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**The Role of the Social Economy in Advancing the 2030 Agenda: Public Policy,
Governance and Socially Responsible Public Procurement**

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the role of the social economy in advancing the social dimension of the 2030 Agenda, with a particular focus on socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) as a governance mechanism. It seeks to address a gap in the literature regarding the limited integration of social economy actors and public procurement within the implementation framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Methodology: The paper adopts a conceptual and policy-oriented approach, drawing on existing academic literature and institutional frameworks (European Union, OECD, United Nations). It is complemented by a comparative reference to national policy developments in Greece and Spain, aiming to provide contextual grounding and policy relevance.

Findings: The analysis demonstrates that the social economy can be conceptualized as an intermediary governance mechanism linking public policy objectives with tangible social outcomes. SRPP emerges as a key enabling instrument that facilitates this interaction by directing public demand towards socially oriented entities. The comparative analysis highlights a significant gap between formal policy design and effective implementation, particularly in the Greek case, in contrast to a more operational and mature governance framework in Spain.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice:

The study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated governance framework in which SRPP and the social economy jointly function as mechanisms for the implementation of socially oriented SDGs. From a policy perspective, it underscores the importance of moving beyond formal regulatory frameworks towards operational tools, institutional coordination, and capacity-building mechanisms. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers on how to enhance the participation of social economy actors in public procurement systems and improve the effectiveness of SRPP as a policy instrument.

Keywords: *Social Economy, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Agenda 2030, Socially Responsible Public Procurement (SRPP), Public Policy, Social Inclusion, Food Security, Governance, Greece, Spain*

JEL Codes: *H57, I38, O35, I32, Q18*

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INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has reshaped the global policy landscape by introducing a comprehensive framework of interconnected social, economic, and environmental objectives (United Nations, 2015). Among these, the social dimension of sustainable development remains particularly demanding, as it requires the effective coordination of public policies, institutional mechanisms, and societal actors to address persistent challenges such as poverty, inequality, and access to essential goods and services.

In this context, increasing attention has been given to the role of the social economy as a complementary and, in some cases, alternative model of economic organization. The social economy encompasses a diverse set of entities, including cooperatives, associations, foundations, and social enterprises, which prioritize social objectives and democratic governance over profit maximization (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; European Commission, 2021). These organizations are widely recognized for their contribution to social cohesion, inclusion, and sustainable development, particularly through addressing unmet social needs and supporting vulnerable groups (OECD, 2022; Lamprinidis, 2023a).

At the same time, public policy plays a decisive role in shaping the conditions under which the social economy operates and evolves. Among the available policy instruments, public procurement has emerged as a strategic tool capable of influencing market behavior and promoting broader societal objectives (Thai, 2001; McCrudden, 2004). In particular, socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) enables public authorities to integrate social considerations into procurement processes, thereby supporting employment opportunities, social inclusion, and compliance with social and labor standards (European Commission, 2021; Lamprinidis, 2025a & 2025b).

Through this mechanism, public expenditure is no longer limited to the acquisition of goods and services but becomes a means of pursuing wider social policy goals. In this respect, SRPP can be understood as a governance tool that aligns economic activity with social objectives, reinforcing the role of the social economy within public policy frameworks (McCrudden, 2004).

Despite the growing recognition of both the social economy and SRPP in academic and policy debates, a significant gap remains in understanding how these elements can be systematically linked to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Existing studies tend to examine either the contribution of the social economy to development or the role of public procurement as a policy instrument, without fully conceptualizing their combined potential within an integrated governance framework (OECD, 2022).

