

A Systematic Review of Public Tender Awards in Eswatini: Analysing the Value and Distribution of Contracts under the Public Procurement Act, 2011, and its Contribution to Decent Work (SDG 8)

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Abstract: This study assessed the impact of public procurement tenders awarded for goods, services and service and its contribution to UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work) in Eswatini. It specifically analyzed tender types, monetary values, and the participation of local versus foreign entities. Employing a convergent parallel mixed-method design, the study utilized the PRISMA 2020 framework to analyze 225 tenders awarded in the 2023/2024 fiscal year. This was supplemented by an analysis of the local Construction Industry Council (CIC) reports (2020–2024) and qualitative interviews with 22 procurement officials and senior managers. The results showed that total awards reached US\$39,890,922, with “Works” dominating at 69%. While locals comprised 98% of the workforce, critical gender and stability gaps emerged: women’s representation plummeted to 14%; permanent employment dropped to 32%, and skilled labour fell to 43%. Findings reveal a direct link between procurement cycles and employment volatility. To mitigate job losses, the study recommends establishing clear project cash-flow plans and addressing delayed payments by procuring entities. Future research should investigate the impact of payment delays on contractor sustainability. This research contributes to global scholarship by empirically linking public procurement execution to the achievement of SDG 8 targets for women and youth in a developing economy.

Keywords: Public Procurement; SMEs; Economic Growth; Job Creation; Eswatini

JEL Classification: The Journal of Economic Literature

1. Introduction

Public procurement is a powerful tool for promoting economic development and social inclusion (Uehara, 2020). By directing government spending, it can foster local economies, support rural development, and contribute significantly to food security initiatives. The global commitment to a sustainable future was formalized in September 2015 when 193 United Nations (UN) countries adopted Agenda 2030, a comprehensive blueprint outlining 17 Sustainable Development Goals

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(SDGs) and 169 specific targets. Among the goals, SDG 8 specifically promotes “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UN, 2015). Target 8.3 further encourages “development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation”.

In spite of the clear synergy, the 2030 Agenda deficiencies is a robust context and methodology to completely use public procurement as a shortest way for attaining all its SDGs. To bridge this gap, Uehara (2020) highlights that Agenda 2030 promotes Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) practices that must be tailored to national needs and priorities and work in harmony with existing state policies and strategies. To promote the long-term social, economic, and environmental impacts, UN set up a task force looked Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP). The Kingdom of Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) has been an active participant in global initiatives since its admission as a full member of the UN in 1968 (Security Council Resolution S/Res/257). This long-standing membership reflects a foreign policy commitment to actively contributing to UN initiatives, including the pursuit of the 2030 SDGs. As a developing country, Eswatini is striving to attain these goals. However, recognizing that the SDGs do not offer a one-size-fits-all approach for national implementation, the country must adapt its operations to meet the targets.

In line with promoting good governance and sustainable practices, the Kingdom of Eswatini Legislature approved the Public Procurement Act in 2011. Championed by the Minister of Finance, this legislation serves to promote fair competition for state-owned enterprises and government contracts, govern the procurement of goods, services, and works and cover a broad range of public entities, including state-owned enterprises, municipalities, banks, and financial institutions. Eswatini faces a significant challenge with its high unemployment rate, which stood at 24.7% among the working-age population (15+) in 2023.

The Kingdom of Eswatini has an opportunity to directly align its spending practices by implementing Target 8.3 of the SDGs. This transforms the policy into a powerful tool for achieving SDG 8 by creating employment opportunities, enhancing economic growth and contracting works to local companies. Hence, the Government of Eswatini established the Eswatini Public Procurement Regulatory Agency (ESPPRA) to manage and oversee the tendering process. ESPPRA’s advertises all tenders for procurement and awards in their website. These adverts are available to local and international businesses. Some organizations also advertise specific opportunities dedicated to SMEs and large enterprises (LEs) on this platform. In adherence to the Eswatini Procurement Act of 2011, a key element of the process is the right of bidders to formally protest the outcome of a tender within a 14-day window, ensuring a level of transparency and accountability in public spending.

Eswatini demonstrates moderate progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), facing challenges primarily related to data availability. According to the Sustainable Development Report 2023 Jeffrey Sachs et al. (2023), Eswatini’s performance is as follows: Global Rank: 132 out of 166 countries, with a score of 57.9%; SADC Rank: 4th among 16 SADC member countries, trailing the leaders are Namibia (109th globally, 64.3%), South Africa (110th, globally, 64.0%), and Botswana (118th, globally, 62.0%). This paper analysed the value and distribution of contracts awarded following the Public Procurement policy to stimulate economic growth and employment. The analysis focused on public procurement tenders awarded over a twelve-month period (2023/2024).

2. Literature Review

Gutiérrez-Goiria and Amiano-Bonatxea (2022) noticed that public procurement participation has the possibility to add value in the implementing Sustainable Development Goals. While developing countries (Global South) dedicate a significant portion of their GDP to public procurement, a key challenge remains in that many procurement officials prioritize acquiring goods and services at the lowest possible cost and neglect issues that consider sustainability and development (Uehara, 2020). Despite growing interest in sustainable procurement for construction projects, findings in a study in Nigeria suggest that limited sustainability knowledge among stakeholders, lack of transparency and good governance, misalignment between procurement strategies and national policies, and underdeveloped construction industry capacity are key factors hindering construction projects in developing countries (Ogunsanya et al., 2019).

Nani and Ali (2020) found that well-defined strategies, clear objectives, strong integration between organizations and systems, and adequate human resource support contribute to achieving improvement in accountability, transparency, efficiency, and overall effectiveness in sustainable procurement practices. Hallikas et al. (2021) confirmed significant positive relationships between a firm's digital procurement capabilities, data analytics capabilities (both internal and external), and overall supply chain performance. For example, Papua New Guinea 'Vision 2050' strategy promotes local content in government procurement, offering tax breaks and incentives for indigenous-owned companies (Uehara, 2020). This shows that transparency in public procurement procedures is crucial for ensuring fair competition and reducing corruption risks since increased transparency leads to lower corruption risks unlike "horizontal transparency," which primarily benefits bidders themselves rather than the general public (Bauhr et al., 2019). Meshack et al. (2023) developed a conceptual model that highlights four key dimensions influencing SDG achievement through Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) after examining how public procurement contributes to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Their analysis notably suggests that Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) can influence twelve of the seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which could translate to 70% of attainment.

