

Assessing the Challenges Affecting Local Supplier's Access to Public Procurement Opportunities: Evidence from Choma District, Zambia

Kachinga Munachande¹, Mufalali Simasiku Mwiya^{1*}, Muduli Regina¹

¹Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

Article Info

Volume 7, Issue 4

Publication history:

Accepted on 26 October 2025;

Published: 2 July 2026

Key Words:

Public Procurement, Local Suppliers, Institutional Theory

Article Doi:

10.59413/ajocs/v7.i4.6

Public procurement represents a strategic instrument for promoting local economic development by providing business opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). However, despite policy reforms aimed at increasing local supplier participation, many SMEs continue to experience barriers that limit their access to public procurement opportunities. This study explored how local suppliers perceive public procurement opportunities and examined the challenges they face when participating in public procurement processes in Choma District, Zambia. Anchored on Institutional Theory, the study adopted an exploratory qualitative case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 17 purposively selected local suppliers and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that local suppliers generally perceive public procurement, particularly Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects, as an important avenue for business growth and local economic empowerment. However, these positive perceptions are undermined by persistent institutional challenges, including delayed government payments, lengthy bureaucratic procedures, limited digital capacity for electronic government procurement (e-GP), inadequate access to procurement information, and perceived political interference in contract awards. The study concludes that while procurement reforms have expanded opportunities for local suppliers, institutional weaknesses continue to constrain effective participation. It recommends strengthening transparency and accountability in procurement systems, improving payment efficiency, enhancing supplier capacity through training on procurement regulations and e-GP platforms, simplifying administrative procedures, and broadening dissemination of procurement information. These interventions would improve SME participation and enhance the contribution of public procurement to sustainable local economic development in Zambia.

1. Introduction

Globally, public procurement accounts for about 15-20% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), highlighting its importance in economic development and market access for suppliers (UNDP, 2021). Public procurement represents a significant opportunity for suppliers, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), to engage in government contracts that can sustain and grow their businesses (Mufalali et.al., 2026). However, various challenges impede their ability to access these opportunities. Public procurement refers to the process by which government entities purchase goods, services, and works from the private sector. Despite its potential, small and medium enterprises continue to face significant barriers such as complex regulations, limited awareness, and financial constraints (Mufalali et.al., 2026; Mundia at.al., 2025).

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), many of SMEs in procurement-reporting countries experience difficulties due to complex regulations (OECD, 2021). Studies shows that many suppliers, particularly SMEs, lack knowledge regarding procurement processes. World Bank, (2022) reports that many local suppliers are unaware of how public procurement works, which leads to significant missed opportunities There is a significant gap in educational programs aimed at improving supplier knowledge of procurement processes, particularly in developing countries. A Transparency International report indicates that many suppliers reported experiencing corruption-related issues, impacting their ability to win contracts (Transparency International, 2021).

In Africa studies shows that suppliers often encounter complex regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic processes. For example, a study by the African Development Bank noted that many suppliers believe that cumbersome procedures deter them from bidding for contracts (African Development Bank, 2020). A survey conducted by a local Non-Governmental Organization revealed that more local suppliers did not fully understand how to navigate the procurement process (Zambia Institute for Policy Analysis, 2022).

In Zambia, a study by Transparency International reports indicate that local suppliers believe that corruption affects their ability to secure contracts (Transparency International, 2021). Financial constraints affect suppliers' ability to compete for contracts. According to a survey by the Zambia Chamber of Commerce, indicates that local suppliers have limited access to finance which restricts their participation in public procurement (Zambia Chamber of Commerce, 2021).

Despite the availability of public procurement opportunities intended to promote local enterprise development, many local suppliers in Choma District continue to face significant challenges in accessing and participating in these opportunities. The Zambia Development Agency (2022) reports that a considerable number of local suppliers lack adequate access to technology and digital platforms necessary for obtaining procurement information and submitting bids, thereby limiting their competitiveness in public procurement markets. Additionally, there is a substantial gap in supplier development and educational programmes aimed at enhancing understanding of procurement regulations, procedures, and compliance requirements (Anaele et.al., 2025; Mundia et.al., 2025). Furthermore, the Zambia Development Agency (2022) found that many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are unaware of the requirements and processes involved in participating in public tenders, resulting in low levels of participation and missed business opportunities. Although previous studies have examined SME participation in public procurement, limited empirical evidence exists on the specific challenges faced by local suppliers in Choma District. Therefore, there is a need for further research to examine the barriers affecting local suppliers' access to public procurement opportunities and generate evidence-based recommendations for improving their participation in public procurement markets.