This gap reflects a broader structural problem in the relationship between policy design and implementation. While regulatory frameworks formally recognize the role of the social economy and the potential of socially responsible public procurement (SRPP), their practical integration into governance systems remains limited. As a result, public policy often fails to effectively mobilize social economy actors as operational partners in the implementation of socially oriented Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In this context, the literature remains fragmented, as existing studies tend to examine either the contribution of the social economy to development or the role of public procurement as a policy instrument, without fully conceptualizing their combined function within an integrated governance framework. This raises a set of critical questions regarding how SRPP can operate as a governance mechanism, how social economy actors can be effectively integrated into

policy implementation processes, and to what extent national institutional frameworks enable or constrain this interaction.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the role of the social economy as a policy mechanism for advancing a core cluster of socially oriented SDGs, including poverty reduction (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), decent work (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and sustainable communities (SDG 11). It argues that the social economy can function as an intermediary layer between public policy and societal outcomes, facilitating the implementation of these goals through concrete economic and social activities (Lamprinidis, 2025a).

Building on this perspective, the paper further conceptualizes SRPP as a key enabling instrument that activates and supports the contribution of social economy actors. By directing public demand towards socially oriented entities, SRPP creates opportunities for the expansion of social economy activities and enhances their capacity to deliver measurable social outcomes, including access to essential goods such as food, employment opportunities, and community-based services (European Commission, 2021).

To address these questions, the study adopts a conceptual and policy-oriented approach, drawing on existing academic literature and institutional frameworks, including those of the European Union, OECD, and United Nations. The analysis is further complemented by a comparative reference to national policy developments in Greece and Spain, providing contextual grounding and policy relevance. Rather than relying on empirical data, the study focuses on the theoretical and governance dimensions of the relationship between socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) and the social economy within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Conceptualizing the Social Economy within the 2030 Agenda Framework

In recent years, the social economy has progressively moved from the margins of economic debate to a more central position within discussions on inclusive and sustainable development. Although definitions vary across countries and institutional contexts, there is broad agreement that the social economy includes organizations such as cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations, and social enterprises—entities that prioritize social objectives, democratic governance, and collective benefit over profit maximization (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Borzaga & Defourny, 2001; European Commission, 2021).

Beyond its definitional boundaries, what makes the social economy particularly relevant is its ability to respond to societal needs that are often inadequately addressed by either markets or public institutions. This perspective aligns with the concept of embeddedness introduced by Polanyi (1944), which highlights that economic activity is shaped by social relations and institutional structures. Within this theoretical framework, social economy organizations can be understood as hybrid actors operating at the intersection of the market, the state, and civil society (Nicholls, 2010; Kerlin, 2013). This approach also resonates with governance-oriented perspectives, which conceptualize policy instruments such as SRPP as mechanisms that actively shape market outcomes and align economic activity with social objectives.

Building on this perspective, more recent literature further develops this view by elaborating on the hybrid nature of social economy organizations operating at the intersection of the market, the state, and civil society (Nicholls, 2010; Kerlin, 2013). These organizations combine economic activity with explicit social objectives, contributing not only to service provision but also to social innovation and new forms of value creation (OECD, 2022; European Commission, 2021). Empirical evidence further suggests that social enterprises can play a

meaningful role in addressing development challenges, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional gaps and socio-economic inequalities (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). As a result, the social economy is increasingly viewed not as a peripheral sector, but as a meaningful component of modern welfare systems and inclusive growth strategies.

The relevance of the social economy becomes even more evident when examined through the lens of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework that integrates economic, social, and environmental priorities into a unified global agenda (United Nations, 2015). However, while the goals themselves are clearly articulated, the mechanisms through which they are implemented—particularly in relation to their social dimension—remains insufficiently theorized in the literature, particularly in terms of institutional and policy integration. This gap is particularly evident in the limited integration of social economy actors into formal governance frameworks for SDG implementation. Addressing this gap requires a closer examination of how public policy interacts with social economy actors—an issue that is explored in the following section.

Within this context, the present study focuses on a core cluster of socially oriented SDGs: poverty reduction (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), decent work (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and sustainable communities (SDG 11). These goals are closely interconnected and collectively represent the social pillar of sustainable development. Importantly, they also align closely with the areas in which social economy organizations are most active.

