

Busting the Bribe Barrier and How to Square the Circle of Transparency and Efficiency to Unlock Public Procurement

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Abstract— This paper investigates the essential conflict between transparency and efficiency in the Zambian public procurement system, arguing that a lack of human capital is the primary obstacle to effective governance. While transparency is crucial for accountability and minimizing corruption, an overemphasis on bureaucratic procedures has significantly impaired efficiency, leading to project delays and a decline in public trust. By employing the theoretical frameworks of ten prominent scholars, including Gary Becker's human capital theory and Peter Drucker's *Management by Objectives*, the paper analyzes specific challenges within the Zambian Civil Service, such as the disparity between skills and job requirements, insufficient performance management, and a risk-averse organizational culture. The research utilizes a qualitative, desk-based methodology, synthesizing existing literature to provide actionable recommendations for the Cabinet Office. These recommendations include the development of a strategic human capital investment plan, a comprehensive reform of performance management systems to focus on outcomes, and the launch of a leadership program designed to transform organizational culture. The paper concludes by asserting that, in certain circumstances, the principle of efficiency should logically take precedence over transparency to prioritize timely service delivery and avert the serious repercussions of delayed development. This shift requires the establishment of a high-trust system based on professional expertise rather than bureaucratic control.

Keywords— Human capital; Public procurement; Efficiency; Transparency; and Zambia.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conflict between achieving efficiency (speed, cost-effectiveness) and ensuring transparency (accountability, anti-corruption) represents a core dilemma in public sector management worldwide, a challenge that is particularly pronounced in Zambia's public procurement system. Public procurement, which constitutes a significant portion of public spending, serves as the crucial intersection where this trade-off most evidently affects state performance (World Bank, 2013). Although initiatives to enhance transparency through stringent documentation, public disclosures, and intricate evaluation processes are vital for reducing corruption and increasing public trust (Kaufmann, 2010), these very requirements frequently lead to considerable bureaucratic delays and administrative expenses, thus hindering operational efficiency and the prompt provision of public services (Guccio et al.,

2011). This research seeks to explore the efficiency–transparency paradox within the Zambian civil service to propose a comprehensive framework that reconciles these conflicting objectives for improved public sector performance.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The background for the topic 'Busting the bribe barrier and how to square the circle of transparency and efficiency to unlock public procurement' is rooted in the significant role of public procurement globally and the specific challenges faced within the Zambian context.

The Critical Role of Public Procurement

Public procurement, which refers to the method by which government entities obtain goods, services, and works, serves as a crucial element of public spending and governance. On a global scale, procurement represents a significant share of a nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with estimates indicating it constitutes approximately 10 percent of Zambia's GDP (Parliament of Zambia, n.d.). In light of this considerable expenditure, the process is grounded in fundamental principles aimed at ensuring the efficient utilization of taxpayer funds. These principles encompass economy, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, competition, and fairness, all directed towards achieving 'value for money' (Parliament of Zambia, n.d.; Transparency International, 2024).

Nevertheless, owing to the substantial value, intricate processes, and numerous stakeholders involved, public procurement is often regarded as the government function most susceptible to mismanagement, waste, and corruption (OECD, 2017). Corruption within this domain can result in project failures, the misappropriation of public funds, and a decline in public confidence (Kangwa, 2025; OECD, 2017).

The Efficiency - Transparency Dilemma

The essence of this dilemma is rooted in the conflict between two key goals: transparency and accountability. These objectives aim to promote openness by making tender notices, evaluation criteria, and contract awards publicly available, which is crucial for preventing corruption, encouraging fair competition, and ensuring that officials are held accountable (UNOPS, 2012; Open Government Partnership, 2017). Transparency is regarded as a powerful

mechanism to guarantee value for money (Transparency International, 2024); efficiency and timeliness are critical since effective procurement guarantees the prompt and economical provision of goods, services, and public works (UNOPS, 2012; ResearchGate, 2024).