Research Objectives

- To examine how local suppliers perceive public procurement opportunities in Choma District, Zambia.
- To assess the challenges local suppliers face when participating in public procurement processes in Choma District, Zambia.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Institutional Theory

This study is anchored on Institutional Theory, which was primarily developed by John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) through their seminal work titled *Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony*. The theory emerged from sociology and later gained prominence in organizational studies as a framework for understanding how institutions influence organizational behavior and practices. Meyer and Rowan argued that organizations often adopt formal structures, procedures, and practices not only to improve efficiency but also to gain legitimacy, acceptance, and support from their external environment (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012).

Institutional Theory posits that organizational behavior is shaped by both formal institutions, such as laws, regulations, policies, and procedures, and informal institutions, including societal norms, values, beliefs, and cultural expectations (Scott, 2014). According to the theory, organizations and individuals are compelled to conform to these institutional pressures in order to gain legitimacy and access to resources. Consequently, the opportunities available to organizations are often influenced by the institutional environment within which they operate.

The theory is particularly relevant to this study because access to public procurement opportunities is largely governed by institutional arrangements. Public procurement systems operate within a framework of laws, regulations, policies, and administrative procedures that determine who can participate and under what conditions. Institutional Theory therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how procurement regulations, qualification requirements, compliance standards, and procurement procedures can either facilitate or hinder the participation of local suppliers in public procurement markets.

Furthermore, the theory highlights the influence of informal institutional factors such as perceptions, networks, norms, and stakeholder relationships. Local suppliers may face challenges if they are perceived as less capable than larger firms, lack access to procurement-related information, or have limited connections with key stakeholders involved in procurement processes (Greenwood et al., 2017). In addition, many local suppliers may lack the financial resources, technological capacity, and technical skills required to meet procurement requirements, challenges that are often exacerbated by the broader institutional environment.

In the context of Choma District, Institutional Theory helps explain how both formal barriers, such as complex procurement procedures and compliance requirements, and informal barriers, such as limited awareness, inadequate networks, and perceptions about supplier capability, affect local suppliers' ability to access public procurement opportunities. The theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining the challenges faced by local suppliers and understanding how institutional factors shape their participation in public procurement processes.

2.2 Empirical Review

Perceptions of Local Suppliers Regarding Public Procurement Opportunities

Globally, studies indicate that local suppliers generally perceive public procurement systems as complex, resource-intensive, and largely skewed in favour of established and large-scale firms. A major global study analysing firm-level data from over 59,000 firms by the World Bank Group found that smaller suppliers viewed public procurement systems as high-risk due to excessive administrative requirements and the prevalence of bribery (Karttunen, Matela, Hallikas, & Immonen, 2022). Using quantitative analyses of firm-level indicators alongside public procurement quality metrics, the study established that these perceptions discourage SME participation in government procurement markets. The study identified the absence of standardized global supplier-feedback mechanisms capable of measuring supplier experiences and improving "customer attractiveness" as a major gap.

Within Southern Africa, supplier perceptions are largely shaped by institutional inefficiencies and the exclusionary effects of procurement systems. Ramasimu, Ramasimu and Ramasimu (2025), in a quantitative study involving SME owners within South African municipalities, found that local suppliers perceived public procurement as bureaucratic, inaccessible, and vulnerable to governance failures. Similarly, Baloyi and Ambe (2026), using a

concurrent mixed-methods design to investigate sustainable procurement within South African state-owned enterprises, reported that suppliers were frustrated by ambiguous preferential procurement policies and the high cost of doing business with government institutions. While governments have introduced procurement policies aimed at empowering local businesses, the studies identified a persistent disconnect between policy intentions and implementation, particularly in creating an enabling environment for local suppliers.

Within Zambia, supplier perceptions are strongly influenced by government initiatives aimed at promoting citizen economic empowerment through public procurement. Chanda (2026), employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design comprising structured questionnaires and key informant interviews, found that local suppliers perceived public procurement as a valuable business opportunity but were constrained by inadequate access to procurement information and severe financial limitations. Likewise, a policy review by the Consumer Unity & Trust Society (2021), based on qualitative policy analysis and stakeholder consultations, revealed that centralized procurement systems and complex tender documentation continue to disadvantage provincial suppliers. The study further identified the need to decentralize procurement processes and strengthen suppliers' digital readiness to enable effective participation in the electronic government procurement (e-GP) system.