The contribution of the social economy to SDG 1 (No Poverty) is well established. Through the creation of employment opportunities, support for income-generating activities, and the provision of essential services, social economy organizations play a direct role in supporting vulnerable populations (OECD, 2022; Lamprinidis, 2025c & 2025d). In many cases, they operate precisely where traditional market mechanisms fail or where public interventions remain insufficient.

A similar dynamic is observed in relation to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). Social economy actors are actively involved in cooperative agricultural production, local food systems, and community-based distribution networks. These activities contribute not only to food availability but also to food accessibility, particularly for disadvantaged groups, while strengthening the resilience of local food systems (European Commission, 2021; United Nations, 2015).

In relation to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), the social economy plays a critical role in promoting inclusive employment. Social enterprises and cooperatives frequently create job opportunities for individuals who face structural barriers to labor market participation, including long-term unemployed individuals and persons with disabilities (OECD, 2022; Nicholls, 2010). These forms of employment are often characterized not only by economic value but also by social purpose.

The contribution to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is equally significant. Through inclusive governance structures and participatory decision-making processes, social economy organizations promote equitable access to resources, services, and opportunities, thereby helping to reduce socio-economic disparities (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; European Commission, 2021).

Finally, in relation to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), the social economy strengthens local development and community resilience. By embedding economic activity within local contexts, these organizations contribute to territorial cohesion, reinforce social

capital, and support sustainable urban and rural development (OECD, 2022; Kerlin, 2013).

What emerges from this analysis is that these goals are not independent of one another. Poverty (SDG 1) is closely linked to food security (SDG 2), both of which are influenced by employment opportunities (SDG 8) and broader patterns of inequality (SDG 10), all within the framework of communities (SDG 11). This interconnectedness highlights the need for approaches that treat sustainable development as a systemic and integrated process rather than a set of isolated objectives.

Within this framework, the present study conceptualizes the social economy as an intermediary governance mechanism—one that connects public policy interventions with tangible social outcomes. Rather than functioning solely as a sector of economic activity, the social economy acts as a bridge between policy objectives and their practical implementation.

At the same time, despite its growing importance, the role of the social economy in the implementation of the SDGs remains under-theorized in literature, particularly regarding the policy instruments and institutional arrangements required to fully mobilize its potential.

Public Policy and Socially Responsible Public Procurement as Governance Mechanisms

Public policy plays a decisive role in shaping the environment within which the social economy operates. While social economy actors demonstrate a strong capacity to address social needs, their ability to scale and sustain impact depends largely on the presence of supportive institutional frameworks and targeted policy interventions (OECD, 2022; European Commission, 2021). In this sense, public policy does not simply regulate the social economy — it actively enables, structures, and amplifies its contribution to sustainable development.

Among the available policy instruments, public procurement has gradually evolved from a purely administrative function into a strategic tool of governance. Traditionally associated with efficiency and value for money, procurement is now increasingly understood as a mechanism through which governments can influence market outcomes and pursue broader social objectives (Thai, 2001; McCrudden, 2004). This shift reflects a broader transformation in public administration, where economic transactions are used not only to acquire goods and services but also to generate social value.

As McCrudden (2004) argues, public procurement can serve as a vehicle for advancing social policy objectives by embedding social considerations within purchasing decisions. Similarly, Arrowsmith (2010) highlights that procurement frameworks—particularly within the European Union—have progressively incorporated the possibility of pursuing secondary policy goals, such as social inclusion, labour protection, and equality. This evolution is reflected in the EU regulatory framework, notably Directive 2014/24/EU, which provides legal grounds for the integration of social criteria and the use of reserved contracts for certain categories of organizations, including those belonging to the social economy (European Commission, 2021).

Within this evolving policy landscape, socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) has emerged as a key instrument for aligning public expenditure with social objectives. SRPP enables public authorities to integrate social considerations throughout the procurement cycle, from tender design to contract execution. In practice, this may involve the inclusion of social criteria related to employment conditions, the use of evaluation frameworks that capture social value, or the incorporation of contractual clauses requiring inclusive outcomes.

