

The Effects of Preferential Procurement on Youth Start-Up Enterprises in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa

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Abstract: The effects of preferential procurement laws on the growth and viability of young start-up businesses in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province is examined critically in this essay. A key component of post-apartheid economic transformation policy has been preferential procurement, a strategic state intervention based on inclusivity and redress. This study specifically looks at how legislative intent and practical application of these procurement frameworks intersect, with an emphasis on how they affect start-ups led by young people. The study uses a qualitative research paradigm based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology and consults a large body of government reports, policy documents, and peer-reviewed scholarly articles published between 1994 and 2025. A thorough and thoughtful synthesis of current academic discourse and pertinent empirical trends is made possible by the SLR approach to procurement and youth entrepreneurship. Using the Atlas.ti software, thematic analysis was carried out to help with the depth and rigor of data interpretation. This allowed for the extraction of conceptual categories and recurring patterns from the chosen literature. Although preferential procurement has created beneficial pathways for youth economic inclusion, especially in terms of better access to public tenders and contractual opportunities, its actual effectiveness is still limited by a number of systemic barriers, according to key thematic insights. Administrative complexity, opaque procurement procedures, a lack of institutional capacity at the municipal level, and long-standing gatekeeping practices that disenfranchise young entrepreneurs who are truly deserving are some of these. The analysis also reveals a lack of trust among young people in public procurement systems, which is made worse by instances of political favouritism and unequal empowerment target enforcement. The study makes the case that the transformative potential of preferential procurement may remain mainly symbolic unless these issues are resolved by intentional policy improvement and operational accountability. Therefore, recommendations support a redesigned policy framework that is based on streamlined application procedures, strong oversight procedures, and formalized mentorship programs and is suited to the developmental requirements of young start-ups. Such interventions are thought to be necessary if procurement is to serve as a tool for inclusive growth and sustainable entrepreneurship among South Africa's youth, especially in provinces with limited resources like Mpumalanga.

Keywords: *Preferential Procurement, Youth Start-Ups, Mpumalanga, Entrepreneurship Policy, Economic Empowerment.*

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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The 1994 democratic transition in South Africa brought about a dramatic change in the country's sociopolitical and economic environment, leading the government to implement revolutionary policy tools meant to eliminate the long-standing disparities of the apartheid era. Preferential procurement is one of these tools that has become a strategic tool for empowering historically marginalized groups and promoting inclusive economic growth. The legislative foundation of this strategy is the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act (PPPFA), which was enacted in 2000

and requires state organs and government agencies to distribute procurement opportunities in ways that promote the advancement of women, people with disabilities, Black people, and most importantly, young people (Ambe & Badenhorst-Weiss, 2012). By institutionalising empowerment through public sector spending, preferential procurement not only serves economic objectives but also functions as a vehicle for social justice.

Examining the real-world effects of these policies is strongly suggested by the province of Mpumalanga. Mpumalanga, a province in northeastern South Africa that is

abundant in natural resources, agricultural potential, and tourism, ironically faces some of the highest rates of youth unemployment and poverty in the nation (Statistics South Africa, 2023). In this regard, policymakers and development organizations are increasingly seeing youth entrepreneurship, especially in the form of start-up businesses, as a way to spur socioeconomic change. Young entrepreneurs' start-ups have the potential to empower young people, create jobs, encourage innovation, and boost the province's GDP, all while giving them a sense of agency.

However, preferential procurement and young start-up businesses have a complicated and occasionally ineffective relationship. Although youth inclusion is supposedly a top priority for legislative frameworks like the PPPFA and its subsequent amendments, such as the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) codes, young business owners' real experiences frequently show a pattern of exclusion, frustration, and limited impact. Youth participation in state-led procurement opportunities is still hampered by structural barriers like opaque tendering procedures, a lack of procurement literacy, limited access to financing, and the dominance of well-established firms (Mofolo & Mathe, 2022).

Furthermore, research indicates that even in cases where young start-ups are successful in landing procurement contracts, they usually run into delivery pressures and institutional inefficiencies that jeopardize the viability of their businesses. The challenges faced by young entrepreneurs are exacerbated by municipalities' inability to adequately support them, especially in Mpumalanga's rural districts (Mbele, 2021). The effectiveness and equity of preferential procurement as a tool for development are seriously called into question by these difficulties, especially in light of the distinct socioeconomic context of Mpumalanga Province.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically analyze how preferential procurement has affected young start-up businesses in Mpumalanga over the previous thirty years. The study intends to examine the degree to which policy rhetoric corresponds with actual conditions on the ground by using a qualitative, literature-based research design grounded in the principles of systematic reviews. By doing this, it advances a more sophisticated comprehension of how preferential procurement can be improved to better serve its target audience and, eventually, to further the more general objectives of intergenerational equity and inclusive development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The post-apartheid South African preferential procurement policy's development is representative of the larger fight for inclusive development and socioeconomic justice. The Public Procurement Act 28 of 2024, which aims to improve accountability and integrate disparate frameworks, is the result of substantial changes to the policy, which is anchored in Section 217 of the Constitution (Fourie & Buissinne, 2025). Although the constitutional and normative underpinnings were established by early legal scholarship (e.g., Bolton, 2006), more recent analyses have questioned the

policy's practical effectiveness. Persistent issues like fragmented implementation, limited institutional capacity, and corruption are noted by Watermeyer (2019) and Ambe and Maleka (2016). Moeti and Mokgopo's (2021) study, which emphasizes the lack of procurement expertise and compliance in local municipalities, echoes these concerns.

