

# Sustainable procurement at its tipping point: Our momentum to deliver

Gerwin Bukkems, Decarbion

Over the past decade, sustainable procurement has accelerated significantly. Procurement functions have matured, regulation has made impact transparent and enforceable, and solutions have become both technically and financially viable. As a result, the playing field has fundamentally changed: there are no longer excuses to hide behind.

At the same time, the urgency has become undeniable. The climate is approaching a critical and worrying tipping point, with the societal costs of climate-related damage increasing rapidly and influencing our economies. Unfortunately, most costs are disproportionately borne by those who did not cause them, making the transition difficult, complex and a resistance to change. This puts a clear responsibility on procurement—both public and private—to act and capitalize on this momentum.

## Why sustainable procurement struggles between ambition and execution.

We are at a unique moment in sustainable business, where the procurement community plays a critical role in the transition. While progress is evident, resistance remains. Increasing regulatory demands on reporting have created pressure within organizations. At the same time, systems driven by short-term financial incentives continue to outweigh long-term value creation, slowing down real progress. The momentum is there, but we still have big steps to take.

Procurement has long influenced negative impacts such as deforestation, child labour, waste, and climate change. Yet, these same decisions are part of the solution. after all,

### A fundamental question arises:

**“Were your procurement decisions of the past contributing to deforestation, excessive CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, or enabled unsafe conditions?”**

This article reflects on the developments that have enabled sustainability to become embedded within procurement. It also outlines how procurement teams have progressed step by step, in some cases supported by the Decarbion Sustainable Purchasing Scan (Decarbion SPS). Introduced in 2008 and continuously developed, this framework is now available as a web application for all procurement teams.

procurement spend often accounts for approximately 80% of operating costs, and procurement is involved in capital and energy investments. Choices that make it a decisive lever for change.

In practice, the challenge lies in translating policy into execution. This is usually not due to unwillingness, but to a fear of the unknown—not surprising, as sustainable business is a complex, relatively new, and broad subject. Additionally, we sometimes became discouraged because actions lacked support or appeared to have insufficient impact. By breaking sustainability down into

actionable steps and creating the right conditions, organizations can overcome paralysis and understanding and momentum emerge. This thinking led to the development of the Decarbon Sustainable Procurement Scan (SPS) framework in 2008, helping organizations understand their position and define clear, practical next steps. Several organizations owe their pioneering position to the application of this framework.

## From ambition to implementation: 15 years of acceleration

It is important to realize that fifteen years ago, we still had to explain climate change and sustainable business practices. Sustainable procurement was not on the executive agendas. The urgency was insufficiently recognized, questioned, or ignored and sustainable alternatives were barely available.

It was precisely during that period, thanks to initiatives such as from governmental programs (Senternovem, PIANOo) and knowledge institutes (NEVI, Procurement Leaders, Yacht), that a movement gained momentum leading to sustainable innovations, guiding regulations, investments, and automatisations. What we easily forget: only in recent years has a broad range of options emerged that truly enables sustainable procurement. Below, we reflect on some developments of the past ten years that are making a difference and demonstrate that there is a momentum we need to use.

For example, in 2008 most organizations had little visibility into supplier emissions. Although in the SPS, supply chain transparency was mentioned as a key condition, but only until well after 2020, ERP-based tools enable a comprehensive view of Scope 3 emissions across procurement

spend. It is precisely this essential transparency that enables procurement to



intervene to decarbonize the supply chain.

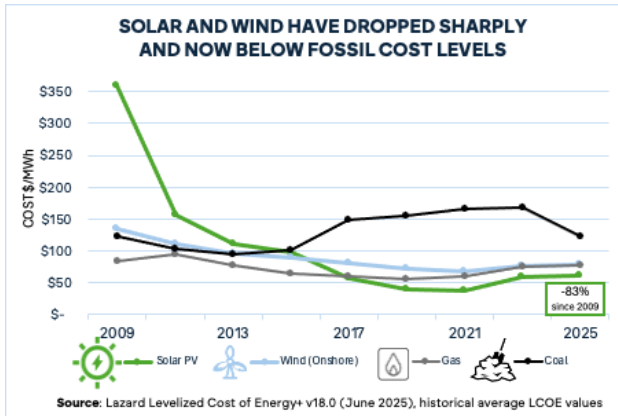
Similarly, sustainability audits have evolved from fragmented Excel-based processes to structured, tool-supported approaches using platforms such as EcoVadis and IntegrityNext.

**Picture:** Electric heavy-duty trucks proof better financial business (DAF, Volvo, Tesla, etc..).

Electrification, too, has only truly matured in the last five years. In 2008, there were no electric vehicles yet; now, only the past few years prove that an electrified fleet is technically reliable and—for both employer and employee—almost always financially far more attractive (Total Cost of Ownership) than fossil fuel cars.

Equally is the speed of development which heavy-duty trucks and industrial processes (e.g. electric arc furnaces) are electrified, resulting them in stronger financial business cases with improved quality and reliability.

Also renewable energy has followed a similar trajectory. Where solar and wind were once uncompetitive, costs have dropped dramatically—solar energy costs declined by approximately 90% between 2010 and 2023—making renewables in many markets more cost-effective than fossil alternatives. For industry, this also reduces exposure to price volatility and dependence on energy markets.



**Figure:** cost development renewable and fossil energy

We see a similar price decline curve for batteries—essential for electrification. Battery prices have fallen sharply in recent years, making applications increasingly profitable. Procurement plays a driving role in this. And that role remains crucial for other sustainable alternatives that require further cost development, such as green hydrogen.