Rahman (2021) identifies several key institutional bottlenecks hindering SDG achievement, and these include erroneous stakeholder analysis, data unobtainability, absence of competency and accountability and a top-down policy approach. According to Hence Perano et al. (2022) observe that there is a positive relationship between Sustainable Development Goals and supply chain performance. Companies have significant opportunities to support the 2030 Agenda (Cammarano et al., 2022).

Chidimma, Ogochukwu and Chinwe (2020), identify three categories (major challenges, significant challenges, and remaining challenges) of impact for the 17 SDGs in Nigeria. Chidimma et al. (2020) research concludes that architects play an indispensable role in attaining these goals. Ma et al. (2022) investigate Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They establish a systematic framework for analysing the SDGs, which also serves to categorize the attributes of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). The study suggests that improving the utilization of PPPs as a tool requires collaboration between governments and practitioners globally (Ma et al., 2022). The 2018 SDG Index and Dashboard report found that no country was on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and this served as a wakeup call for many countries (Walsh et al., 2020). According to Allen et al. (2019), Australia, despite being among leading countries in implementation

SDG, faces a key challenge of the lack of clear and agreed-upon national target values. Consequently, it is difficult to achieve a precise assessment of national progress toward the SDGs.

Ziolo, Bak and Cheba (2020) investigated the connection between sustainable finance and achieving the SDGs in European Union countries. Ziolo et al. (2020) identified a significant link between sustainable finance and social sustainability (SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 16), environmental sustainability (SDGs 11, 12, 13, 15), and economic sustainability (SDGs 8, 9, 17). Aust et al. (2020) examined the impact of foreign direct investment (FDI) on achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 44 African countries, found that FDI plays a crucial role in SDG progress, particularly in North African nations. Yang et al. (2020) propose that ecosystem services (ES)-based solutions offer overlooked co-benefits. Their study investigates expert valuation of the SDGs and their connection to ES across 66 countries and three macro-regions. The findings indicated that all regions prioritized SDGs related to basic needs and environmental health, such as No Poverty (SDG 1), Zero Hunger (SDG 2), and Clean Water (SDG 6) and economic sustainability goals (SDGs 8, 9, and 17) were not identified as primary drivers for implementing SDGs yet, despite of its significance.

Coscieme et al. (2020) highlight the contradiction between limitless economic growth and a planet with finite resources. While Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are now a cornerstone of development planning in many countries, a study by Moyer and Hedden (2020) findings suggest that with current policy priorities, the world will make limited progress towards achieving these specific SDGs by 2030. Masuda et al. (2022) note that localization and multi-stakeholder partnerships are crucial, and local governments are uniquely positioned to facilitate these. State-owned enterprises and local governments in Eswatini already function as indirect intermediaries in relation to the SDGs.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, a single-phase design in which the researcher collects and analyzes quantitative and qualitative data independently before comparing the results to determine whether the findings confirm or contradict one another (Creswell, 2014). This approach is predicated on the assumption that while quantitative and qualitative data provide distinct types of information, their integration yields a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. In this study, the quantitative component involved the analysis of two secondary datasets: tender awards published on the Eswatini Public Procurement Regulatory Agency (ESPPRA) website and four-year annual reports from the Construction Industry Council (CIC). Complementing this, the qualitative component consisted of primary data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 22 participants. This sample included 10 senior managers and 12 procurement officers representing the Eswatini construction industry, ESPPRA, various municipalities, financial institutions, and state-owned enterprises.

3.1. Quantitative Research

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design. Descriptive research is primarily concerned with describing the current status of an identified variable or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This design was selected because it provides a systematic method for examining and articulating the characteristics of the construction industry's landscape.

To evaluate public tender awards and employment trends, secondary data was retrieved from the official websites of the Eswatini Public Procurement Regulatory Agency (ESPPRA) and the Eswatini Construction Industry Council (CIC). Specifically, the study reviewed all tenders awarded during the 12-month 2023–2024 financial year data sourced from the CIC annual reports. By utilizing this descriptive approach, the study aimed to establish a clear factual baseline, which was used to develop or refine hypotheses following the data analysis phase.

This formed the first stage of the quantitative research design, and it involved a structured administrative data analysis of awarded tender, underpinned by the PRISMA 2020 framework, focusing on tenders awarded for goods, services, and works during the 12-month period of the 2023–2024 financial year in the ESPPRA website. The second quantitative research design is to analyze employment trends by extracting statistical data from four consecutive annual reports published on the Construction Industry Council (CIC) website.

3.2. Qualitative Research

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing individual interviews conducted with participants to gather primary data. Following a mixed-methods approach, these qualitative findings will be integrated with quantitative data to triangulate results and assess consistency across datasets.

3.3. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate whether public procurement tender awards for works, goods, and services contribute to the promotion of decent work (SDG 8), ultimately supporting the realization of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable.

To achieve this, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- Analyze the total monetary value of tenders awarded for works, goods, and services by public procurement entities.
- Identify and evaluate employment trends within companies registered under the Construction Industry Council, focusing on the metrics of “decent work.”
- Assess the extent to which public procurement tender awards contribute, or fail to contribute, to the advancement of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), specifically regarding decent work and economic growth.

3.4. Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis focused on public procurement tender awards for works, goods, and services across various sectors, including state-owned enterprises, municipalities, and financial institutions. Complementing this, a published dataset was retrieved from the Construction Industry Council (CIC) of Eswatini. This secondary data encompassed a four-year period, allowing for a longitudinal analysis of decent employment trends within the industry.

3.4.1. Public Tender Awards for Works, Goods and Services

The data on public tender awards was collected from the Eswatini Public Procurement Regulatory Agency (EPPRA) website¹. Specifically, data was retrieved from the “Tender to Award” section, under the “Intention to Award” sub-icon.

Initially, 1,300 tenders were identified under the “Intention to Award” sub-icon. The EPPRA website screens these tender notices based on Section 45 of the Public Procurement Act No. 4 of 2011 (the Act). This section mandates that a notice be given for a contract award decision reached via a competitive bidding process, detailing the awarded contractor’s name, nationality, and evaluated price. From the initial pool, 900 tenders were first screened based on these criteria. Following this, the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram methodology framework was applied for administrative data review. This structured administrative data analysis as illustrated in Figure 1, resulted in a final sample of 225 tenders to award being included for analysis.