At the district level, supplier perceptions are further influenced by localized economic conditions and procurement practices. Sikombe and Phiri (2021), in a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with industry experts, examined institutional factors influencing supplier development initiatives within Zambia's construction industry. Their findings revealed that suppliers operating outside Lusaka, including districts such as Choma, perceived the tendering process as being influenced by political interference, unfair competition from larger firms, and unequal access to procurement opportunities. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that although public procurement presents significant business opportunities, local suppliers continue to perceive procurement systems as complex, inaccessible, and insufficiently supportive of SME participation. However, limited empirical evidence specifically examines these perceptions within Choma District, thereby justifying the current study.

Challenges Local Supplier's Face when Participating in Public Procurement Processes

Globally, research consistently demonstrates that local suppliers encounter numerous barriers when attempting to participate in public procurement markets. Flynn (2025), using a mixed-methods approach that combined global SME surveys with statistical analyses of tender outcomes, found that rigid financial requirements, including bid securities and performance guarantees, disproportionately favour large multinational firms while disadvantaging SMEs. The study further revealed that fragmented procurement processes and limited access to procurement information significantly reduce supplier participation. The principal research gap identified was the need to incorporate localized, outcome-based procurement criteria that would enable SMEs to compete more effectively.

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, these global challenges are compounded by institutional inefficiencies, weak governance systems, and bureaucratic procurement procedures. Ndrecaj (2015), investigating procurement challenges within local government institutions, employed qualitative interviews involving 150 suppliers supported by government reports and chi-square statistical analysis. The findings showed that lack of transparency (38%), inadequate institutional capacity among procuring entities (25%), and bureaucratic approval procedures constituted the major obstacles confronting local suppliers. Similarly, Ramasimu, Ramasimu and Ramasimu (2025), using a mixed-methods approach comprising questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, established that corruption, excessive documentation requirements, and weak institutional capacity continue to marginalize indigenous SMEs across Southern Africa. These studies identified inadequate localized SME support mechanisms as a major gap, with most procurement reforms focusing primarily on legislative changes rather than addressing operational challenges experienced by suppliers.

Within Zambia, public procurement challenges are further characterized by administrative bottlenecks and legal complexities. The Consumer Unity & Trust Society (2021), through a cross-sectional survey involving interviews and structured questionnaires administered to suppliers and municipal procurement officials, found that local suppliers were disadvantaged by anti-competitive procurement practices, complex tender documentation, and inadequate access to procurement information. The study identified the absence of context-specific supplier training on electronic government procurement systems and bid preparation as a major weakness within Zambia's procurement framework.

At the local level, studies focusing specifically on Choma District reveal additional contextual barriers affecting supplier participation. A micro-level study conducted by the Consumer Unity & Trust Society (2021), utilizing an embedded mixed-methods design involving face-to-face interviews with 50 local suppliers and quantitative analysis of municipal tender awards, found that suppliers experienced prohibitive transaction costs, delayed payments by the local authority, and difficulties obtaining mandatory Zambia Public Procurement Authority (ZPPA) registration and tax compliance certificates. Similarly, Michelle et al. (2025), employing a quantitative descriptive research design, established that delayed government payments, limited access to working capital, rigid collateral requirements, and high lending interest rates significantly reduced the capacity of SMEs to participate in government contracts. The study emphasized that declining access to finance directly undermines the ability of local suppliers to compete effectively in public procurement markets.

