particularly beneficial for all the entrepreneurs directly concerned. I can say from my experience that in order to be able to participate it takes time and several parties have to be involved in gathering the documents. I, for example, involve my accountant, the manufacturers of the products and a legal adviser in the process in order to gather the documents and be able to participate in the tender.

Answer to Q9: Inevitably, since the majority of public contracts are awarded through electronic procedures, I had to adapt. I have spent dozens of hours reading manuals and watching videos in order to be able to submit my bid on time and I was also provided with training by a qualified technician. I would not recommend anyone who is not familiar to try to do it on their own from scratch as they may miss out on some business opportunity. In the private sector things are simpler, with meetings, by e-mail or telephone. In recent years we have also included electronic catalogues where we include the products we supply to make it easier for the customer.

Answer to Q10: First the transparency frame. In the private sector a business can get a job because the owner is cousin to the buyer without any criteria, e.g. financial. On the other hand in the public sector there are high levels of transparency and meritocracy.

Answer to Q11: I wouldn't say I'm an expert, but I have a little bit of knowledge. Mainly at environmental and social levels there are elements that we as a company try to understand and assimilate.

Answer to Q12: On our side, a great effort is being made to develop elements of sustainability. One of our policies is that because of the increased need for staff, whether they are drivers, warehouse staff or even cleaning staff, people who are long-term unemployed or people from vulnerable groups will be selected. Moreover, in the trade of cleaning products, which consist of various chemicals, we choose these manufacturers and

cooperate with them only if they have environmental management certificates and CE certificates for their products in order to protect the environment from further pollution. Finally, all appropriate working conditions with an emphasis on the employee are provided.

Answer to Q13: We faced challenges mainly related to the environmental dimension as in our effort to become greener suppliers, we had to abandon long-term partnerships that were more economically favourable than the current ones. Moreover, the legislation that often imposes such changes was not only an incentive but also a threat to us if we did not comply in time.

Answer to Q14: Not always, but in some cases we have faced requirements that limit participation to companies that meet certain requirements. I, for example, could not bid on a tender as until a few years ago some of the products I supplied were not from certified manufacturers. Mainly environmental requirements are set.

Answer to Q15: In the private sector we also face sustainability requirements, but these are mainly imposed by large companies that are watching every move they make and trying to make a shift towards sustainability especially regarding the social aspect of their business..

Answer to Q16: The goals do not change, they remain the same. Profit is always the goal, but we try to adjust on the changes.. That is, as I said, we include people from vulnerable groups in our workforce and we select our partners according to their environmental awareness.

Answer to Q17: Due to the particular circumstances of our business and the different targets of each buyer, I don't think that specific solutions can be proposed for our relationship. Perhaps pre-defined requirements and detailed technical specifications so that we can serve each one according to their needs.

### **Interview 5:**

Answer to Q1: 43

Answer to Q2: FEMALE

Answer to Q3: Master in Logistics

Answer to Q4: 9

Answer to Q5: Procurement Manager

Answer to Q6: Wholesale of food

Answer to Q7: Yes we supply the private and public sector. In the public sector currently addressing the Army with which it cooperates in many regions of Greece. The benefits of the public sector are stability in both the duration of contracts and financial obligations. Public sector contracts are usually long term, giving us the opportunity to continuously execute orders that will generate the corresponding revenues. The bureaucracy through the large amount of documentation that is often required to participate in public procedures is, in my opinion, a disincentive for someone wishing to participate. Having developed a wide network of distributors, partners and customers in the private sector, we have now achieved high levels of profitability. We are challenged by the ever-changing environment of the private sector where there are more and more requirements.

Answer to Q8: The procedure for participating in public procurement tenders is a difficult and time-consuming process that requires patience and continuous submission of documents. However, it is a good investment for a long-term and stable partnership.

Answer to Q9: E-procurement is useful in both the private and public sectors. In our company we have not yet implemented e-procurement in our partnerships but we are in the process of looking into it in order to benefit from its advantages. Regarding the public sector and e-procurement systems, we have outsourced the management of the relevant processes to partners, so we send them whatever documents are required and they proceed with the e-procurement part.

Answer to Q10: There are several differences between supplying a public body or a private company, including the strict standards that govern the public sector. For example, in our company, in order to work with the Army we had to have renewed all the certificates of the company and our products (HACCP-ISO), to have carried out chemical analyses, to keep a form for cleaning our warehouses, to control the temperature of the chambers and all the procedures required by law. In the public sector, in addition to the complex bureaucratic procedures, we had to go through multiple approvals as well as an inspection by the army itself. Procedures are simpler and more flexible in the private sector where obviously high standards of quality are required but trust with the buyer also plays an important role.