Utilizing the PRISMA framework, this study adopted a systematic approach to identifying, screening, and synthesizing structured administrative data. The dataset focuses on procurement awards from various public entities, including State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), financial institutions, and municipalities. Records were categorized by procurement type—services, goods, or works—and by the origin of the contracted firms, specifically distinguishing between local and international companies.

The PRISMA 2020 Framework guided systematic review of public tender awards published in EPPRA website (as illustrated in Figure 1).

¹ <https://esppra.co.sz/sppra/tender.php>.

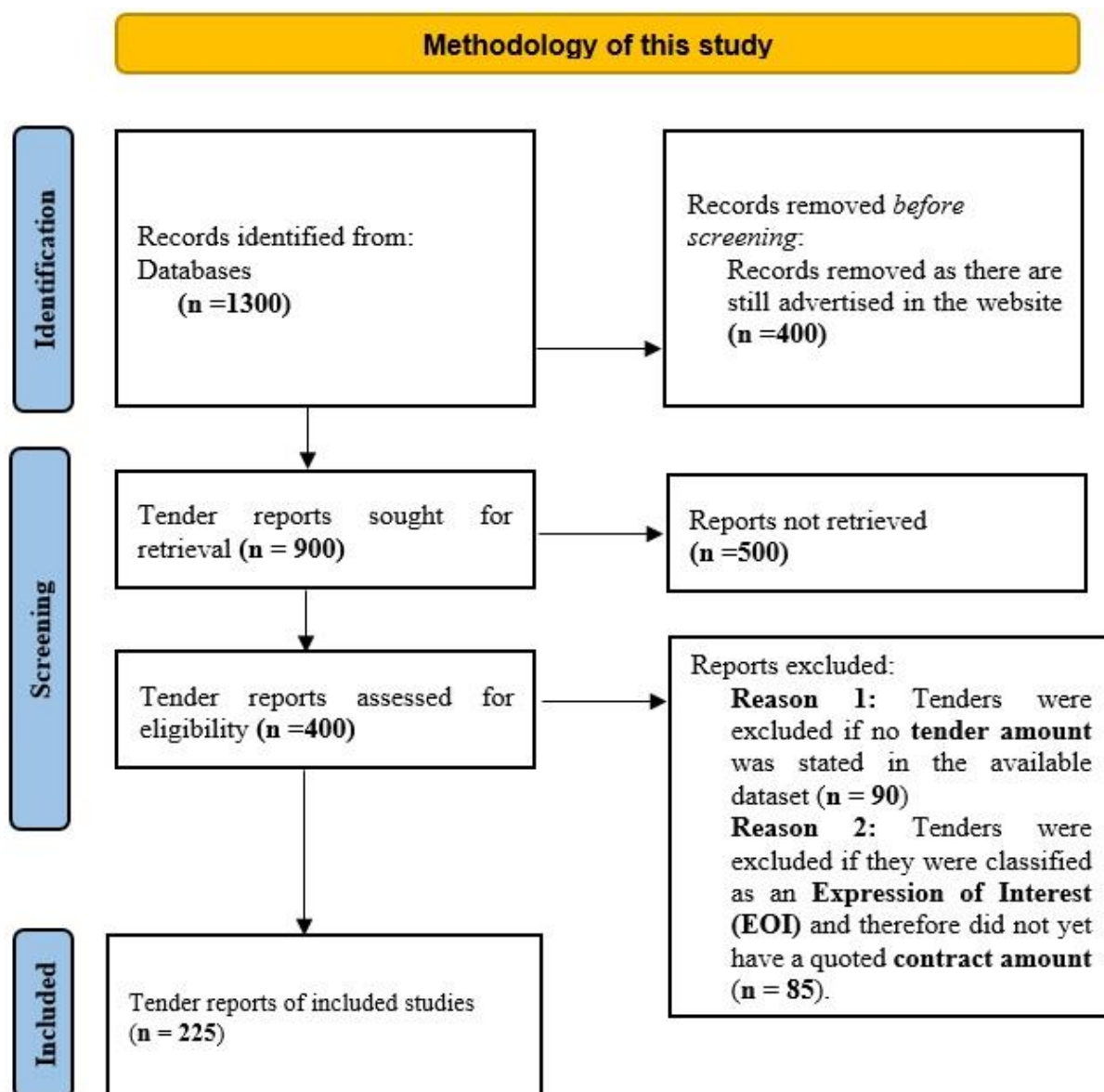


Figure 1. Application of PRISMA 2020 flow for systematic review of Public Tender Awards

3.4.1.1. Tender Award Identification and Extraction

Initially, a total of 1,300 tenders were identified for potential inclusion. These tenders were downloaded over a twelve-month period from the relevant public procurement database. The primary data point extracted during this phase was the intended contract award price.

3.4.1.2. Tender Award Screening and Value Analysis

- In the second stage, 900 tender reports were sought for full retrieval and review. During this process: 500 reports could not be fully retrieved or were deemed irrelevant.
- 400 tender reports were assessed for eligibility. Reports were excluded if they were classified as an Expression of Interest (EOI) (and thus did not have a quoted contract amount) or if the required tender details were unavailable.

This screening and value analysis ensured that only valid and quantifiable award decisions for goods, services, or works were retained for the next stage.

3.4.1.3. Final Inclusion and Data Points

After rigorous screening and assessment, a final sample of 225 tender award reports was included in the study.

3.4.2. Employment Trends in the Construction Industry

To evaluate progress toward Decent Work (SDG 8), the study analysed the Eswatini Construction Industry Council (CIC) annual reports. The dataset comprised reports from the 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23, and 2023/24 financial years. Data were categorized according to four key metrics: gender, employment type (direct vs. indirect and skilled vs. unskilled), age, and nationality. Using descriptive statistics, the analysis primarily focused on the 2023/24 financial year to determine if employment trends correlated with tender awards across the categories of works, goods, and services.

3.5. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative phase of this study involved semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 22 participants, comprising ten senior managers and twelve procurement officers responsible for works, goods, and services. Participants were drawn from various public entities, including government ministries, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and municipalities. All participants were highly qualified, possessing university degrees and significant professional experience in procurement. Due to logistical considerations, interviews were conducted using open-ended questions and facilitated remotely via mobile phone and WhatsApp calls.

The study employed both inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013). The inductive process involved an iterative movement between the raw data and emerging patterns until a comprehensive set of themes was established. Conversely, the deductive process involved re-examining the data against these themes to ensure that each was supported by sufficient evidence. By synthesizing interview transcripts with secondary reports, the study established a rigorous and comprehensive thematic framework.