Overall, empirical evidence across global, regional, national, and district contexts demonstrates that local suppliers continue to face multiple institutional, financial, technological, and administrative barriers when accessing public procurement opportunities. While procurement systems are intended to promote inclusive economic development, they frequently become exclusionary due to complex procedures, inadequate supplier capacity, financial constraints, weak institutional support, and governance challenges. Despite increasing attention to SME participation, there remains limited empirical evidence specifically examining the unique challenges faced by local suppliers in Choma District. This gap underscores the need for the present study to generate context-specific evidence that can inform policies and interventions aimed at improving local supplier participation in public procurement.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the challenges facing local suppliers in accessing public procurement opportunities in Choma District, Zambia. An exploratory design is appropriate where limited empirical evidence exists and where the researcher seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and views regarding a phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Creswell, 2014; Mundia et al., 2023). The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore how local suppliers perceive public procurement opportunities and the barriers they encounter when participating in procurement processes. Data were collected through qualitative methods, allowing participants to provide rich descriptions of their experiences. This design generated context-specific insights that can inform policy and institutional interventions aimed at enhancing local supplier participation in public procurement within Choma District.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Choma District in Southern Province, Zambia. Choma is the provincial capital and one of the country's key commercial and agricultural centres, with a growing number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) operating in sectors such as agriculture, construction, trading, transport, and general supply. The district has experienced increasing public infrastructure development and government-funded projects, creating numerous public procurement opportunities for local suppliers. Despite these opportunities, many local businesses continue to encounter challenges in accessing and participating in government procurement processes. Choma was therefore considered an appropriate study area because it provides a suitable context for examining local suppliers' perceptions of public procurement opportunities and the challenges they face in participating in public procurement processes.

3.3 Population

The target population comprised local suppliers operating in Choma District, Southern Province, Zambia, including owners and managers of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that were eligible or had the potential to participate in public procurement processes. Local suppliers were considered appropriate for this study because they are the primary participants in government procurement markets and possess firsthand experience regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with accessing public contracts. The unit of analysis and observation was the individual supplier, represented by the business owner or manager, as they are directly involved in procurement decisions, tender preparation, and interactions with procuring entities. Their experiences and perceptions provided valuable insights into the barriers affecting local supplier participation in public procurement opportunities.

3.4 Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants with direct experience and knowledge of public procurement processes in Choma District. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research as it enables the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mundia et al., 2026; Mufalali et al., 2026). The study comprised 17 local suppliers, a sample size determined through the principle of data saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes emerged (Mufalali et al., 2026). This sample was considered sufficient to generate rich and credible qualitative findings.

3.5 Data Collection Methods and Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews using an interview guide specifically developed to explore local suppliers' perceptions of public procurement opportunities and the challenges they encounter when participating in public procurement processes in Choma District. The interview guide comprised two main sections. The first section captured participants' demographic and business characteristics, while the second explored key issues relating to awareness of procurement opportunities, experiences with procurement procedures, institutional support, financial and technological constraints, and recommendations for improving supplier participation. The semi-structured interview approach provided flexibility to probe participants' responses and obtain rich, detailed insights while maintaining consistency across interviews (Mufalali et al., 2026; Saunders et al., 2019). All interviews were conducted with participants' informed consent, recorded with permission, and supplemented with field notes to enhance the credibility and completeness of the data collected.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied the qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through the use of semi-structured interviews and member checking to verify participants' responses. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the study setting, participants, and research procedures to enable comparison with similar contexts. Dependability was ensured through consistent application of the interview guide and maintaining an audit trail of the research process. Confirmability was strengthened by documenting the data collection and analysis procedures and supporting findings with participants' verbatim responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Simasiku et al., 2026).

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, after which the transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated and systematically organized into categories based on recurring patterns and ideas. These categories were then reviewed, refined, and grouped into broader themes that addressed the study objectives. The identified themes were interpreted and supported with verbatim quotations from participants to provide a comprehensive and credible understanding of local suppliers' perceptions and experiences regarding public procurement opportunities in Choma District.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of the study, and all ethical research principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and each participant was provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study before giving informed consent. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no identifying information was included in the study. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. All interview data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes, in accordance with established ethical research guidelines (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Mufalali et al., 2025).

4 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the study findings. Literature and related studies assisted in the discussion of the findings. The section begins with demographics and then moves into the analysis of data.

4.1 Profile of Study Participants

This section provided a detailed analysis of the demographics of the participants.

Table 1: Profile of Study Participants

Characteristics	Category	Number of Participants
Gender	Male	10
	Female	7
Total		17
Highest Education Level	Secondary	3
	Certificate	5
	Diploma	6
	Bachelor's Degree	3
Total		17
Business Sector	General Supply	6
	Construction	4
	Agriculture	3
	Stationery & Office Supplies	2
	Other Services	2
Total		17
Business Experience	Less than 5 years	7
	5-10 years	6
	More than 10 years	4
Total		17

Table 1 shows that the study participants comprised 10 male and 7 female local suppliers, indicating representation from both genders. Most participants possessed certificate or diploma qualifications, reflecting the educational profile of many SME operators in Choma District. The participants operated across diverse sectors, with general supply and construction businesses being the most represented. In terms of business experience, the majority had been in operation for less than ten years, suggesting that both emerging and established suppliers were included in the study. This diversity enhanced the richness of the data and provided varied perspectives on public procurement opportunities and the challenges encountered by local suppliers in Choma District.