At the same time, sustainability has become embedded in procurement practices. Organizations train their buyers, integrate sustainability into processes, and include it in decision-making criteria. In regions like Brainport, The Netherlands, frameworks such as QLTCs explicitly incorporate Sustainability alongside Quality, Logistics, Technology, and Competitive Cost. This embedding is further strengthened by customers who demand transparency as well as demonstrable improvement in their supply chain.

Sustainable procurement practices also demonstrated in recent years that suppliers who have decarbonized their processes (to Net Zero) outperform competitors in pricing and maintaining price stability in volatile markets.

In addition to market innovation and purchasing power, regulation is a major driving force: The European Green Deal translates ambition into concrete obligations, Examples include Due Diligence and transparency (e.g., via CSRD and EUDR) and incentives towards circularity (such as

PPWR). This makes sustainable procurement less optional, stimulates the executive support and accelerates the professionalization of processes, data, and supplier management.

Geopolitical developments have further reinforced the importance of energy independence and supply chain transparency, enabling procurement to balance People, Planet, and Profit.

The conclusion is clear: viable solutions, embedded practices, and regulatory pressure have brought sustainable procurement to a tipping point. Now it is up to procurement to push forward and deliver impact.

## Accelerating through focus: the Decarbon-SPS framework

The Decarbon SPS framework provides a structured way to accelerate progress. It assesses procurement maturity across seven key processes: policy and organization, awareness, two strategic procurement processes, and three tactical procurement processes.



**Figure:** Decarbon SPS Framework conditions

For each of these processes, an organization finds itself in one of the ten maturity levels. The first three levels form the foundation for implementing sustainable procurement at all. This requires, at a minimum, a professionally structured procurement function. If that foundation is not in order—for example, due

to insufficient transparency in the supply chain—then that foundation must first be strengthened within the relevant key processes through concrete actions. Only then can you effectively take further steps towards sustainability.

**Successful sustainable procurement starts at the basics;  
Purely Professional Purchasing.**

The subsequent three phases embed sustainable in the procurement and leads to further maturity. The final four phases lead to 'functional excellence'.

The model is not a benchmarking tool but a self-assessment that clarifies current position and defines the most effective next steps, appropriate to your situation and which are most logical and effective.

Based on the entered maturity level and ambitions, the web application provides five prioritized actions that are expected to be most effective and efficient within your organization.

Completing the form takes approximately 10 minutes. This is done together with your team; the team then chooses which of the proposed initiatives to be rolled out, ensuring the approach remains realistic and feasible.

Small improvements often deliver rapid results. For example, linking sustainability KPIs to employee bonuses can align the organization, reduce resistance, unlock capacity and collaboration. At DSM, this approach has proven effective in accelerating sustainable procurement adoption in early stage.

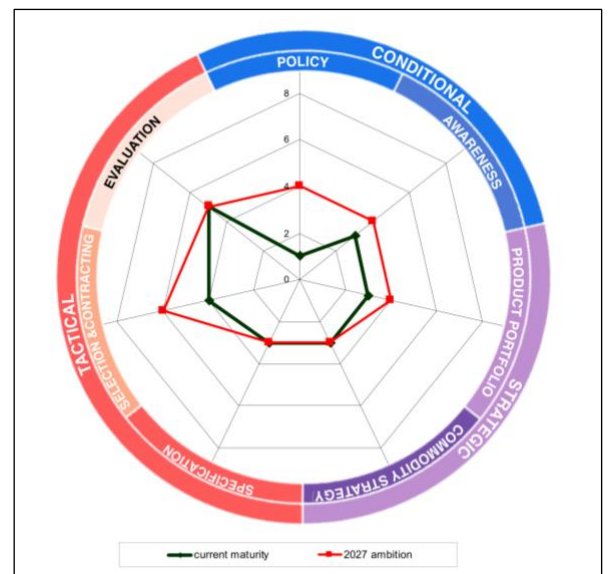
## The critical role of culture and capability

Awareness and culture may seem secondary, but they are often decisive. While

sustainability is now often in the media, this was not the case fifteen years ago, it was a hidden concern.

That is precisely why educating and continuously training employees on this broad subject was (and is) essential: so that

they are motivated and empowered, and can embed sustainability into their daily work. Nowadays, many purchasing departments receive annual training on sustainable procurement—crucial for engaging employees in a field that is still relatively new, and providing them with the knowledge to effectively apply sustainable procurement.



**Figure:** Spiderweb diagram of the Decarbion SPS model

The remaining five SPS key processes are build on established procurement principles and process (Van Weele & Rozemeijer). These five demonstrate which instruments procurement has—and how sustainability can be embedded within them. An key-example is supply chain transparency: insight into ESG risks, opportunities, and sustainability impact per purchased product or service (Scope 3 -footprint (GHG)).

I encourage companies that are not (yet) subject to reporting requirements to map out their footprint now. Customer expectations are increasing, regulatory requirements are expanding, and this insight enables procurement to develop category-specific decarbonization strategies and engage suppliers towards a future-proof portfolio. In these five SPS processes, many tools are provided, but you will only be burden with the

tools actual suitable for your purchasing organization at that moment.

Sustainable procurement has reached its tipping point. The tools, frameworks, the feasible solutions and conditions are in place. Now we act, focused, structured, and impactful.

The free web application can be found at [www.Decarbion.nl](http://www.Decarbion.nl)



**About the Author:**

Gerwin Bukkems, Program Director Net Zero and Trainer Sustainable Procurement , Decarbion  
Formerly Procurement Director and Chief Sustainability Officer, worked at DSM-firmenich and Rotom Europe.



**About the Company:**

Expertise program management to get your plants to Net Zero.  
From strategy to implementation.  
Tailor-made sustainable procurement trainings global.

Date: June, 2026  
Number of words: 1719