Nevertheless, excessively stringent or protracted evaluation and compliance procedures, although designed to improve transparency, may create bureaucratic hurdles, cause delays, and obstruct project completion, thus compromising efficiency (ResearchGate, 2024; GSDRC, 2017). Consequently, the dilemma lies in how to create a system that upholds high integrity without compromising the speed and effectiveness necessary for civil service performance.

The Context of Public Procurement in Zambia

In Zambia, the dilemma of efficiency and transparency is especially evident amidst ongoing reforms and enduring systemic challenges. The Zambian government has formalized its reforms through legislation, particularly the Public Procurement Act of 2020 (Sampa, 2024; Sipalo, 2021). This Act created the Zambia Public Procurement Authority (ZPPA) to regulate the procurement process, aiming to enhance effectiveness and mitigate corrupt practices (Sampa, 2024). Additionally, the government has made investments in digital solutions, including the Electronic Government Procurement (E-GP) system, which is designed to boost transparency, shorten procurement timelines, and fight corruption (Parliament of Zambia, n.d.; Queen's University Belfast, 2024).

Despite these initiatives, systemic issues continue to exist: for instance, the inconsistent performance evidenced by reports from the Auditor General (AG) and the Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC), which repeatedly point out significant procurement irregularities, including overpricing, failure to deliver contracted goods, and conflicts of interest (Sampa, 2024; Parliament of Zambia, n.d.); operational inefficiencies, as studies have indicated that delays and cost overruns are prevalent, attributed to a lack of streamlined processes, insufficient procurement planning, and inadequate enforcement of regulations (Chanda et al., 2023; Mwamba, 2022); and a sluggish digital transition, where the potential advantages of the E-GP system, such as reduced timelines and enhanced accountability, have yet to be fully realized due to its gradual implementation and obstacles to adoption (Parliament of Zambia, n.d.; ResearchGate, 2024). These observations highlight a persistent institutional failure in which the goals of transparency and efficiency frequently conflict, hindering the civil service's ability to effectively deliver public services and ultimately undermining the principle of value for money (Sipalo, 2021). Consequently, this study is crucial for investigating practical and context-specific solutions to reconcile these competing priorities in order to improve civil service performance in Zambia.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Civil Service in Zambia is significantly hindered by a continuous, systemic challenge in effectively balancing the inherent trade-off between the demand for increased

transparency and the need to maintain operational efficiency in its public procurement processes. Although the government's initiatives, particularly the enactment of the Public Procurement Act No. 8 of 2020 and the required implementation of the Electronic Government Procurement (E-GP) system, are intended to improve accountability and mitigate fraud, the current execution leads to a contradictory failure. On one side, the push for more stringent controls and procedures (transparency) frequently results in excessive bureaucracy, delays, and implementation obstacles (ResearchGate, 2024). Conversely, despite these rigorous controls, a deficiency in institutional capacity and enforcement permits widespread non-compliance, which undermines the very transparency objectives they were meant to fulfill (The International Journal of Business Management and Technology, 2025).

The issue at hand is that this unmanaged dilemma results in a bottleneck, which directly correlates to a significant loss of public funds and a failure to deliver public services in a timely manner, ultimately compromising the performance and credibility of the civil service. This assertion is supported by statistical and correlational evidence from authoritative research sources in Zambia, which substantiates this issue: 1. Evidence of Financial Loss and Inefficiency (Low Efficiency) Significant Loss of Public Funds: Annual reports from the Auditor General (AG) consistently underscore the financial repercussions of procurement irregularities. For instance, losses reported for a single year included K25.5 million in government revenue and overpayments amounting to K110 million (Office of the Auditor General, 2022, cited in The International Journal of Business Management and Technology, 2025). Additionally, in a particular case, over ZMW 23.5 million was lost due to the non-delivery of materials, highlighting a failure in contract management and public expenditure (CUTS Lusaka, n.d.); Widespread Non-Adherence: The non-adherence to procurement procedures is a persistent issue, resulting in wasteful expenditure, irregular payments, and a considerable increase in the total amount of funds under scrutiny over time (Parliament of Zambia, 2022); project delays and cost overruns: research specifically confirms that the absence of streamlined procurement processes leads to frequent delays in project delivery and cost overruns, which pose significant obstacles to the success of public projects (Chanda et al., 2023, cited in ResearchGate, 2024).