4. Results

The section covers the both qualitative and quantitative results.

4.1. Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis evaluated tender allocations across goods, services, and works while categorizing the procuring organizations and the specific nature of the awarded ventures, distinguishing between domestic, international, and joint-venture enterprises. To further contextualize these findings, the study scrutinized four years of annual reports from the Eswatini Construction Industry Council (CIC) to identify longitudinal trends in “decent work” indicators. By assessing the procurement of capital works projects through this framework, the analysis aimed to determine the extent to which current procurement practices contribute to the realization of United Nations

Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) within the Eswatini's construction sector.

4.1.1. Analysing Awarded Tender Amounts for Works, Goods, and Services via Public Procurement

The total value of tenders awarded by organizations between April 1, 2023, and March 31, 2024, amounted to ZAR 741,971,157 (US\$39,890,922). The distribution across procurement categories showed a pronounced focus on infrastructure, with Works projects receiving the highest share at ZAR 512,815,383 (US\$27,570,720), accounting for 69% of the total awarded amount. The supply of Goods represented the second-largest category at 23% (ZAR 167,622,050), while Services received the remaining 8% of the total tender value

Table 1. Works, goods and services and amount awarded to companies.

Works, goods and services procuring companies tendered out			
Works	Goods	Services	Total
69%	23%	8%	100%

4.1.2. Evaluation of the Total Monetary Value of Tenders Issued for Goods, Services, and Works by Procuring Entities

In the period between April 2023 and March 2024, state-owned enterprises awarded the highest tender amount among all procuring entities, totalling ZAR 562,962,507 (US\$30,266,801) to various companies. Financial institutions awarded ZAR 49,479,787 (US\$2,660,204), municipalities awarded ZAR 114,373,376 (US\$6,149,106), and other organizations awarded ZAR 15,155,485 (US\$814,811).

Table 2. Tender Awards by Procuring Entity (2023/2024 Financial Year)

Tender Awards by Procuring Entity (2023/2024 Financial Year)					
Months	SOEs	Financial Institutions	Municipalities	Other	Total %
Total	76%	7%	15%	2%	100%

Based on Table 2, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were the primary drivers of contract awards, responsible for an average of 76% tender awarding organization.

Monthly Peaks

Notably, SOE tender awards exceeded 80% of the total in five months:

- 94% in November 2023
- 92% in March 2024
- 91% in February 2024
- 86% in January 2024
- 83% in April 2023

Annual Breakdown

The remainder of the tender amount for the financial year was distributed among other entities:

- Municipalities accounted for 15% of the total. As mentioned, their highest tender award amounts occurred in June and July 2023.
- Financial institutions awarded 7% of the total.
- Other organizations contributed the remaining 2% to the total tender amount awarded.

4.1.3. Analysis of Tender Amounts Awarded to Local and Joint Venture Companies

As detailed in Table 3, the total awarded amount for the 2023–2024 financial year was distributed as follows:

- Local companies received the majority, securing 68% of all awarded tenders.
- Joint ventures or external companies secured the remaining 32%.

Table 3. Tender awarded to local, joint venture and external companies per month

Month	Local companies	External companies or Joint venture	Total
Total	68%	32%	100%

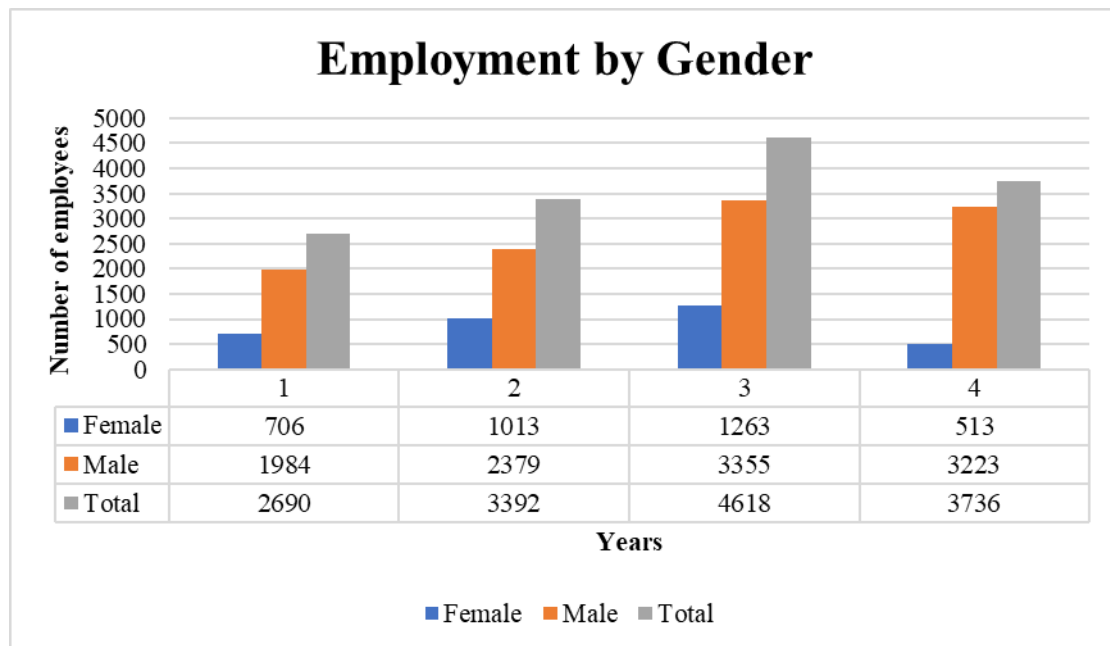
Table 3 highlights the monthly variation in awards to external or joint venture companies during the 2023–2024 financial year. While no awards were made to these entities in April 2023, September 2023, January 2024, or February 2024, noteworthy attentions were observed in other periods. Specifically, March 2024 recorded the highest share, accounting for 89% of the month's total tender value, whereas June 2023 witnessed a near-equal distribution, with external or joint ventures receiving 48% of the total value compared to the 52% awarded to local companies.

4.2. SDG 8 Evaluation Report on Decent Work in the Construction and Industry Council

This section presents the analysis of the four-year annual reports from the Eswatini Construction Industry Council. The focus was on evaluating the trends of decent work through procurement of works projects in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8. The results were based on statistical analyses on employment based on gender, employment type, employment age and nationality. The works which mainly capital project is 69% of procurement occurred in 2023/2024 of Eswatini Public Procurement Regulatory Agency (ESPPRA).