Answer to Q11: In our company we are familiar with the concept of sustainability and we strive to improve and follow its principles every day. We include in the training of our employees the implementation of practices that support sustainability as well as informing them of the need to protect the environment

Answer to Q12: In the production process, the packaging materials we use are environmentally friendly and we promote the principle of using reusable materials. It is a rule of our company to reduce the waste of our raw materials. For this reason, when cutting the cheeses we collect the leftover scrap pieces and create new products such as grated cheese or grated gruyere. As for the trucks we use in our distributions, we have replaced the old ones with new ones that are more efficient and less polluting. We have implemented the installation of gps systems with sensors that give access to the fuel consumed by each vehicle and helps us to optimize our routes and reduce fuel consumption. We maintain this philosophy in our partnerships. Our company also supports social sustainability, whereby we promote equality and quality of life for all. The actions we have adopted are support and acceptance of vulnerable social groups, such as the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities. In addition, we strive to support and provide free food to groups in our community in need. It is an action we want to develop in the future to help improve the quality of life of our society. There are several reasons that prompted us to implement the above. Some of them are:

- The competition that now exists in the market in terms of the procedures followed to respect the environment and social sustainability. We noticed that we are lagging behind in this area and we wanted to evolve as a company.
- The pressures of a number of consumers who were increasingly setting respect for the environment as a selection criterion.
- The thought that by using new technologies we would be able to be more efficient at less cost.
- The legislation in force in a number of public bodies according to which we must comply with environmental and social rules.

Answer to Q13: The high costs required to implement certain changes such as replacing old vehicles and machinery, more expensive packaging materials to meet our requirements and costs to properly train staff.

Answer to Q14: Several criteria are set, mainly of an environmental nature. However, because of the specificity of our subject matter, I would say that most of the criteria relate to technical characteristics and food safety. We try to be as up to date as possible and meet the requirements.

Answer to Q15: As a company we are next to the customer and we try to please them in every way. During our cooperation we try to be formal in what was agreed at the beginning of our cooperation and we ask our client periodically to inform us about any corrections he wants us to make. The usual conditions set by our clients are :

- Recyclable materials
- Social responsibility
- Environmentally friendly materials
- Product certificates and chemical analyses

Answer to Q16: Our goals as a company have been affected by the entry of sustainability. Now our actions include total respect for the environment, society and we strive to evolve in this direction. However, we notice that we have experienced a positive impact on both the company's philosophy and our partnerships with customers.

Answer to Q17: Properly train staff in sustainability practices and I would put a person in charge of new employees to guide and correct them in case of mistakes. Continuously inform the company of the processes to follow to achieve sustainability improvements.

### **Interview 6:**

Answer to Q1: 37

Answer to Q2: MALE

Answer to Q3: Master in Applied Economics

Answer to Q4: 6

Answer to Q5: Head of Finance

Answer to Q6: Clothing trader

Answer to Q7: Yes. Most of our business is supplying the private sector. However, in recent years we have also entered the public sector by supplying clothing to various public bodies such as security forces. There are benefits in both cases, for example in the public sector apart from the stability offered by a contract there is also the feeling that ultimately our product works in the interest of society as they are in fact the buyer. In the private sector I think the profit margin in our case is quite high and is an incentive to expand the customer portfolio. As there are benefits there are also challenges. In the public sector, rigor and strict controls are certainly a challenge not because of lack of product quality but because of time and process delays. In the private sector I would describe the challenge as the constant negotiation, as closing deals with large customers requires constant meetings and negotiations on the terms of supply.

Answer to Q8: I think there is a move towards simplifying procedures, but there is bureaucracy. In some cases I think it is mandatory, especially at a technical level, as due to the complexity of the object as fabrics, buttons, threads, etc. are involved, quality must be ensured.

Answer to Q9: In part, I know how to identify tenders in our company's field of activity and we have a team member who regularly checks what has been published to identify any tenders of interest to us. However, in relation to the website where tenders are submitted, due to tight deadlines and fear of making a systemic error we have outsourced the submission of the tender file. In relation to the private sector, we have set up an interface via ERP to receive orders from buyers and provide immediate service.

Answer to Q10: The main difference I see is that our brand name is enough for us to come to an agreement in the private sector as the client knows that we ensure quality and meet their requirements. On the other hand in the public sector for quality and specifications we have to provide evidence. Footnote, I do not consider this to be a negative.

Answer to Q11: Yes, I think I am quite familiar with this terminology to such an extent that I try to pass on this philosophy to the rest of the group, both in environmental, economic and social terms.

Answer to Q12: In terms of economic sustainability we have implemented a policy of innovation due to high competition. We invest steadily in innovation so that we can keep up with fashion and have a share of the market. But we have not limited ourselves to this as we

trade fairtrade clothes, i.e. produced in an ethical way. The reasons that lead us to these choices are obvious, such as high competition and consumer behaviour which, with all the talk in recent years about child labour and exploitation, has shifted to labels that promote sustainability on social and environmental levels.