2. Evidence of the transparency non-compliance link; Correlation between Lack of Transparency and Irregularities: A quantitative study found a moderate positive correlation (0.552) between a lack of transparency and non-compliance with procurement procedures, directly indicating that a reduction in transparency fosters greater irregularities (The International Journal of Business Management and Technology, 2025); Corruption and Non-Compliance: The same study revealed a strong positive correlation (0.567) between higher levels of corruption and breaches in procurement regulations, underscoring that corruption remains an endemic problem despite transparency mechanisms (The International Journal of Business Management and

Technology, 2025); Impact of Capacity: The challenge is compounded by a strong negative correlation (-0.743) between non-compliance and institutional capacity, suggesting that the absence of robust human resources, training, and administrative capabilities allows non-compliant practices to persist, regardless of the stated transparency rules (The International Journal of Business Management and Technology, 2025). In summary, the Zambian civil service is caught in a self-defeating loop where new legislative and digital tools meant to increase transparency paradoxically fail to curb financial mismanagement due to weak institutional enforcement, while their rigid implementation simultaneously reduces the efficiency and speed needed for effective service delivery. The primary objective of the study is to tackle the fundamental issue of the unregulated efficiency transparency trade-off in public procurement within Zambia.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research is to explore the elements influencing the efficiency–transparency dilemma in public procurement within Zambia, as well as to suggest a framework aimed at improving the performance of the civil service. The specific objectives of the study are:

- i. To assess the specific mechanisms through which the mandate for increased transparency (e.g., rigorous evaluation, documentation) contributes to operational inefficiencies and delays in the public procurement process within the Zambian civil service.
- ii. To determine the institutional and technical factors (e.g., capacity, enforcement, E-GP adoption) that prevent the successful conversion of legal transparency reforms into effective anti-corruption and value-for-money outcomes in public procurement.
- iii. To evaluate the correlation between procurement efficiency outcomes (e.g., timely delivery, cost-effectiveness) and the overall performance of public service delivery projects in key Zambian sectors.
- iv. To propose a harmonised policy and institutional framework that effectively balances the requirements of transparency and efficiency to optimise public procurement and enhance civil service performance in Zambia.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of efficiency and transparency in public procurement within developing nations, especially regarding Zambia's recent reforms, is underpinned by a substantial body of literature. The primary themes encompass the essential challenge of reconciling these two objectives, the effects of legal reforms such as the Zambian PPA 2020, and the significant influence of e-Government Procurement (e-GP) systems.

The Public Procurement Efficiency-Transparency Dilemma

Public procurement represents a substantial share of GDP in developing countries, amounting to \$9.5 trillion worldwide and constituting 15–22% of GDP in numerous developing nations. It serves as an essential conduit for development

financing (Transparency International, 2021; World Bank, 2016). The primary challenge lies in reconciling two conflicting objectives:

VI. TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This is regarded as the most efficient mechanism to prevent corruption, encourage equitable competition, and guarantee the prudent utilization of public resources (UNOPS, 2012). It entails the transparent disclosure of regulations, tender announcements, assessment standards, and contract allocations. Transparency is viewed as an essential condition for ensuring the responsibility of public officials, minimizing the risk of injustice, and fostering public confidence (UNOPS, 2012).

VII. ECONOMY AND EFFICIENCY

This goal requires prompt delivery, cost efficiency, and value for money (VFM). The quest for complete transparency frequently leads to procedural delays. An excessive emphasis is often placed on procedural adherence (transparency), while insufficient attention is given to performance aimed at achieving value for money (efficiency), resulting in procurement acting as a hindrance to service delivery (Basheka & Kabatereine, 2013). For example, the duration needed for tender submissions can disrupt budgetary cycles (UNOPS, 2012).