4.2 How Local Suppliers Perceive Public Procurement Opportunities in Choma District

Participants were asked to describe their perceptions of public procurement opportunities available to local suppliers in Choma District. The analysis generated four major themes: high potential through increased localized spending, concerns over political interference and favoritism, financial frustration arising from delayed government payments, and prolonged bureaucratic procurement processes.

High Potential through Increased Localized Spending

The findings indicate that local suppliers generally perceive public procurement as an important avenue for business growth, particularly following the introduction of Constituency Development Fund (CDF) procurement reforms that prioritize local participation. Participants acknowledged that reservation schemes for citizen-owned enterprises have increased their confidence in competing for government contracts and have created opportunities previously dominated by larger external firms. Participant P2 explained: *"The recent policy shifts have mandated that certain contracts be awarded to bidders residing or domiciled within the locality. This in other ways empower us local people. For example, local contractors in Choma perceive the 2024/2025 CDF projects... as tailor-made opportunities."* Similarly, Participant P1 observed: *"Personally I see public procurement as a vehicle for growth due to mandatory reservation schemes... local firms feel more competitive because the law now reserves all CDF procurements for citizen bidders living within that specific constituency."*

These findings suggest that local suppliers perceive government procurement reforms as mechanisms for stimulating local enterprise development, employment creation and economic inclusion. The reservation of CDF contracts for locally domiciled suppliers has enhanced optimism among SMEs by providing them with greater access to government-funded projects and increasing their competitiveness against larger firms.

The findings corroborate previous empirical studies. Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS) (2024) and Sipalo (2021) reported that preferential procurement policies increase suppliers' confidence by creating opportunities for local enterprises to participate in public procurement. Similarly, Chanda (2026) found that legal reforms promoting citizen participation positively influence suppliers' perceptions of government procurement opportunities. These findings further reinforce the argument advanced by Institutional Theory that formal institutional arrangements such as procurement legislation, reservation schemes and government policies significantly shape organizational behaviour and access to economic opportunities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014). In this study, the institutional reforms surrounding CDF procurement have enhanced the perceived legitimacy and accessibility of public procurement among local suppliers.

Concern over Political Interference and Favoritism

Despite recognising the opportunities created by procurement reforms, participants expressed persistent concerns regarding political interference and favouritism during contract awards. Many believed that procurement outcomes are sometimes influenced by political affiliations and personal

relationships rather than competitive merit. Participant P3 remarked: *"Some suppliers believe that contracts are occasionally steered toward political elites or firms with partisan links, which they feel undermines fair competition."*

These findings indicate that while procurement policies appear favourable on paper, their implementation is perceived to be compromised by informal institutional practices that weaken confidence in the procurement system. Such perceptions discourage suppliers from investing resources in tender preparation because they believe that contract awards may not always reflect transparent evaluation processes.

The findings are consistent with Hinings, Logue and Zietsma (2017), who found that perceptions of political influence reduce supplier confidence in public procurement systems. Similarly, the Zambia Public Procurement Authority (ZPPA, 2022) reported that perceived favouritism undermines transparency and discourages supplier participation. These findings strongly support Institutional Theory, which argues that organisational behaviour is influenced not only by formal rules but also by informal norms, values and power structures operating within institutional environments (Scott, 2014). Although procurement regulations prescribe fairness and transparency, informal political pressures appear to shape suppliers' experiences and perceptions of procurement opportunities in Choma District.

Financial Frustration Due to Government Payment Delays

The study further revealed that delayed government payments significantly influence how suppliers perceive public procurement opportunities. Although suppliers recognise government contracts as potentially profitable, many view them as financially risky because of prolonged payment cycles. Participant P5 explained: *"...the system is uncertain due to late payments, making it difficult for small businesses to manage cash flow."* Similarly, Participant P7 stated: *"Working with the government is risky due to long payment delays... payment delays severely affected the ability to pay staff or procure new stock."*

These findings suggest that delayed payments reduce suppliers' confidence in participating in government procurement despite the availability of business opportunities. Cash flow constraints make it difficult for SMEs to fulfil contractual obligations and sustain business operations while awaiting payment.