Answer to Q13: Fast fashion chains where there are relatively low prices are a serious challenge, as by applying sustainability elements to our operations our costs have increased and as a result we are trying to keep our customer base stable without passing on these costs to the final price of the product.

Answer to Q14: In general there are many requirements regarding technical specifications. For sustainability in particular we have met requirements for the financial sustainability of our company as a supplier, or at least that is how I understand the turnover requirements set out in the tender notice. Yes, we have never had a problem to participate in terms of these criteria.

Answer to Q15: Yes, I believe that in general private buyers, whether they are ordinary citizens or companies that want business clothing or even various wholesalers are very interested and set strict sustainability conditions. Their main concern is the ethical aspect of sourcing, the way the fabrics and clothes are produced and the non-use of animal skins. For this, high levels of traceability are required in order to have access to manufacturers.

Answer to Q16: Yes, I believe that from exclusive and opportunistic profitability our goals have made a shift towards gradually gaining the trust of the consumer in terms of our ethics combined with the strengthening of innovation.

Answer to Q17: Strengthening clear communication and mutual cooperation between our side and the buyers, whether public or private, I believe would help in our joint satisfaction. Also, knowledge sharing between the members of the company would broaden the horizons regarding sustainability. Through patience and hard work every new method could be adopted both suppliers and buyers.

### **Interview 7:**

Answer to Q1: 40

Answer to Q2: MALE

Answer to Q3: Bachelor in Economics

Answer to Q4: 10

Answer to Q5: Sales Manager

Answer to Q6: Wholesale of frozen products

Answer to Q7: Yes, we supply the public sector, such as hospitals, army corps, municipalities, etc., while in the private sector we do not supply retail but exclusively large hotels, private clinics, etc. I would like to start by saying that without the private sector we would not be able to survive as the volume there is very high and therefore the benefit it provides is survival above all else. Of course a serious challenge is that if you are not a consistent and quality supplier the market can throw you out. On the public sector procurement part is a further expansion that we have gone into to take advantage of the benefit of multi-year contracts. The challenge is the fierce competition and the limited budget of these contracts.

Answer to Q8: Since I have several business people of various sectors who participate in public tenders in their field and based on conversations we have had, I can state that compared to other fields, the supply of our products is a particularly demanding process due to the collection of a large number of documents. This is probably not unfairly so, as it is a particularly sensitive issue where, in addition to us as a supplier, producers, facilities, vehicles, staff and hygiene standards are involved.

Answer to Q9: Yes, I handle some platforms myself so that I can submit bids. I think it is very important that confidentiality and transparency are guaranteed. In the private sector few customers have electronic systems for receiving bids for supply. In most cases we receive a purchase order via e-mail and provide our quote through this type of communication.

Answer to Q10: One main difference I notice is the delivery times and the frequency of deliveries. The private sector hides the element of the unexpected as based on consumption there may be more regular or less frequent orders. In the public sector deliveries are predetermined in the contract and very few times may need to go off schedule.

Answer to Q11: Yes, and particularly in our field of frozen products it is a particularly key issue.

Answer to Q12: It goes without saying that we have applied sustainability elements. As suppliers we come into contact with an incredibly extended network. From the producers who are our suppliers to our customers who are our buyers. So especially on an environmental level we are very careful and we have made a huge shift in applying sustainability in practice. To start with, in terms of fisheries, we work with parties that are against overfishing and implement in practice measures to reduce sea pollution. Also, the vegetable producers with whom we have agreements have all the necessary certifications. Finally, for our part we comply with all waste management requirements and our packaging is ecologically friendly. Corporate consciousness towards a more sustainable future as if we exhaust the productive potential of, for example, the sea today for the sake of easy profit, then the future is bleak. Beyond our conscience, consumer behaviour also plays a catalytic role. Consumers are now weighing up their choice not only on the basis of price but also on a combination of price, quality and general benefits to them. Corporate consciousness towards a more sustainable future as if we exhaust the productive potential of, for example, the sea today for the sake of easy profit, then the future is bleak. Beyond our conscience, consumer behaviour also plays a catalytic role. Consumers are now weighing up their choice not only on the basis of price but also on a combination of price, quality and general benefits to them.

Answer to Q13: The ever-changing regulations and legislative frameworks that are changing and in essence motivating but at the same time imposing elements of sustainability, mainly "green" methods, has been a headache for us. Wanting to be consistent in all our obligations we have made a huge effort and have obtained all certifications and necessary permits. Our relationship with producers has gone through many waves throughout this transition as we put in place several restrictions in order to supply the goods they produce.