VIII. PRINCIPAL-AGENT THEORY (MITNICK, 1975)

Principal-Agent Theory, which was first formalized by Mitnick in 1975 (drawing upon earlier economic concepts), holds significant relevance to the dilemma of efficiency versus transparency in public procurement and its impact on civil service performance. This theory tackles the fundamental agency problem that arises when one party, the principal (the public/government), assigns tasks to another party, the agent (civil service officials/procurement officers), whose interests may not be perfectly aligned with those of the principal. In the realm of public procurement, the principal seeks efficiency (optimal value for money) and high transparency (accountability and anti-corruption).

However, agents (procurement officials) might be driven by self-interest, such as maximizing personal benefits (e.g., engaging in corruption) or minimizing their efforts (resulting in inefficiency), which leads to a conflict of interest. To oversee the agent, the principal implements transparency measures, but these same measures (for instance, excessive bureaucratic procedures) can escalate transaction costs and prolong process times, potentially hindering efficiency and adversely affecting civil service performance in Zambia. The theory offers a framework for analyzing the structuring of contracts, incentives, and monitoring systems to align the interests of civil servants with the public good, which is directly pertinent to the central research topic.

IX. TRANSACTION COST ECONOMICS (COASE, 1937; WILLIAMSON, 1975)

Transaction Cost Economics (TCE), which was introduced by Coase in 1937 and further developed by Williamson in 1975, offers a significant perspective for examining the Efficiency–Transparency Dilemma by concentrating on the costs linked to an exchange. TCE posits that organizations, such as the procurement function within the Zambian civil service, opt for governance structures that minimize the total of production costs and transaction costs. In the realm of public procurement, attaining transparency and accountability frequently requires formal regulations, comprehensive documentation, and protracted review processes, all of which represent substantial transaction costs.

These procedures, which are heavily focused on compliance, while they mitigate the risk of corruption and information asymmetrically referred to as opportunism by TCE can simultaneously compromise efficiency by increasing time, resources, and bureaucratic hurdles. This balance between governance costs (transparency measures) and the intended result (efficiency/performance) is pivotal to the dilemma. Utilizing TCE aids in assessing whether the intricate transparency framework in Zambian public procurement incurs transaction costs that surpass the potential benefits of diminished corruption, thereby obstructing the overall performance of the civil service.

X. GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

The existing body of literature regarding public procurement in Zambia, especially in relation to the efficiency-transparency dilemma, underscores several critical issues while simultaneously exposing gaps that necessitate further investigation. Numerous studies validate the presence of inefficiencies, non-compliance, and corruption within Zambia's public procurement framework; however, the following domains remain insufficiently explored: 1. quantification of the efficiency-transparency trade-off absence of a modelled trade-off: the literature often claims that transparency measures (such as rigorous evaluations and extensive documentation) lead to delays and cost overruns (inefficiency), yet few studies have formulated a specific, quantitative model to assess this trade-off within the Zambian context.

Research has not definitively identified the threshold at which an increase in transparency transitions from being beneficial to significantly hindering efficiency; impact of specific transparency clauses: there is a scarcity of analysis regarding how the detailed, mandatory public disclosure requirements outlined in the Public Procurement Act No. 8 of 2020 directly affect the duration and cost associated with various types of procurement (goods versus works versus services). 2. post-implementation effectiveness of the E-GP system with an emphasis on adoption barriers: a significant portion of recent research concerning the electronic government procurement (E-GP) system has concentrated on the obstacles to its implementation (such as inadequate training, resistance, and technical infrastructure). lack of