4.2.1. Gender Representation in Capital Projects (2020 -2024)

Table 4. Employees by Gender

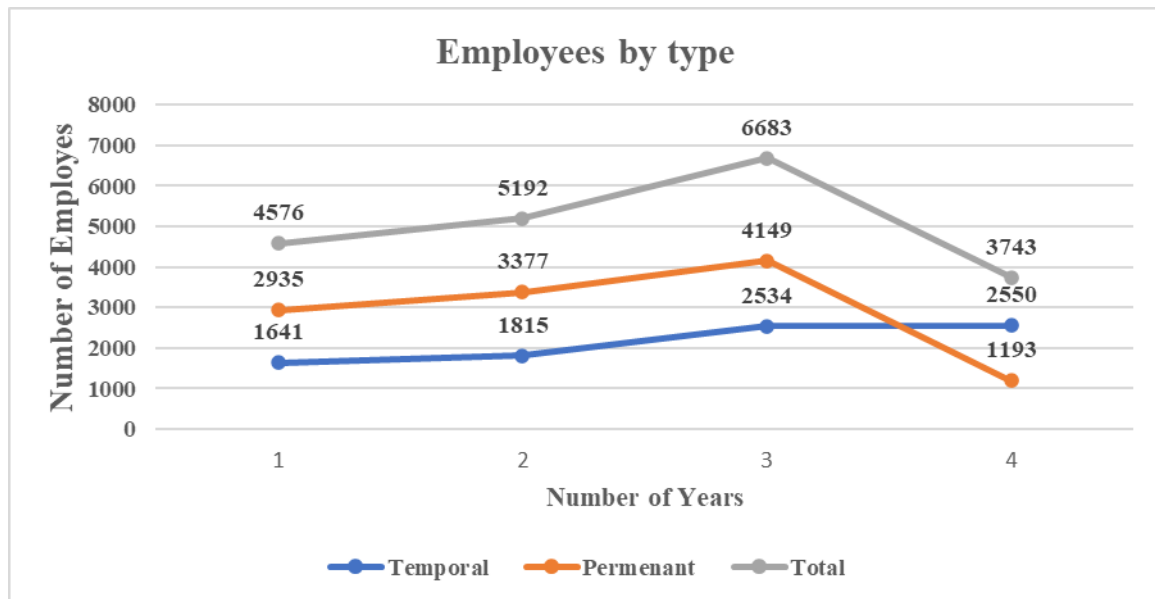


Analysis of capital projects procured under the Construction Industry Council (CIC) revealed a persistent gender imbalance. While there were initial gains in female participation, recent data shows a significant downturn in women’s representation within the sector. Between 2020 and 2022 was an initial growth where women’s employment grew from 26% to 30%. Notably, the number of women-owned entities also saw a 25% increase during Period 3 compared to Period 2. The most recent data indicates a 59% sharp decline in female representation. By the end of Period 4, women accounted for only 14% of the workforce while men comprised the remaining 86%.

4.2.2. Employment Trends: Permanent vs. Temporary Staffing (2020–2024)

Analysis of employment types, categorized as either permanent or temporary/short-term contracts, reveals a significant shift in the hiring strategies of the Eswatini Construction Industry Council (CIC) members over the last four years.

Table 5. Employment by type

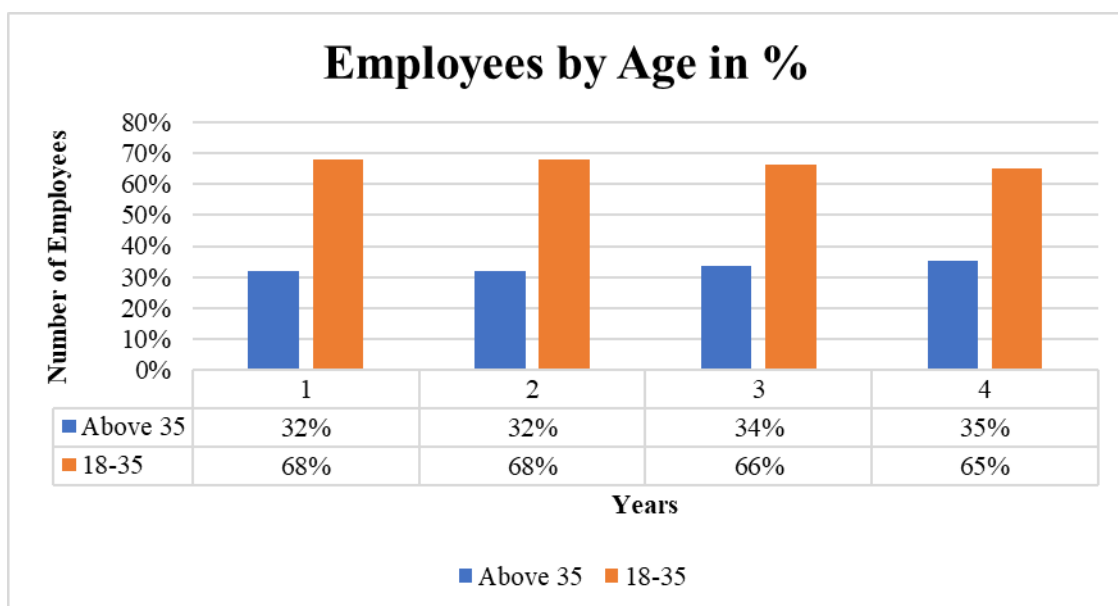


During the first three years, permanent employment remained the dominant engagement type, peaking in volume during Year 3 despite a slight decrease in its percentage share compared to temporary work. The final reporting period shows a drastic reversal. Permanent employment plummeted to 32% while temporary or short-term contracts surged to 68% of the total workforce.

4.2.3. Employment by Age

The workforce analysis categorized employees into two primary groups: Youth (ages 18–35) and Seniors (above 35 years). This classification allows for a better understanding of age demographics within the construction-related industry and the effectiveness of national employment initiatives.

Table 6. Age of employees



According to Table 6, the construction industry in Eswatini maintains a predominantly young workforce. Between the 2020/21 and 2023/24 reporting periods, the average distribution was as follows: Youth (18–35): 67% and Seniors (35+): 33%.