At this point, procurement moves beyond its traditional role and becomes part of a broader governance system. Rather than merely facilitating transactions, it actively shapes the structure

of markets and the distribution of opportunities within them. This perspective is further developed in the literature on social procurement, which defines it as the strategic use of purchasing processes to generate social value beyond economic efficiency (Furieux & Barraket, 2014). In this sense, procurement contributes to the creation and expansion of markets for social enterprises and other mission-driven organizations (Barraket, 2019).

A particularly important dimension of this process is the role of intermediaries. As highlighted by Barraket (2019), intermediaries play a critical role in connecting public buyers with social economy suppliers, facilitating access to procurement opportunities, supporting capacity-building, and enabling the development of social procurement ecosystems. These actors help bridge the gap between policy design and practical implementation, ensuring that social procurement mechanisms function effectively in real-world contexts. This highlights that the success of SRPP depends not only on regulatory frameworks but also on the broader governance environment in which it is embedded.

From this perspective, the relationship between SRPP and the social economy is mutually reinforcing. Social economy organizations are inherently oriented toward social value creation, making them particularly well suited to deliver contracts that incorporate social criteria. At the same time, SRPP provides the institutional and economic conditions that enable these organizations to access markets, expand their activities, and increase their impact.

This interaction becomes especially relevant when examined through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals. Public procurement can contribute directly to SDG 8 (Decent Work) by promoting fair employment conditions, to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by supporting the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, and to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) through contracts related to food provision.

For instance, procurement processes related to school meals, hospital catering, or social food services can be structured in ways that prioritize local cooperatives or social enterprises. Such approaches not only improve access to nutritious food for vulnerable populations but also strengthen local economies and support sustainable production systems (European Commission, 2021; United Nations, 2015). Similarly, procurement contracts can include social clauses requiring contractors to employ individuals from disadvantaged groups, thereby contributing to labor market integration and social inclusion (Lamprinidis, 2025a & 2025b).

Additional examples can be found in sectors such as social care, waste management, and community services, where procurement can be used to support locally embedded social enterprises. In these cases, procurement does not simply allocate public resources—it actively shapes how services are delivered and who participates in economic activity.

At the same time, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is closely linked to the broader policy environment. As noted by Macher (2018), public policy significantly influences the development trajectories of small social enterprises by shaping access to markets, funding, and institutional support. In this regard, public procurement can act as a key entry point through which these organizations engage with public systems and expand their activities (Macher, 2019).

This highlights the importance of viewing procurement not as an isolated administrative function, but as part of a wider governance framework. The strategic use of SRPP requires coordination across policy domains, administrative capacity, and a clear alignment between policy objectives and implementation tools (OECD, 2022; Arrowsmith, 2010). Within this broader perspective, SRPP can be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional governance

mechanism. It operates simultaneously as a policy instrument (McCrudden, 2004), a legal framework (Arrowsmith, 2010), a market-shaping tool (Barraket, 2019), and a support mechanism for social enterprises (Macher, 2018; 2019). Through this integrated role, SRPP enables the translation of public policy objectives into tangible and measurable social outcomes.

Ultimately, the interaction between public policy, procurement practices, and social economy actors forms a coherent governance system through which the social dimension of the 2030 Agenda can be effectively advanced. This perspective highlights that achieving sustainable development is not only a matter of setting goals, but also of designing institutional mechanisms capable of delivering them in practice.

National Policy Frameworks: Greece and Spain in Comparative Perspective

The role of public policy in enabling socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) becomes truly visible when moving from theory to practice. While European frameworks provide the necessary legal and strategic direction, it is at the national level that the effectiveness of these policies is ultimately tested. In this context, a comparison between Greece and Spain offers a particularly revealing picture—not only of different policy approaches, but of deeper contrasts in governance capacity and institutional maturity (OECD, 2022; European Commission, 2021).