impact evaluation: there exists a deficiency in studies that quantify the actual post-adoption effects of the E-GP system on both efficiency (for instance, cycle time reduction) and transparency (such as changes in corruption indices and public access to data) in government entities that have fully transitioned. The comprehensive assessment of the true value-for-money provided by the system remains pending. 3. Institutional and Behavioral Misalignment Role of Civil Service Culture: While the existing literature highlights issues such as "resistance" and "inconsistent enforcement," there remains a significant gap in comprehensive, qualitative research that delves into the organizational culture and behavioral elements within the civil service that hinder reforms. The studies frequently fail to adequately clarify the reasons behind public officials' non-compliance with established regulations. Disparity Between Law and Practice: Research recognizes the discrepancy between contemporary procurement laws (PPA 2020) and the unsatisfactory outcomes reflected in auditor general's reports. However, there is a pressing need for thorough institutional analysis to pinpoint which specific control mechanisms such as audits, approvals, or sanctions—are persistently ineffective and the reasons for their failure. In summary, the literature identifies the existing problems (inefficiency, non-compliance), yet it lacks robustness in quantifying the exact trade-offs between fundamental principles, assessing the results achieved from the primary technological solution (E-GP), and providing a profound explanation of the cultural and institutional origins of non-compliance.

Legal Reforms: The Public Procurement Act (PPA) Of 2020

Zambia's legal structure governing public procurement has undergone numerous reforms aimed at tackling inefficiencies and corruption, leading to the establishment of the Public Procurement Act No. 8 of 2020. This Act was specifically enacted to improve transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, economy, value for money, competition, and accountability (Parliament of Zambia, 2020).

Positive Intent Vs. Practical Impact

Although the PPA 2020 and its related regulations establish stringent standards, various reports continually emphasize a disparity between the legal stipulations and actual results, with ongoing issues such as cost overruns, delays, and inadequate enforcement (Chanda et al., 2025; Parliament of Zambia, 2022).

Supplier Evaluation Rigour

Research examining the new procedures indicates that although strategies such as competitive bidding (CB) and supplier qualification screening (SQS) can improve project outcomes, excessively stringent or extended supplier evaluation (SE) processes may negatively affect progress, resulting in delays and hindering project success (Chanda et al., 2025). This clearly demonstrates the efficiency-transparency dilemma present in Zambia's current legal framework.

The Role of E-Government Procurement (E-GP) Systems

E-GP, which refers to the application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the execution of procurement activities, serves as the main global strategy for balancing the trade-off between efficiency and transparency. Dual Benefit: E-GP systems are acknowledged worldwide for their ability to boost efficiency (by lowering transaction costs and expediting procurement cycles) and to improve transparency (by offering online access to information, automating processes, and decreasing human interaction, thereby reducing the chances of corruption) (World Bank, 2016; Khorana et al., 2024).

Zambian Context

The PPA 2020 explicitly requires procuring entities to utilize the e-GP system (ZPPA, 2021). Nevertheless, the implementation in Zambia faces obstacles including the absence of strong institutional frameworks, poor IT infrastructure, a shortage of skilled personnel, and reluctance to adapt to new methods (Moranda, 2015).

Effectiveness Requires Institutional Support

Research highlights that technology by itself is inadequate; the effective adoption and implementation of e-GP necessitate a comprehensive reform of the administrative framework, which includes modifications to regulations, operational policies, and the skill sets of personnel (World Bank, 2012; Khorana et al., 2024). The academic literature consistently points to public procurement in developing nations as a locus of conflict between the objectives of efficiency and transparency, often resulting in a fundamental quandary. Public procurement expenditures typically represent a significant portion of government outlays, rendering it essential for both national advancement and fiscal oversight (World Bank, 2016).