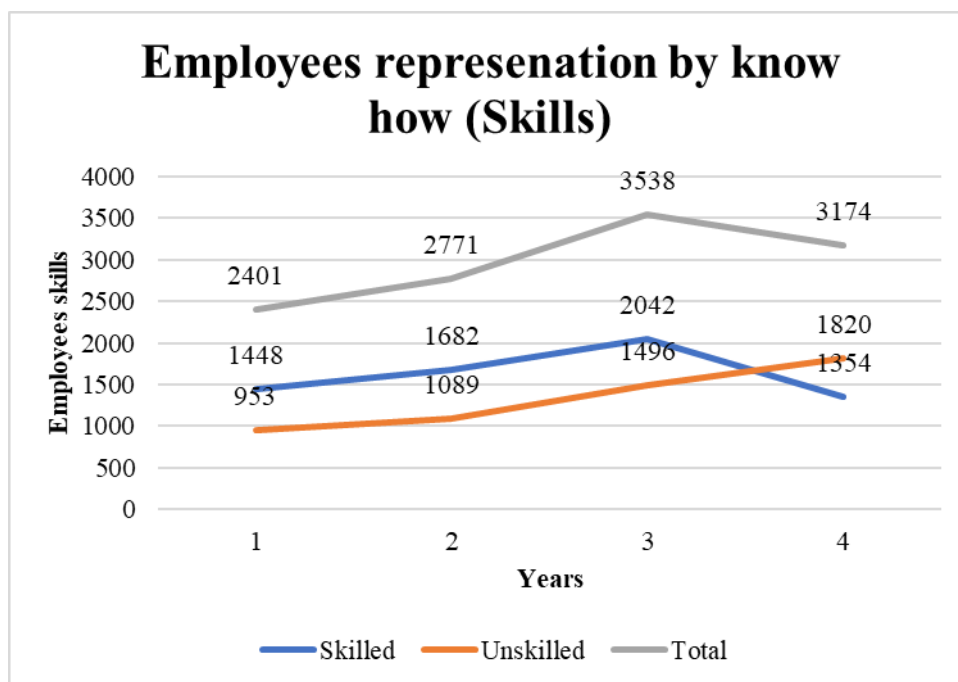
Despite the high average of youth participation, recent data shows a **2% decline** in youth employment during the 2023/24 reporting year. This downward trend presents a challenge to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, Target 8.6, which aims to substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training by 2030.

While the current figures show that the industry is still youth-heavy, any decline in this demographic is a concern for long-term economic stability. The government continues to strive for policy interventions that ensure youth employment remains a priority, despite the fluctuations observed in the construction sector.

4.2.4. Skilled vs. Unskilled Labor Representation (2020–2024)

This analysis evaluates the distribution of skilled and unskilled labor employed by companies following the award of tenders through public procurement. Data from Table 7 highlights a concerning shift in the professional composition of the workforce.

Table 7. Employees by Know-how (skills and expertise)



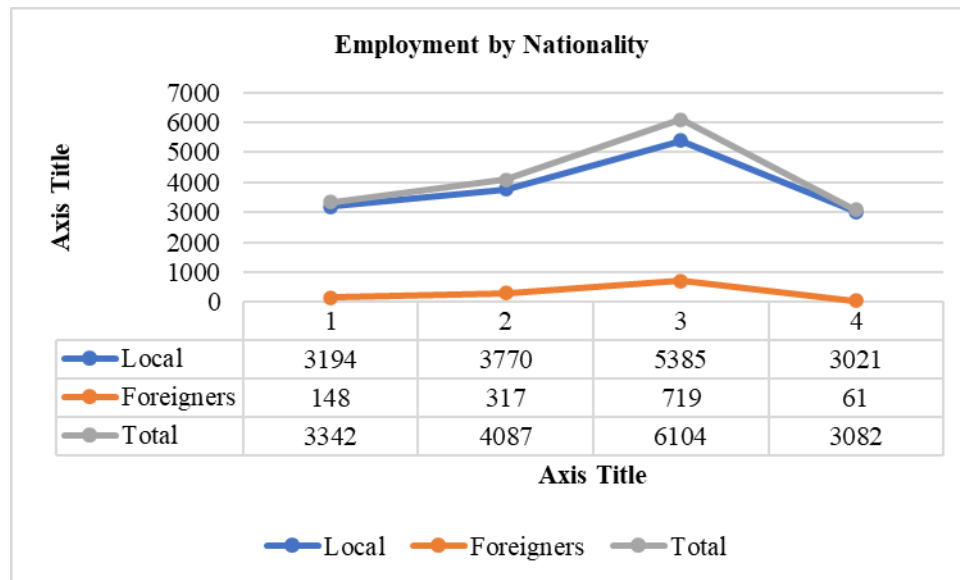
The reporting periods show a steady baseline of skilled labor followed by a significant drop in the most recent year:

- **Period 1 to 3:** Skilled labor remained the dominant group, averaging roughly 60% of the workforce.
- **Period 4 Decline:** The 2023/24 period saw a **sharp decline**, with skilled labor dropping to 43%. This represents a significant loss of qualified personnel within companies registered under the Construction Industry Council.

4.2.5. Local vs. Foreign Employment Representation (2020–2024)

This analysis evaluates the balance between local (Eswatini) and foreign employees within the construction industry.

Table 8. Employment by nationality



Data from Table 8 indicates a strong preference for local labor, consistent with national employment policies. Between 2019 and 2024, local employment maintained a high average of 94%. While there was a gradual decline in local representation through Period 3 (dropping to 88%), Period 4 saw a sharp increase, with locals making up 98% of the workforce.

4.2. Qualitative Findings and Analysis

4.2.1. Overview of Methodology and Primary Research Question

To contextualize the quantitative data, this phase involved in-depth interviews with **ten senior managers** and **twelve procurement officials**. The investigation focused on the central research question: *Do public procurement tender awards contribute to UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) in Eswatini?*

The majority of participants indicated that tender awards have had a **minimal impact** on creating sustainable employment or fostering broad economic growth. Feedback highlighted several systemic bottlenecks, primarily related to the timing of awards that hinder the industry’s ability to support SDG 8.

4.2.2. Thematic Analysis of Findings

Theme 1: Deficiencies in Procurement Planning

Participants identified a lack of strategic planning as a primary barrier to achieving **SDG 8, Target 8.3** (promoting entrepreneurship and SME growth). The absence of comprehensive procurement plans leads to rushed project approvals. This issue is exacerbated by inconsistent government cash flows,

which frequently force tender approvals and contract awards into the final months of the financial year.

