



Co-funded by
the European Union



CO-RESP: Maximising the Use of Social Procurement

Conference Report



European Economic
and Social Committee

Contents

Contents	0
Introduction	1
Overview of CO-RESP project’s rationale, goals and results	2
SRPP for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities and Disadvantaged Groups	2
Insights	2
Opportunities.....	2
Recommendations	3
The Future of SRPP – What’s Next for Europe?	3
Insights	3
Opportunities.....	3
Recommendations	4
Conclusions	4

Introduction

Public procurement, as the mechanism through which governments purchase goods and services, holds significant economic sway within the European Union (EU), accounting for up to 14% of the GDP in 2017. Over recent years, spurred by Directive 2014/24/EU, public procurement has evolved into a tool for advancing social objectives, including the creation of job opportunities for marginalised populations in the labour market. In response to this trend, the CO-RESP project was initiated from May 2022 to April 2024. This project aimed to bolster local cooperation and facilitate the exchange of best practices in fostering job opportunities for persons with disabilities (PDW) through the strategic use of socially responsible public procurement (SRPP).

The ***CO-RESP Final Conference: Maximising the Use of Social Procurement***, convened stakeholders from across Europe, including local authorities, DPOs, SMEs, social economy organisations, training providers, and public procurement experts. Held on **Friday, 22nd March 2024**, at the **European Economic and Social Committee** in Brussels, Belgium, the event provided a platform to assess the impact of SRPP on the integration of persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups into the labour market. It also presented the findings of the CO-RESP project and facilitated discussions on the future of SRPP in the EU.

This document offers an overview of the event, highlighting project results, SRPP practices across Europe, challenges, recommendations, and future opportunities on enhancing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and disadvantaged groups through socially responsible public procurement (SRPP).

Overview of CO-RESP Project

Co-funded by the European Union's Single Market Programme (SMP COSME), the CO-RESP project (2022-2024) was developed with the aim of enhancing the local economy through Socially Responsible Public Procurement (SRPP) and creating job opportunities for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. A key starting point of the project was clarifying the concept of SRPP, distinguishing it from traditional public procurement by emphasising the integration of social criteria into contract allocation and execution. This integration aimed to promote employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups, foster social inclusion, and encourage ecological practices. The methodology employed in the CO-RESP project aimed to foster inter-regional collaboration and disseminate successful practices across Europe. Key findings from the project provided insights into how public authorities can promote inclusive and quality employment opportunities for persons with disabilities throughout the procurement cycle.

More information about [CO-RESP](#).

SRPP for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities and Disadvantaged Groups

Across European regions, initiatives have been undertaken to integrate social clauses into procurement processes, aiming to address unemployment challenges and foster inclusivity. Among the findings gleaned from various SRPP initiatives are diverse best practices, challenges in data collection, variations in utilization across regions, and resistance to inclusive hiring practices.

Insights

Numerous successful cases have been documented, spanning multiple sectors and countries. From cleaning services to road construction, examples abound of how social clauses have facilitated the inclusion of PWD and disadvantaged individuals in the workforce. A recurring challenge lies in the difficulty of gathering comprehensive data on the performance and impact of social clauses. Quantitative and qualitative information from contracting authorities remains elusive, hindering the assessment of outcomes such as the number of PWD employed, job quality, and social impact. Disparities exist in the utilisation of SRPP across different regions and sectors. While some countries exhibit a strong commitment to incorporating social clauses, others lag behind due to factors such as cultural barriers, inadequate legislation, resistance from employers, lack of knowledge on SRPP from contracting authorities and bureaucratic processes around its implementation. Therefore, changing the mindset of employers regarding the hiring of persons with disabilities is paramount. Cultural barriers, misconceptions, biases, lack of knowledge could often deter public contractors from actively engaging in SRPP practices.

Opportunities

Opportunities for advancing SRPP include increasing awareness and capacity building among stakeholders to foster greater commitment to inclusive procurement practices, while leveraging

public-private partnerships can amplify the impact of social clauses, facilitating collaboration between contracting authorities, businesses, and social enterprises to create meaningful employment opportunities. Furthermore, integrating environmental considerations into SRPP presents an opportunity to promote sustainability while advancing social inclusion, contributing to broader societal objectives and long-term sustainability. Encouraging subcontracting activities to social enterprises can broaden employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups while supporting the growth of the social economy sector.

Recommendations

Recommendations for effective implementation of SRPP encompass establishing clear policy frameworks and guidance to provide direction in public procurement processes. 1. Creating networks of facilitators and fostering collaboration between public and private sectors can streamline the integration of social clauses and ensure their effective implementation. 2. Emphasising the importance of long-term sustainability in SRPP practices is crucial, focusing on continuous improvement, evaluation, and adaptation to evolving societal needs. 3. Adopting a holistic approach to SRPP, addressing not only employment but also broader social and environmental objectives, maximises positive impacts on society.

The Future of SRPP – What’s Next for Europe?

Several key insights, challenges, and recommendations have emerged while discussing the future of SRPP in Europe.

Insights

Among the insights gained from various stakeholders is the recognition of the critical need for capacity building among public authorities. Understanding the socio-economic conditions of PWD is paramount for empowering them to participate meaningfully in the labour market. Additionally, stakeholders emphasised the importance of cooperation between public authorities and social economy organisations. Aligning objectives, optimising state aid utilisation, and developing national strategies are seen as essential steps in promoting social inclusion initiatives.

Despite the potential benefits of SRPP, several challenges persist. Fear of contracting authorities due to continuity issues and delays in market allocation often leads to risk aversion, resulting in the selection of safer, less problematic options. Moreover, there is a lack of cooperation between social and labour departments, as well as the treasury, which can hinder efforts to prioritise socially responsible procurement practices.

Opportunities

Integrating circular economy practices with social criteria in procurement initiatives can create synergies that benefit both the environment and disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, initiatives such as capacity building and stakeholder collaboration present opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of SRPP in fostering inclusive employment opportunities.

Recommendations

To address these challenges and capitalise on opportunities, stakeholders have put forth several recommendations. These include prioritising capacity building initiatives to enhance understanding among public authorities, fostering collaboration between stakeholders to align objectives and strategies, and adopting a holistic approach to procurement that integrates environmental and social criteria. Moreover, ensuring quality employment opportunities for PWD and implementing robust quality control measures are essential for promoting sustainable and inclusive employment practices.

Conclusions

The CO-RESP project served as a catalyst for advancing the agenda of socially responsible public procurement in Europe, highlighting the transformative potential of SRPP in promoting inclusive employment opportunities and fostering social and economic cohesion. Further promotion of SRPP demands a multifaceted approach focused on raising awareness, further fostering collaboration, and addressing persistent challenges.

To advance SRPP, it is imperative to prioritise capacity-building initiatives aimed at empowering public authorities with the necessary knowledge and skills for effective implementation. Additionally, robust data collection mechanisms are essential to accurately assess the impact of SRPP initiatives on the employment of PWD and other disadvantaged groups. Overcoming cultural barriers and biases among employers regarding inclusive hiring practices remains a significant challenge that requires targeted interventions and awareness-raising efforts.

Moving forward, stakeholders must prioritise collaboration and align objectives to maximise the impact of SRPP initiatives. This includes fostering partnerships between public and private sectors, leveraging environmental considerations to create synergies, and integrating social criteria into procurement processes.