Module 7: Sustainable public procurement

The buying power of public institutions gives them great economic leverage to influence manufacturers on the devices they design and produce. This in turn has a knock-on effect on the devices sold by manufacturers to ordinary consumers.

The power of public procurement

Public procurement refers to the volume purchase by governments and state-owned enterprises of computing devices and related components such as printers, displays and network devices.

Public procurement typically includes not only the supply, but also deployment and installation services, as well as initial warranty. It may include maintenance during use in an organisation, as well as disposal at the end of use after several years, which may not be the end of life for the devices, and therefore an opportunity for either further use or final recycling.

As a result of large contract volumes, the buying power of major public customers results in public tenders having great economic weight. This gives them leverage to influence manufacturers on the devices they design and produce. This in turn has a global effect on the digital devices offered by a manufacturer to the everyday consumer.

Public procurement is sometimes done through what are called "purchasing consortiums". Purchasing consortiums work with higher volumes of devices because they buy for several public institutions in an area. This can improve the quality, cost efficiency and effectiveness of procurement processes, and strengthen the verification of compliance with workers' rights and environmental standards.

Sustainable procurement means that public institutions obtain only those goods and services that have been produced under humane working conditions and do not have any damaging effects on the environment. Public procurement contracts can include clauses to ensure compliance with environmental, labour, safety and quality standards in the supply chains of the ICT hardware they purchase.[1] Contracts can include due diligence requirements on extended producer responsibilities, including take-back and reuse, and supplementing the cost of proper e-waste recycling that maximises resource recovery and minimises disposal. Contracts could take into account whether the "fundamental" conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) are being met in the production process, or whether energy efficiency demands are met.

Sustainable and transparent public procurement can also empower non-profit organisations such

as Electronics Watch to properly monitor and help enforce standards for sustainable manufacturing. This includes detecting problems that workers do not usually report on, remedying problems in a timely manner, and addressing systemic issues over time.

What is being done?

The Global Electronics Council (GEC) and TCO Certified are organisations that provide independent verification and certification that products and procurement processes meet comprehensive environmental and social criteria. They fall under the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) category of a "voluntary, multiple-criteria-based third party programme that awards a licence which authorizes the use of environmental labels on products indicating overall environmental preferability of a product within a particular product category based on life cycle considerations." Both issue ISO 14024 Type 1-compliant "ecolabels".

The GEC, formerly known as the Green Electronics Council, is a non-profit dedicated to "creating a more just and sustainable world" with a focus on electronics. It supports the production of consensus-based environmental leadership standards, such as the Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT) that assists in the purchase of "greener" PCs and displays, imaging equipment and televisions, and helps purchasers by developing procurement guides.

TCO Certified, initially created by the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO), focuses on certification as a guarantee that computer products purchased by employers maintain ecological standards as well as ergonomic standards to prevent long-term health issues for users. It started in 1992 with certification for computer displays, and is now a global sustainability certification for IT products.

The Electronics Watch model of worker-driven monitoring and industry engagement has developed into an internationally accepted standard in public procurement (see the case study for Module 6).

Footnotes

[1] Electronics Watch. (2020). *Public Buyer Toolkit*. https://electronicswatch.org/en/public-buyer-toolkit_2548345