Theme 2: Carry-Over Projects and Validity Constraints

The timing of awards is heavily dictated by the structural nature of project funding. One Participant claims that multi-year projects require the carry-over of unspent funds, which often delays the scheduling of new tenders. Another issue participants raised is limitations such as the standard 90-day tender validity period compel agencies to defer procurement until the end of the financial year to ensure that the award period aligns with late-stage funding allocations.

Theme 3: Budgetary and Disbursement Cycles

The government's fiscal cycle creates a significant concentration of activity late in the year. Although the budget cycle begins in April, participants noted that funds are often not received until August, with actual disbursements occurring even later. They claim the Lead-Time Challenges whereby Capital projects require a lead time of 6–8 months. Participants also argued that Starting procurement too early risks a misalignment with actual cash availability. Consequently, officials often delay the tendering process until the second half of the year to ensure financial coverage, resulting in a “seasonal” surge of awards that does not support steady, permanent employment.

Theme 4: Influence of Donor Funding

International donor funding (e.g., World Bank or African Development Bank) introduces a layer of complexity that bypasses local legislation. Participants claim that projects financed by international donors must follow financier-specific rules, including opening tenders to all member states. Participants noted that the Eswatini Public Procurement Act (2011) often has no operational effect on these projects. This creates a disconnect between national development goals and the procurement timelines of large-scale, donor-funded capital projects.

5. Discussion

This section analyses tender award amounts for works, goods, and services within the public procurement sector. Specifically, it examines awards distributed by procuring entities during the 2023/2024 Financial Year and provides a comparative analysis of contract values awarded to local companies versus external or joint venture firms.”

5.1. Analysing Awarded Tender Amounts for Works, Goods, and Services via Public Procurement

The quantitative analysis showed that 69% of the total tender value was awarded for Works projects, which are primarily capital projects, exceeding the value awarded for goods and services. This implies that the majority of the awarded amount (US\$27,570,720 out of a total of US\$39,890,922 in the 2023/2024 financial year) went towards capital projects, typically executed by local or joint venture companies.

Despite this significant investment in capital projects, the follow-up interviews suggested there was only a minimal effect of tender awards toward achieving Target 8.3 of the SDGs (promoting job creation and economic growth). These qualitative results are confirmation to the broader literature.

Uehara (2020) argues that a key challenge remains: many procurement officials prioritize acquiring goods and services at the lowest possible cost, neglecting issues of sustainability and development. Strategically applied public procurement in developing countries like Eswatini *should* see these capital projects create decent work and economic growth in the long run. The findings of Meshack et al. (2023) support this potential, as their conceptual model suggests that Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) can positively impact 12 of the 17 UN SDGs (70% of the total SDGs).

The discrepancy between the high value of capital projects and the minimal reported impact on SDG 8 is likely rooted in the timing of government spending. As alluded to by participants, the government budget and disbursement cycle dictates the procurement schedule. This delay hinders progress because many procurement entities, such as state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—which account for the majority of the works projects awarded (69% of the total)—rely on government grants to execute these projects. This suggests that greater employment and economic growth could be realized through awarding tenders at the beginning of the financial year, particularly by state-owned enterprises whose capital projects depend on timely government grants. Nonetheless the 2018 SDG Index and Dashboard report found that no country was on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and this served as a wakeup call for many countries (Walsh et al., 2020).

Allen et al. (2019), highlights that despite being among leading countries in implementation SDG, Australia, faces a key challenge of the lack of clear and agreed-upon national target values. This issue highlights the findings of Masuda et al. (2022), who note that localization and multi-stakeholder partnerships are crucial, with local governments being uniquely positioned to facilitate these initiatives. Similarly, Ma et al. (2022) suggest that improving the utilization of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) requires global collaboration between governments and practitioners, which, in the context of Eswatini, includes donor agencies. Ultimately, these challenges echo the institutional barriers identified by Rahman (2021), who argues that key institutional bottlenecks hindering SDG achievement include erroneous stakeholder analysis, data unobtainability, an absence of competency and accountability, and a top-down policy approach.

5.2. Tender Awards by Tendering Entity

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) were the primary recipients of procurement awards, receiving 76% of the total. Municipalities followed with 15%, financial institutions received 7%, and other organizations accounted for the remaining 2%. This high proportion suggests that public procurement through SOEs is a key mechanism for supporting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.

Notably, more than 80% of the awards to SOEs were granted in the three months preceding the financial year end: January, February, and March 2024. These findings are corroborated by qualitative research, where participants indicated that delays in fund disbursement frequently push tender approvals and subsequent awards into the final quarter of the financial year. This trend suggests that most SOEs commit their funds just before the year ends to utilize the allocated budget.

The inconsistent tender award patterns, particularly for SOEs and municipalities, introduce unpredictability that can hinder the attainment of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). This uncertainty may limit ability to effectively plan for human capital and resource apportionment, possibly affecting employment.

Participants strongly suggested that poor financial planning and cashflow management present a major obstacle to public procurement effectively contributing to SDG 8, Target 8.3 (promoting entrepreneurship and SME growth). These results align with Moyer and Hedden (2020), who suggest that despite SDGs being central to development planning, limited progress will be made globally towards achieving these specific goals by 2030. In contrast, Aust et al. (2020) found that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) plays a crucial role in SDG progress, particularly in 44 African countries. Ultimately, to foster decent employment and stimulate economic growth, public procurement must play a more effective role by ensuring increased participation from a wider range of enterprises.

In the context of Eswatini, donor-funded projects often include specific rules governing the tendering process, fund disbursement methods, and procurement timelines. Bauhr et al. (2019) reinforce the importance of these procedures, confirming that transparency in public procurement is vital for ensuring fair competition and mitigating corruption risks, a sentiment shared by project financiers.

5.3. Analysis of Tender Amounts Awarded to Local and Joint Venture Companies

The analysis of procurement awards reveals a distinct preference for local businesses, with 68% of the total awards being granted to local companies, while 32% were made to external or joint venture companies. Interestingly, there were no awards granted to joint venture or external companies for five months within the reporting period. Although limited, the few awards secured by joint venture or external companies are still crucial for stimulating local economic growth and promoting decent work for citizens. These findings echo the proactive strategy observed in Papua New Guinea, specifically their ‘Vision 2050’ strategy. This strategy promotes local companies in government procurement tenders by offering tax breaks and incentives for indigenous-owned companies (Uehara, 2020). However, the trend reversed significantly in March 2024, where external or joint venture companies received the highest concentration of awards, accounting for 89% of the total tender value awarded that month.