These findings agree with Sipalo (2021), who found that delayed payments discourage SME participation in public procurement because they increase operational risks. Likewise, the World Bank (2025) observed that inefficient payment systems reduce supplier willingness to participate in government contracts. Institutional Theory provides an appropriate explanation by suggesting that institutional effectiveness depends not only on the existence of formal procurement regulations but also on the efficiency with which institutions implement contractual obligations (Scott, 2014). Delayed payments therefore weaken institutional legitimacy and reduce suppliers' trust in government procurement systems.

Prolonged Bureaucratic Procurement Processes

Participants also perceived procurement procedures as excessively bureaucratic and administratively demanding. Complex documentation requirements, numerous compliance conditions and lengthy tender procedures were viewed as significant obstacles, particularly for small enterprises with limited administrative capacity. Participant P9 noted: *"Lengthy bureaucratic procedures, complex documentation, and strict compliance requirements are barriers... small businesses become discouraged from bidding."*

These findings suggest that although procurement opportunities exist, excessive administrative requirements reduce their accessibility to local suppliers. Many SMEs perceive compliance costs as outweighing the potential benefits of participating in government tenders.

These findings are consistent with Baloyi and Ambe (2026), who concluded that bureaucratic procurement systems discourage SME participation by increasing compliance costs and administrative complexity. Similarly, Ramasimu, Ramasimu and Ramasimu (2025) found that cumbersome procurement procedures contribute to supplier scepticism and reduced participation. Institutional Theory explains these findings by emphasizing that formal institutional structures, regulations and procedures significantly shape organisational behaviour (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). While procurement regulations are intended to promote accountability, excessive bureaucratic requirements may unintentionally exclude smaller local suppliers from meaningful participation.

4.3 Challenges Local Suppliers Face when Participating in Public Procurement Processes in Choma District

The second objective sought to explore the challenges encountered by local suppliers during participation in public procurement. Four dominant themes emerged: government payment delays, technical gaps in e-procurement adoption, lack of transparency, and limited access to procurement information.

Delays in Government Payments

Participants consistently identified delayed government payments as one of the most significant operational challenges affecting supplier participation in public procurement. Participant P5 observed: *"Suppliers who deliver school desks have to wait months for payment... frequent payment delays lead to business collapses."* Participant P11 added: *"Protracted payment cycles create severe cash flow problems for local businesses."*

The findings demonstrate that delayed payments threaten SME sustainability by constraining working capital, limiting inventory replenishment and reducing firms' ability to fulfil subsequent contracts.

These findings support those of Ndrecaj (2015) and Flynn (2025), who identified payment delays as one of the principal barriers limiting SME participation in public procurement globally. Likewise, Ramasimu et al. (2025) found that delayed payments weaken supplier confidence and discourage future participation. Institutional Theory explains this challenge by arguing that ineffective institutional implementation undermines organisational confidence in formal governance systems (Scott, 2014). When contractual obligations are not honoured promptly, institutional legitimacy deteriorates.

Technical Gaps in E-Procurement Adoption

Participants reported that the transition to electronic government procurement (e-GP) has disadvantaged many local suppliers due to inadequate digital literacy, poor internet connectivity and limited technical support. Participant P12 stated: *"Suppliers in rural parts of Choma have unstable internet access or lack the technical skills to navigate the ZPPA e-GP portal."*

The findings indicate that digital transformation has created unintended exclusion for suppliers lacking technological capabilities, thereby reducing equitable access to procurement opportunities.

These findings are consistent with Michelle et al. (2025), who reported that inadequate ICT infrastructure and limited digital skills constrain supplier participation in electronic procurement systems. Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012) similarly argued that technological capability influences

organisations' ability to conform to evolving institutional requirements. Institutional Theory therefore suggests that successful institutional reforms require complementary capacity-building initiatives to enable organisations to comply with new institutional expectations.

Lack of Transparency

Participants perceived transparency as a continuing challenge despite recent procurement reforms. Many believed that tender awards were sometimes influenced by personal relationships rather than objective evaluation criteria. Participant P10 explained: "Local suppliers feel that tender awards... are influenced by personal relationships with procurement officials." Participant P8 similarly stated: "*Corruption and favoritism severely impact local suppliers.*"

These findings indicate that perceived corruption weakens supplier confidence and reduces willingness to participate in procurement opportunities.