Although transparency through open disclosure and well-defined procedures is essential for mitigating corruption, promoting competition, and ensuring accountability (UNOPS, 2012), it frequently introduces intricate bureaucratic processes. If these processes are not managed with care, they can lead to procedural compliance taking precedence over performance, causing considerable delays, administrative burdens, and ultimately, a negative effect on project efficiency and value for money (Basheka & Kabatereine, 2013). This trade-off is often framed within the context of Agency Theory, where the principals (government/citizens) are required to establish costly monitoring systems to deter agents (procurement officials) from engaging in opportunistic, self-serving behavior, such as corruption, which flourishes in conditions of information asymmetry (Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

Legal Reforms

Legal reforms, such as the Zambia Public Procurement Act (PPA) of 2020, are often implemented to address this issue by establishing a balance between conflicting principles. The PPA 2020 specifically seeks to improve both efficiency and transparency through an updated legal framework (Parliament of Zambia, 2020). Nevertheless, the execution of such reforms

is frequently limited by a disparity between the newly established formal institutions (the Act) and the existing informal institutions (corrupt practices, bureaucratic inertia, and insufficient capacity), a viewpoint grounded in New Institutional Economics (North, 1990). Studies indicate that while certain processes like competitive bidding can enhance project results, an excessive focus on strict procedural adherence (e.g., extended supplier evaluation periods) can ironically lead to new obstacles, directly demonstrating the ongoing efficiency challenge despite legal progress (Chanda et al., 2025). Consequently, the success of the new legislation relies on strong enforcement and the capacity to address deep-rooted systemic problems.

The implementation of e-Government Procurement (e-GP) systems is widely considered the most effective technical approach to address the efficiency-transparency dilemma. E-GP systems leverage Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to streamline the procurement process, thereby enhancing efficiency by reducing manual processing time and lowering transaction costs (Khorana et al., 2024). At the same time, they enhance transparency by centralizing the dissemination of tender announcements, award decisions, and contract information, which minimizes human discretion and establishes an audit trail, serving as a significant deterrent to corruption (World Bank, 2012). In nations such as Zambia, where the e-GP system is compulsory, its effective implementation and use are essential for achieving the full advantages of the PPA 2020. Nevertheless, the actual impact depends on the presence of sufficient IT infrastructure, robust governance frameworks, and the ability to overcome resistance to change from both procuring entities and suppliers (Moranda, 2015).

Efficiency (Speed) And Scrutiny (Transparency And Anti-Corruption Measures)

The discourse regarding public procurement in Zambia frequently focuses on the intricate equilibrium between efficiency (speed) and scrutiny (transparency and anti-corruption initiatives). Scholarly literature indicates that although the objective is to optimize both aspects, trade-offs and challenges in implementation continue to pose considerable obstacles, particularly in an environment with a high risk of corruption (Transparency International, 2024; World Bank, 2018).

The Conflict: Speed Vs. Scrutiny

Public procurement represents a significant share of Zambia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which was estimated at 10% according to a parliamentary report from 2020. Therefore, ensuring its efficiency and integrity is essential for the country's development (CUTS-Lusaka, 2024).

Efficiency And Speed

Efficiency in public procurement focuses mainly on obtaining the greatest value for public funds while guaranteeing the prompt provision of public goods and services (Stritch et al., 2020). The case for expedited processes in procurement is essential to accelerate the delivery of public

services and meet governmental obligations, which has a direct effect on a nation's economic development and infrastructure (CUTS-Lusaka, 2024).

Scrutiny and Transparency

Scrutiny is facilitated by transparency, which entails establishing an open and accessible framework for stakeholders to observe and assess purchasing decisions (OECD, 2019). Transparency encompasses the publication of tender announcements, evaluation standards, and contract allocations (UNOPS, 2012). The case for Scrutiny highlights that public procurement is particularly susceptible to corruption, with worldwide estimates indicating that 10–25% of this expenditure is diverted to illegal activities (UNODC, 2013, cited in Transparency International, 2024). Transparency is regarded as one of the most potent instruments to prevent corruption, enhance competition, and ultimately provide greater value for money (Bauhr et al., 2019; Knack et al., 2017).

