

Determinants of Sustainable Supplier Selection: An Exploratory Study of Manufacturing Tunisian's SMEs

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Abstract : This study examines the adoption of sustainable purchasing practices among Tunisian SMEs, with a focus on assessing how environmental and social sustainability maturity affects the implementation of sustainable supplier selection (SSS) criteria. Using institutional theory to classify coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, as well as emerging drivers and barriers, this study explores the institutional factors influencing sustainable purchasing practices and the specific barriers faced by Tunisian SMEs in this area. An exploratory, abductive qualitative research design was adopted for this multiple case study, which involved 19 semi-structured interviews with owners and managers of 17 Tunisian manufacturing SMEs. The Gioia method was used to analyze the data, thus enabling the identification of key themes and relationships directly from the raw data. This approach facilitated a structured interpretation of the institutional factors influencing sustainable purchasing practices, with insights drawn from the participants' perspectives. The study reveals that Tunisian SMEs are at different levels of sustainability maturity, with a significant impact on their procurement practices. SMEs with advanced sustainability maturity integrate both environmental and social criteria into their supplier selection processes, while those with lower maturity levels rely on mostly traditional criteria such as cost, quality, and delivery. Key institutional drivers identified include regulatory pressure, market expectations, and stakeholder influence. Additional emerging drivers—such as certifications and standards, economic incentives, environmental commitment as a core value, and group-wide strategic alignment—also play a critical role in driving sustainable procurement. Conversely, the study reveals significant barriers, including economic constraints, limited awareness, and resource limitations. It also identifies three main categories of emerging barriers: (1) logistical and supply chain constraints, including retailer/intermediary dependency, tariff regulations, and a perceived lack of direct responsibility in B2B supply chains; (2) economic and financial constraints; and (3) operational barriers, such as unilateral environmental responsibility, a product-centric focus and the influence of personal relationships. Providing valuable insights into the role of sustainability maturity in supplier selection, this study is the first to explore sustainable procurement practices in the Tunisian SME context. Integrating an analysis of institutional drivers, including emerging incentives and barriers, provides practical implications for SMEs seeking to improve sustainability in procurement. The results highlight the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and support mechanisms to facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices among SMEs in Tunisia.

Keywords : Tunisian SME, sustainable supplier selection, institutional theory, determinant, qualitative study

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