The findings support Chanda (2026), who found that limited transparency discourages SME participation in procurement. Similarly, Baloyi and Ambe (2026) reported that opaque procurement systems reduce trust and create perceptions of unfair competition. Institutional Theory emphasises that legitimacy depends on transparent and consistent institutional practices (Scott, 2014). Consequently, perceptions of corruption undermine confidence in procurement institutions and weaken supplier participation.

Limited Access to Information on Procurement Opportunities

Participants further indicated that inadequate dissemination of procurement information limits supplier participation, particularly among businesses operating outside Choma's central business area. Participant P4 observed: "*Suppliers in rural parts of Choma miss tender opportunities because they do not regularly access the e-GP system.*" Participant P7 added: "*Local suppliers often struggle to obtain timely and accurate information about upcoming tenders.*"

These findings suggest that unequal access to procurement information creates disparities in supplier participation and reduces competition within procurement markets.

The findings correspond with the World Bank (2011) and CUTS (2024), both of which reported that limited access to procurement information significantly constrains SME participation. Institutional Theory explains that access to institutional information is fundamental for organisations seeking legitimacy and participation within formal systems (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). When procurement information is not disseminated equitably, institutional arrangements inadvertently favour better-resourced firms while marginalising smaller local enterprises.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that although procurement reforms have improved opportunities for local suppliers through citizen preference policies and CDF procurement initiatives, institutional weaknesses - including delayed payments, bureaucratic procedures, limited transparency, technological constraints and inadequate dissemination of procurement information - continue to impede meaningful supplier participation. These findings reinforce Institutional Theory by illustrating that both formal institutional structures and informal institutional practices jointly shape suppliers' perceptions, participation decisions and overall experiences within public procurement systems in Choma District.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study explored local suppliers' perceptions of public procurement opportunities and the challenges they encounter when participating in public procurement processes in Choma District. The findings reveal that while recent procurement reforms, particularly the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) reservation schemes, have improved suppliers' perceptions by creating greater opportunities for local participation, significant institutional barriers continue to limit meaningful access. Key challenges include delayed government payments, bureaucratic procurement procedures, inadequate digital capacity, limited access to procurement information, and perceived political interference. The findings demonstrate that strengthening institutional effectiveness, transparency, and supplier support mechanisms is essential for promoting equitable participation and enhancing the contribution of local suppliers to public procurement and local economic development.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that the Government of Zambia, through the Zambia Public Procurement Authority (ZPPA) and local authorities, should strengthen the implementation of procurement policies by improving transparency, accountability, and fairness in tender evaluation and contract award processes.

The study further recommends that public institutions should establish clear payment timelines and ensure prompt settlement of suppliers' invoices to improve SME cash flow and encourage continued participation in government contracts. Capacity-building programmes should also be introduced to equip local suppliers with practical knowledge of procurement regulations, bid preparation, and electronic government procurement (e-GP) systems.

Furthermore, procurement information should be disseminated through multiple accessible channels, including district information centres, community radio stations, and local business associations, to improve awareness of tender opportunities among rural suppliers.

Finally, policymakers should simplify procurement documentation and administrative procedures for SMEs while strengthening institutional oversight mechanisms to minimize political interference, promote confidence in public procurement systems, and enhance the participation and competitiveness of local suppliers in Choma District.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

Funding

This research did not receive specific grants from any public, commercial, non-profit sector funding bodies.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who made a contribution to this research

Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

References

- African Development Bank. (2020). African Economic Outlook 2020. African Development Bank.
- Anaele, M., Dulaimi, M., Henderson, P., Zulu, S., Kavishe, N., & Jenkins, T. (2025). Addressing SME challenges in procurement of public sector construction projects.
- Baloyi, S. V., & Ambe, I. M. (2026). Institutional and market barriers to sustainable procurement in South African state-owned enterprises. *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AJEMS-04-2025-0278>
- Chanda, M. (2026). Public procurement and SME inclusion: An empirical analysis of the stationery supply sector. *African Journal of Commercial Studies*, 7(3), 110-118. <https://doi.org/10.59413/ajocs/v7.i3.16>
- Consumer Unity & Trust Society. (2021). Public procurement in Zambia: How to get it right. CUTS International.
- Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS) Lusaka. (2024). Legislative analysis of public procurement in Zambia 2024 (pp. 15-22). CUTS International.
- Flynn, A. (2025). Research on SME involvement in public procurement: A review, critique and conceptual framework. *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, 32(2). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1478409225000615>
- Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Lawrence, T. B., & Meyer, R. E. (Eds.). (2017). *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Hinings, C. R., Logue, D., & Zietsma, C. (2017). Institutional complexity and societal sectors. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 13(2), 331-358.
- Karttunen, E., Matela, M., Hallikas, J., & Immonen, M. (2022). Public procurement as an attractive customer: A supplier perspective. *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 42(13), 79-102. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-05-2021-0346>
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340-363. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>
- Mufalali, S. M., Moose, J., Bbenkele, E., Sikachelela, J., Mundia, M., & Muduli, R. (2026). Revisiting entrepreneurial orientation: A dimensional performance architecture in emerging market SMEs—Evidence from Kabwe District, Zambia. *African Journal of Empirical Research*, 7(2), 183-191. <https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.7.2.17>
- Mufalali, S. M., Muduli, R., Mundia, M., Ngoma, K., & Sikachelela, J. (2026). From exposure to intention: How social media entrepreneurial content shapes youth entrepreneurial intentions in Kabwe District, Zambia. *African Journal of Commercial Studies*, 7(3), 356-364.
- Mufalali, S. M., Muduli, R., Mundia, M., Ngoma, K., Mwiya, B., & Sikachelela, J. (2026). Youth consumer preferences for local vs. international brands: Implications for SMEs in Kabwe District, Zambia. *African Journal of Commercial Studies*, 7(3), 523-532.
- Mundia, M., Nkonde, C., Simui, F., Mufalali, M. S., & Muduli, R. (2023). Cooperatives and livelihood improvement: Understanding the contribution of enterprising agriculture cooperatives in rural communities of Kabwe District, Zambia. *European Journal of Agriculture and Food Sciences*, 5(2), 40-46.
- Mundia, M., Simasiku, M. M., & Chakwana, P. (2025). The role of micro-finance institutions on financial inclusion of farmpreneurs in rural communities of Kabwe District, Zambia. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(10), 3400-3411.
- Mundia, M., Simasiku, M. M., Joseph, I., Muduli, R., & Mweemba, K. (2026). Indigenous knowledge and entrepreneurial mindset among the Ila-speaking people of Namwala District, Zambia. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(1), 3313-3322.
- Mwiya, M. S., Moose, J., Bbenkele, E., Regina, M., Mundia, M., & Sikachelela, J. (2025). Entrepreneurial mindset in practice: Manifestations of entrepreneurial orientation among trading SMEs in Kabwe District, Zambia. *East African Journal of Management and Business Studies*, 5(4), 26-37.
- Ndrecaj, D. (2015). An investigation into the common challenges facing public sector procurement in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *Government at a glance 2021*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>
- Ramasimu, M. G., Ramasimu, N. F., & Ramasimu, M. A. (2025). Public procurement and local economic development: Unpacking the challenges faced by small and medium enterprises. *International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.329>
- Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Sikombe, S., & Phiri, M. A. (2021). Institutional factors influencing institutionalised supplier development initiatives in the construction industry in Zambia. *Cogent Business & Management*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2021.1935184>
- Simasiku Mwiya Mufalali, J., Moose, J., Bbenkele, E., Muduli, R., Mundia, M., Sikachelela, J., & Sishumba, J. (2026). Deconstructing entrepreneurial orientation: A variance decomposition analysis of SME performance in Kabwe District, Zambia. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(4), 2775-2784. <https://doi.org/10.38124/IJISRT/26APR1645>
- Sipalo, S. (2021). Legal challenges to the Zambian public procurement system: A focus on the health sector (pp. 55-68). University of Pretoria Law Repository.
- Transparency International. (2021). *Corruption perceptions index 2021*. Transparency International.

- United Nations Development Programme. (2021). Procurement annual report 2021. UNDP.
- World Bank. (2011). A guide to getting started in local procurement. World Bank Group/International Finance Corporation.
- World Bank. (2025). Promotion of SMEs/local content in public procurement laws and regulation. World Bank Public-Private Partnership Legal Resource Center.
- Zambia Chamber of Commerce and Industry. (2021). Annual business survey report 2021. Zambia Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- Zambia Development Agency. (2022). SME development and enterprise support report 2022. Zambia Development Agency.
- Zambia Institute for Policy Analysis and Research. (2022). Policy brief on SME participation in public procurement in Zambia. ZIPAR.
- Zambia Public Procurement Authority. (2022). Public procurement regulations, 2022. Government Printer.