The Trade-Off

The fundamental issue resides in the potential that heightened oversight and regulations, although essential for fighting corruption, may lead to inefficiencies and delays within the procurement process (Thai, 2001; Basel Institute on Governance, 2018). On the other hand, an excessive focus on expediency, or 'acceptable deviations from procurement regulations', can open avenues for corruption and undermine the goals of procurement (Basel Institute on Governance, 2018).

Policy And Reform In Zambia

Zambia's legislative framework is explicitly designed to align these objectives, primarily through the Public Procurement Act (PPA) No. 8 of 2020. The Public Procurement Act No. 8 of 2020 aims to "enhance transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, economy, value for money, competition and accountability" in public procurement (Zambia Public Procurement Authority, 2021). This legislative objective seeks to address the speed-versus-scrutiny dilemma by ensuring that all principles are treated as co-equal.

Key Mechanism – E-Government Procurement (e-GP): The Act requires the implementation of an e-GP system. The comprehensive, mandatory deployment of e-GP is regarded by the World Bank as a crucial reform that aids in enhancing transparency and efficiency concurrently (World Bank, 2022). E-GP systems are internationally acknowledged for fostering transparency by offering information in accessible formats, minimizing opportunities for corruption, and expediting processes (Adam et al., 2020, cited in Ghossein et al., 2018).

Implementation Challenges

Despite the evident legislative aim for efficiency and transparency, practical obstacles remain: for example the procurement irregularities, the audits and academic research consistently been underscoring procurement irregularities, prompting inquiries into the efficiency and effectiveness of the Zambia Public Procurement Authority (ZPPA) in executing its

responsibilities (CUTS-Lusaka, 2024). Weaknesses and corruption highlighted in the studies with the concentration on local authorities have revealed deficiencies in the procurement management system and have pointed out the widespread occurrence of corruption, such as bribery and favoritism, and do result in delays and financial setbacks (Stecab Publishing, 2025). The issues of political interference also considerably affect procurement transparency and equity at the local level (Simpungwe, 2023).

Political Context and Academic Theories

The reform initiatives in Zambia are in line with global movements where the transparency of public procurement is a significant concern in governance and political accountability. Literature indicates that strong political commitment is a crucial factor for the success of procurement reform, particularly in achieving sustainable governance and transparency outcomes (ResearchGate, 2025). Given its extensive financial implications, procurement is a fundamental aspect of political manifestos that address governance, value for money, and anti-corruption measures (UNOPS, 2012). The Principal-Agent Theory, which focuses on the challenges of corruption and inefficiency within Zambian public institutions, can be examined through the lens of the Principal-Agent Theory (Stecab Publishing, 2025).

This framework analyzes the connection between the government (principal) and the procurement officers (agent), emphasizing how information asymmetry and insufficient oversight can result in inefficiencies and corruption. Transparency mechanisms such as e-GP represent efforts to mitigate this asymmetry and enhance accountability (Stecab Publishing, 2025). The impact of transparency in addressing concerns is twofold: it fosters competition and diminishes corruption by facilitating "horizontal monitoring" among competitors, particularly when information is disclosed ex-ante (prior to contract award) (Bauhr et al., 2019). The political motivation to limit transparency often arises from the potential for published information to be "politically damaging" if it exposes poor performance or unethical conduct (Institute for Government, 2024).

The Analysis of the Study

Objective 1: Assess the specific mechanisms through which the mandate for increased transparency (e.g., rigorous evaluation, documentation) contributes to operational inefficiencies and delays in the public procurement process within the Zambian civil service.

This objective is fundamentally based on Transaction Cost Economics (TCE), aiming to measure the ex-ante transaction costs associated with transparency mechanisms. The research intends to uncover how regulations designed to mitigate corruption (a type of opportunistic behavior) inadvertently create bureaucratic obstacles that hinder operational speed and efficiency. In particular, the requirements for "rigorous evaluation" and "documentation" escalate the time and effort that procurement officers must invest, potentially resulting in project delays and elevated administrative costs, which are a vital aspect of the efficiency side of the dilemma (Williamson,

1991). The analysis will concentrate on process mapping to identify the specific "bottlenecks" where transparency procedures disproportionately extend procurement lead times.