The concentration of large tenders at the end of the 2023/2024 financial year is primarily attributed to interview participants highlighting procurement delays and poor planning, which negatively impacts the timely achievement of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) for both large and small enterprises. A significant challenge is securing donor funding, which requires strict adherence to international procurement guidelines (e.g., World Bank); local SMEs often struggle to meet the required skills and experience stipulated by these rules. This issue underscores the need for effective procurement strategies—such as those advocated by Nani and Ali (2020)—which require a well-defined strategy, system integration, and adequate human resource support to improve accountability, transparency, and efficiency, ultimately better aligning procurement practices with the objectives of SDG 8.

5.4. Decent Employment Trend Annual Reports 2020-2024

The construction industry remains heavily male-dominated. The drastic reduction of women in the sector during the 2023/2024 period suggests that workforce contractions such as retirements or layoffs disproportionately affected women. This trend poses a significant challenge to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which advocates for “Decent Work and Economic Growth” for all, specifically women and youth. The current trajectory suggests that men are remaining in the industry

at higher rates than women during economic or structural shifts. The types of construction projects procured may be viewed as “unsuitable” or inaccessible for women, potentially due to a lack of gender-sensitive workplace policies or the physical nature of the specific contracts awarded.

The data from the 2023/2024 period indicates a massive downsizing of permanent staff among CIC members. This transition from stable employment to precarious, short-term contracts can be attributed to several factors:

1. **Post-Pandemic Recovery:** The industry is experiencing a slow economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic, leading firms to avoid long-term financial commitments.
2. **Project Inadequacy:** The volume and scale of works awarded to contractors were insufficient to sustain “decent work” (as defined by SDG 8) or justify permanent overhead costs.
3. **Risk Mitigation:** Contractors have shifted their preference toward short-term staffing to maintain flexibility in a volatile market where project pipelines are inconsistent.

The sharp decrease in skilled employment undermines the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which targets full and productive employment and decent work for all by 2030, including equal pay for work of equal value. While the construction sector contributed positively to SDG 8 in previous years, it failed to maintain this momentum in 2023/2024. This decline is particularly notable as it coincides with the period in which the study assessed the impact of tenders awarded under the Eswatini Public Procurement Act of 2011. The data suggests that current procurement outcomes may not be providing the stability required to retain a high-quality, skilled workforce, leading to a “deskilling” of the active labor pool.

The minimal presence of foreign workers (averaging only 6% of the workforce) reflects the strict application of national labor regulations. These findings suggest that the government effectively ensures that all unskilled roles are reserved exclusively for local citizens. Foreign recruitment is limited to specialized or “scarce” skills that are currently unavailable within the local labor market. This high level of local participation demonstrates that the construction industry remains a primary vehicle for domestic job creation and the fulfilment of national localization targets.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This section synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative data to provide targeted, actionable policy recommendations. The central finding is that systemic procurement delays directly undermine SDG 8 by creating a “stop-start” employment cycle that disproportionately affects women and skilled youth.

6.1. Conclusions

The study concludes that public procurement in Eswatini is heavily skewed toward **Works (69%)**, with State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) acting as the primary implementation vehicles. While SOEs demonstrate higher agility than central ministries, they are burdened by a “seasonal” award cycle. The mandatory sequential review process by the Eswatini Public Procurement Regulatory Agency (ESPPRA), combined with late budget disbursements, forces a concentration of awards at the end of the fiscal year.

This delay has a devastating socio-economic impact: the 2023/2024 data confirms that late awards led to massive layoffs, particularly of skilled personnel and women. Due to the physical nature of traditional construction, women are often the first to be retrenched during gaps between contracts, directly defeating the targets of SDG8, Target 8.6.

6.2. Differentiated Policy Recommendations

To transition from mere compliance to the achievement of “Decent Work,” the following operational recommendations are proposed for specific actors:

6.2.1. For State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and Municipalities

- *Mandatory Procurement Planning:* Entities must develop and publish annual procurement plans by the first quarter (Q1). This allows SMEs and contractors to forecast labor needs rather than engaging in reactive, short-term hiring.
- *Adherence to 90-Day Validity:* Management must be held accountable for awarding tenders within the 90-day validity period. Exceeding this timeline should require a formal “Impact on Employment” justification to the board.
- *Phased Project Launching:* SOEs should stagger project start dates throughout the year to ensure a consistent flow of work, preventing the sharp drop-off in employment seen in the 2023/2024 cycle.

6.2.2. For Central Government and Regulatory Bodies (ESPPRA)

- *Policy Amendment (Prompt Payment):* The Procurement Act should be amended to include a “Security of Payment” clause. This would mandate interest on late payments to contractors, protecting them from the cash-flow crises that lead to staff layoffs.
- *Gender-Sensitive Procurement Criteria:* Implement a policy where tender evaluations reward contractors who maintain a minimum threshold (e.g., 20%) of permanent female and youth employment.
- *Streamlined Review Sequencing:* ESPPRA should introduce a “Fast-Track” review for recurring capital projects to reduce the administrative lead time that currently pushes awards to the end of the fiscal year.

6.2.3. For External Financiers and Donor Agencies (World Bank, AfDB)

- *Harmonization Workshops:* Before tender commencement, donors and procuring entities should conduct joint “Contractor Sensitization Workshops.” These should clarify the gap between international donor rules and the Eswatini Public Procurement Act (2011) to manage contractor expectations.
- *Direct Disbursement Mechanisms:* To avoid delays caused by national treasury bottlenecks, donor-funded projects should utilize direct payment systems to contractors upon certification of work, ensuring labor retention.

6.2.4 For Local Authorities

- *Local Labor Retention Schemes*: Municipalities should require contractors to submit a “Skills Retention Plan” as part of their bid, detailing how they will maintain skilled youth and female staff during the project lifecycle, even during minor funding delays.

7. Implications for Policy and Future Research

The findings of this study provide critical information to stakeholders, underscoring the potential of public procurement policies to contribute significantly to SDG 8, Target 8.3 (promoting entrepreneurship and SME growth). Acknowledging and actively supporting these policies could accelerate Eswatini’s progress towards achieving SDG 8 faster than other countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region by 2030. To gain a complete understanding of public procurement’s full impact, future studies must specifically examine tendering practices within central government ministries. Including and accounting for procurement data from these ministries is crucial for accurately gauging the collective effect of public spending on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

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