In Greece, the formal institutional framework appears, at first glance, sufficiently developed. Law 4412/2016 on public contracts and Law 4430/2016 on the Social and Solidarity Economy establish the legal foundations for integrating social criteria into procurement procedures. In addition, both the **National Strategy for Public Procurement 2016–2020** and the **National Strategy for Public Procurement 2021–2025** explicitly provide the development of an action plan for socially responsible public procurement.

However, a closer examination reveals a more complex reality. As highlighted in the analysis of the Greek case (Lamprinidis, 2025d), the challenge does not lie in the absence of regulation, but in the limited capacity to operationalize it. This creates a fundamental contradiction: while the legal framework formally enables the participation of social economy actors, in practice these actors remain largely excluded from public procurement processes.

This contradiction becomes evident when considering the everyday functioning of the system. Social economy organizations often face significant barriers, including administrative complexity, limited access to financing, and difficulties in meeting procedural requirements such as guarantees and compliance obligations (European Commission, 2021). At the same time, contracting authorities frequently continue to prioritize cost-based criteria, despite the formal possibility of integrating social value considerations (OECD, 2022).

A further layer of inconsistency is observed in the relationship between strategic planning and implementation. Although national strategies clearly provide the development of an action plan for SRPP, such a plan has not been effectively implemented. This reflects a broader pattern of policy inertia, where strategic commitments are not translated into operational measures (Lamprinidis, 2023b, 2023c & 2025a). The Social Economy Action Plan in Greece was initially developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in March 2023 (Hellenic Republic, 2023). However, following the governmental restructuring in mid-2023, the institutional responsibility for its implementation was transferred to the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family. Despite this transition, the Action Plan has not yet evolved into a structured and operational framework capable of systematically supporting the participation of social economy actors.

Taken together, these elements suggest that the Greek model is characterized less by regulatory gaps and more by governance deficits. The absence of intermediary structures, limited institutional coordination, and lack of targeted support mechanisms create a policy environment in which socially responsible public procurement remains largely underutilized.

In contrast, Spain presents a notably different trajectory. The development of the social economy is deeply rooted in the country's institutional and economic history, with emblematic examples such as the **Mondragon Corporation** illustrating the long-standing tradition of collective and socially oriented entrepreneurship (Borzaga & Defourny, 2001). This historical foundation has played a crucial role in shaping a more mature and coherent policy environment.

Beyond this structural background, Spain has invested in the development of practical tools that facilitate the implementation of SRPP. The **Guide for Socially Responsible Public Procurement developed by the Municipality of Barcelona** represents a characteristic example, offering concrete methodologies, evaluation criteria, and operational guidelines for integrating social considerations into procurement processes (European Commission, 2021). Such tools significantly reduce uncertainty for contracting authorities and increase the accessibility of procurement systems for social economy actors.

Recent legislative developments further reinforce this approach. In March 2026, Spain adopted the **Law for the Integral Promotion of the Social Economy**, which aims to strengthen the institutional framework of the sector and enhance its role within the broader economic system (Ministry of Labour and Social Economy, 2026). The law promotes socially oriented business models, expands reserved contracts, and strengthens insertion enterprises, thereby directly linking social economy policy with public procurement practices.

The contrast between Greece and Spain becomes particularly evident when examining the relationship between policy design and implementation. In Greece, policy tends to remain at the level of formal compliance, with limited translation into practice. In Spain, by contrast, policy is supported by a combination of institutional tradition, practical tools, and coordinated governance mechanisms, allowing for a more effective integration of social economy actors into public procurement systems.

This comparison highlights a critical insight: the effectiveness of socially responsible public procurement depends not only on the existence of legal and strategic frameworks, but on the capacity of institutions to operationalize them. In this sense, SRPP should be understood not merely as a regulatory instrument, but as a governance system that requires coordination, support structures, and institutional learning.