Objective 2: Determine the institutional and technical factors (e.g., capacity, enforcement, E-GP adoption) that prevent the successful conversion of legal transparency reforms into effective anti-corruption and value-for-money outcomes in public procurement.

This objective is closely aligned with Principal-Agent Theory and institutional theory, emphasizing the importance of governance mechanisms (transparency reforms) that are intended to alleviate agency problems. The objective recognizes that merely enacting transparency legislation does not ensure positive results; instead, it explores the shortcomings of these regulations in limiting the agent's (civil servant's) opportunistic behavior. Factors such as capacity (the absence of skilled personnel) and enforcement (insufficient monitoring and sanctions) directly relate to the concept of "agency costs" and the efficiency of monitoring systems (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Mitnick, 1975). Additionally, the analysis of the implementation of E-Government Procurement (E-GP) addresses a technical aspect frequently suggested as a remedy, as E-GP aims to simultaneously decrease information asymmetry and transaction costs, although its success relies on effective execution (Piga, 2011).

Objective 3: Evaluate the correlation between procurement efficiency outcomes (e.g., timely delivery, cost-effectiveness) and the overall performance of public service delivery projects in key Zambian sectors.

This objective delineates the connection between performance and the ultimate dependent variable of the study. It transcends the internal procurement process to substantiate the assertion that inefficiencies in procurement (such as delays and overspending) directly lead to subpar civil service performance, exemplified by postponed infrastructure projects or inadequate provision of essential goods. By statistically correlating efficiency indicators (timeliness, cost) with final service delivery metrics (such as project completion rates and quality measures), the study underscores the necessity of addressing this issue. This phase anchors the theoretical discussion in practical, concrete results for the Zambian populace, illustrating the tangible social costs associated with a misaligned procurement system (Guccio et al., 2011).

Objective 4: Propose a harmonised policy and institutional framework that effectively balances the requirements of transparency and efficiency to optimise public procurement and enhance civil service performance in Zambia.

This is the ultimate solution-focused goal. It necessitates the integration of results from the initial three analytical objectives to transition from identifying problems to implementing practical solutions. The suggested framework must be "harmonised," indicating that it should provide specific policy trade-offs that utilize insights derived from theoretical foundations. For example, the framework may propose that for low-value, non-complex transactions (characterized by low asset specificity and low uncertainty, as per Transaction Cost Economics), less formal transparency controls are preferable to enhance speed. In contrast, for high-

value, complex projects, the framework may advocate for rigorous monitoring and incentive structures (as per Principal-Agent Theory) in conjunction with targeted technological solutions to effectively manage the requisite bureaucratic demands. This approach guarantees that the recommendations are grounded in evidence and customized to the local Zambian context (Andrews, 2013).

XI. CONCLUSION

The efficiency-transparency dilemma in Zambian public procurement represents a significant governance challenge that has a profound effect on the performance of civil service. This study, by anchoring its examination in Principal-Agent Theory and Transaction Cost Economics (TCE), demonstrates that the push for greater transparency frequently incurs substantial ex-ante transaction costs (for instance, bureaucratic delays stemming from stringent documentation and evaluation), which result in operational inefficiencies. At the same time, inadequate institutional and technical capacity (such as limited E-GP adoption or ineffective enforcement) hinders these transparency initiatives from successfully addressing agency issues like corruption, thus failing to achieve the anticipated anti-corruption and value-for-money results. Ultimately, addressing this dilemma and improving overall civil service performance necessitates the implementation of a cohesive policy framework that strikes a balance between controls and efficiency. This framework should strategically reduce unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles for straightforward transactions (TCE emphasis) while utilizing technology and enhanced monitoring incentives to curb opportunistic behavior in complex, high-value procurement (Principal-Agent emphasis).

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