Answer to Q14: In general, there are several selection criteria in the competitions we participate in. With regard to sustainability, I would say that recently we have encountered some requirements which have restricted the fishing zones in which the species to be procured could have been caught. In particular, only those who had Greek products both in terms of frozen fish and frozen vegetables were allowed to participate. I imagine that this is intended to strengthen Greek producers and fishermen by contributing to social sustainability. No problem faced

Answer to Q15: The private sector focuses on high-quality products. Being lucky enough to operate in one of the most prosperous countries in terms of agriculture and fisheries, their demand for quality brings a number of advantages for the local population. So we supply them with products from Greek fish farmers and vegetable producers. In this way we strengthen entrepreneurship in our place and indirectly private buyers contribute to the development of sustainability in the place. I would not like to omit that particular attention is paid by private buyers to the packaging of goods, whether the products are certified for this and whether recycling can be applied.

Answer to Q16: Our objectives have always been in line with the general interest of society and the environment in which we seek to make a profit. Perhaps a broadening of the long-term view of our business is a factor influenced by the continued entry of sustainability into our scope.

Answer to Q17: I believe that with regard to public buyers, it would help them and us to create a database where some data can be automatically cross-checked so that they know which suppliers are trustworthy and have the quality to carry out such contracts and therefore meet the sustainability requirements that may be set. I think this would save a lot of man-hours for both sides. With regard to the private sector I would suggest better forecasting on their part so that there is on time production and distribution of products, thereby saving fuel and enhancing mass supply.

### **Interview 8:**

Answer to Q1: 33

Answer to Q2: FEMALE

Answer to Q3: Master in Supply Chain Manager

Answer to Q4: 5

Answer to Q5: Supply chain manager

Answer to Q6: Furniture manufacturing

Answer to Q7: Yes. The advantage of public procurement is that it is a source of revenue where as manufacturers there are no middlemen, while the disadvantage is that it requires

customization of production and modification of specifications, dimensions, etc. to meet the needs of each entity e.g. University, Municipality. On the other hand, the private sector is our main source of revenue as there is mass production and distribution of products to specific channels. A challenge I would say is that trends and fashion are constantly changing and as a result we have to find windows of innovation.

Answer to Q8: There is very high competition, but we often have an advantage as manufacturers. I like that there is a transparency regime.

Answer to Q9: No, I am not because due to the workload the management of the platform and the submission of tenders has been taken over by an agency. In the private partnerships we use a platform which bridges us as suppliers with our customers (wholesalers etc.) where the purchase requests are made by them.

Answer to Q10: The main difference I see is that in the private sector almost everyone is aiming for speed of delivery. On the other hand, in public procurement the delivery time is not so suffocating and we can respond comfortably. However this speed is rewarded highly in the private sector because of the sudden orders sometimes, unlike in the public sector where there is a predetermined delivery time with a predetermined fee.

Answer to Q11: Yes I know about sustainability and its importance, but not all of its principles apply to business activities.

Answer to Q12: Yes, we have started and we invest a lot in the local community, choosing local carriers, even materials that are produced in the place where we operate, wanting in this way to please the community in which we operate. Also our raw materials are acquired in a way that does not harm the environment. From the wood that we use to the electrification of our facilities with photovoltaic panels on the roof, all of this has the common goal of reducing our environmental impact. As I said, we want to benefit the local community by giving jobs to local people and supporting financially the place that hosts our activities. Finally, we have a moral obligation to leave the environment in the same if not better condition than when we received it.

Answer to Q13: The financial part is a challenge as some of the changes I mentioned before had to sacrifice funds. For example, we can import cheap raw materials of dubious quality but we prefer to manufacture products based on certified raw materials that come from the place where we operate, even though the prices may be a bit on the high side.

Answer to Q14: We have come across some such requirements, such as ISO certifications for quality and also for the environmental field. We have also been asked for evidence of previous experience and economic solidity. In other words, we have had to have completed similar projects which would prove that we are able to meet our obligations and also have turnover levels sufficient to ensure the successful execution of the project. Due to the Covid crisis which had a direct impact and reduction of our business, we were excluded in some cases in which we wanted to participate in some tenders we could not meet the turnover requirements.

Answer to Q15: A few times and usually large customers with special orders set sustainability requirements within the scope of the supply we will provide them. To give you a sense of our customer with nationwide recognition, he demanded that the products we deliver to him have high levels of traceability from all the parts that made them up. The wooden, metallic elements, etc. He did this so that he would know both the quality and how we obtained them so that no illegal or environmentally damaging actions were taken.

Answer to Q16: Targets are constantly adapted to the situation. The company went through a difficult period under covid, but in the last year and a half it has returned to normality. But something has been learned from all of this, that having a broad customer base and a broad portfolio of partners with a focus on the local community shields the company and makes it a resilient manufacturer-supplier.

Answer to Q17: Training, training and training. In staff, internal and external partners. This is the only way I believe that a smooth integration of sustainability elements within the scope of procurement can be achieved.

**Author's Statement:**

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