Ultimately, the comparison between Greece and Spain demonstrates that the transition from policy intention to policy impact is neither automatic nor guaranteed. It requires a coherent alignment between legislation, strategy, and implementation mechanisms. Where this alignment is achieved—as in the Spanish case—socially responsible public procurement can function as a powerful tool for advancing the social economy and contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Where it is absent, as in the Greek case, the potential of SRPP remains largely unrealized.

Conclusion

This paper examined the role of the social economy in advancing the social dimension of the 2030 Agenda, with a particular focus on socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) as a governance mechanism. Drawing on the literature on social economy, public procurement, and

public policy, the analysis demonstrated that SRPP should not be understood merely as a technical or regulatory tool, but as a structural mechanism through which public policy objectives can be embedded within market processes.

A key contribution of the study lies in conceptualizing the relationship between public policy and social economy actors as a form of governance interaction. Within this framework, SRPP operates as a bridging mechanism that connects institutional objectives with societal needs, enabling social economy actors to play an active role in policy implementation. In this sense, the social economy emerges not as a complementary or residual sector, but as a core component of governance systems aimed at achieving social sustainability, particularly in relation to critical Sustainable Development Goals such as poverty reduction and food security.

At the same time, the comparative analysis between Greece and Spain provided important empirical insights into the conditions under which SRPP can function effectively. The Greek case highlights a structural imbalance between policy design and implementation, where the existence of a formally compliant legislative and strategic framework is not matched by the necessary institutional capacity, coordination mechanisms, and operational tools. As a result, socially responsible public procurement remains largely underutilized, and the participation of social economy actors in public procurement processes continues to be constrained.

In contrast, the Spanish case illustrates a more mature and integrated model, where institutional tradition, practical tools, and recent legislative developments contribute to a more coherent governance environment. The presence of intermediary structures, clear implementation guidelines, and a stronger alignment between policy objectives and administrative practices allows for a more effective integration of social economy actors into public procurement systems. This comparison underscores that the effectiveness of SRPP is not determined solely by legal provisions, but by the extent to which these provisions are embedded within a broader and coordinated policy ecosystem.

These findings have important implications for public policy. Governments should move beyond the formal adoption of socially responsible procurement provisions and focus on their operationalization. This includes the development of concrete action plans, the strengthening of administrative capacity, and the establishment of support mechanisms—such as advisory services, training programs, and intermediary structures—that can facilitate the participation of social economy actors.

At the same time, the future trajectory of socially responsible public procurement remains open and contingent upon policy implementation. In the Spanish case, it remains to be seen how the recently adopted legislative framework for the promotion of the social economy will function in practice, particularly in terms of its capacity to translate institutional commitments into measurable outcomes. In the Greek case, a critical question concerns whether the long-anticipated action plan for socially responsible public procurement will eventually be operationalized, or whether existing strategic commitments—along with the Social Economy Action Plan will remain at the level of formal policy design without effective implementation.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on public governance by proposing an integrated framework in which SRPP and the social economy are jointly understood as components of a governance system oriented toward social value creation. In this sense, SRPP is repositioned from a peripheral policy instrument to a central mechanism of governance capable of shaping market outcomes in line with social objectives.

Finally, the paper points to the need for further research on the institutional and governance conditions that enable the effective implementation of socially responsible public procurement. Future studies could explore comparative cases across different national contexts, examine the role of intermediary organizations in greater depth, and assess the long-term impact of SRPP on the development of inclusive and resilient economic systems. From a policy perspective, particular emphasis should be placed on the operationalization of socially responsible public procurement through the development of concrete action plans, the strengthening of administrative capacity, and the establishment of intermediary support mechanisms. In addition, improving coordination between institutional actors and aligning strategic objectives with implementation tools remain critical conditions for enhancing the effectiveness of SRPP. This study is conceptual and policy-oriented and does not include empirical validation, which constitutes a limitation and an avenue for future research.

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