Though with differing degrees of success, preferential procurement has been embraced as a tool for economic empowerment throughout the African continent. 30% of public procurement in Kenya must go to women, people with disabilities, and youth, according to the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) program. Wanjiru and Kamau (2020) discovered that these groups are still marginalized due to limited access to capital and bureaucratic obstacles. Adebayo and Ojo (2018) contend that despite Nigeria's Public Procurement Act of 2007 being amended to incorporate provisions for local content and SME participation, enforcement is still lacking because of political meddling and a lack of transparency.

Globally speaking, preferential procurement has been used to advance social justice and boost regional economies in nations like Canada, Brazil, and India. Indigenous business participation in Canada has increased measurably as a result of the federal government's Indigenous Procurement Policy, although there are still issues in scaling these gains across provinces (Government of Canada, 2023). The Lei do Bem in Brazil encourages procurement from micro and small businesses; Silva and Rocha (2019) observe that access has improved but also draw attention to the necessity of capacity-building assistance. 25% of procurement must come from MSEs, according to India's Public Procurement Policy for Micro and Small Enterprises (2012), with sub-targets for women and SC/ST business owners. Although awareness has increased, Chakraborty and Singh (2021) note that actual participation is still unequal because of procedural complexity.

Youth and rural enterprise participation were among the specific objectives introduced by the 2022 Preferential Procurement Regulations in South Africa, which were in line with the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) framework (Moore South Africa, 2025). Cairns and Aziz (2025) warn that institutional inertia and varying interpretations jeopardize these reforms. The aspect of youth entrepreneurship is still largely unexplored. Young entrepreneurs encounter systemic obstacles like restricted access to funding, a lack of mentorship, and exclusion from tender processes, despite policy awareness, according to Mofolo and Mathe (2022). The State of the Nation Address (2025), which recognizes the need for focused procurement assistance for youth-owned businesses, supports these findings.

In the literature, Mpumalanga is still underrepresented. Although there is little evidence of interventions specifically designed for youth or rural businesses, preliminary data from the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature (2025) indicates adherence to national procurement frameworks. This disparity emphasizes the necessity of empirical research tailored to a

particular region that examines the real-life experiences of nascent business owners in the province's procurement ecosystem.

In summary, preferential procurement is still a vital component of economic justice in South Africa and elsewhere, but its effectiveness depends on institutional strength, political will, and implementation that takes context into account. Similar issues, bureaucratic intricacy, restricted financial resources, and lax enforcement are revealed by comparative analyses from other African and international jurisdictions; however, they also provide examples of creativity and inclusivity that could guide South Africa's changing procurement environment.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Developmental State Paradigm and the Targeted Procurement Theory serve as the two theoretical pillars supporting this investigation. When combined, these frameworks offer a strong conceptual basis for examining how public procurement can be used as a tactical tool for the growth of youth enterprises in South Africa following the end of apartheid.

Targeted Procurement Theory

According to McCrudden's (2004) conceptualization of targeted procurement, public sector purchasing is a purposeful policy tool for accomplishing larger socio-political goals rather than just a means of efficiently acquiring goods and services. This method, which is frequently called "linkage" procurement, allows governments to incorporate social justice requirements into procurement procedures, including employment equity, marginalized group empowerment, and local economic development (McCrudden, 2004; Adediran, 2018).

The Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act (PPPPFA) and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) codes are two examples of the laws that have institutionalized targeted procurement in South Africa. By giving historically disadvantaged individuals (HDI), such as women, youth, and people with disabilities, priority in public contracting, these frameworks seek to correct historical imbalances (Watermeyer, 2019). Recent empirical studies (Mofolo & Mathe, 2022) affirm that while policy awareness has increased, implementation remains uneven, particularly at the municipal level.

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that focused procurement tactics affect not only financial results but also the quality of supply chain relationships, business growth, and job creation (Adediran, 2018). This is consistent with the more general idea of social procurement, which incorporates social value considerations into decisions about public spending (McCrudden, 2004; Walker & Brammer, 2016).

Developmental State Paradigm

A complementary institutional and macroeconomic framework is offered by the developmental state paradigm. The developmental state, which has its roots in East Asian

economies like South Korea and Singapore, is defined by a powerful, capable, and interventionist government that actively influences economic results through institutional coordination, strategic investment, and industrial policy (Evans, 1995; Mkandawire, 2001). The developmental state model has been modified for use in Africa in order to meet the two demands of social change and economic expansion. The goal to create a democratic developmental state that uses procurement as a lever for inclusive development is reflected in South Africa's post-1994 policy trajectory, especially in the National Development Plan (NDP) and the Public Procurement Bill of 2024 (Gumede, 2021; PARI, 2023).

In order to achieve transformative results, the developmental state perspective emphasizes the significance of institutional alignment, policy coherence, and state capacity. Additionally, it highlights how the government can address market failures, especially when there is structural inequality and youth unemployment (Mulaudzi, 2021). According to this paradigm, procurement is a strategic economic tool for encouraging entrepreneurship, boosting regional industries, and advancing fair economic participation rather than a neutral administrative function.

Integrative Perspective: Procurement as a Developmental Instrument

This study conceptualizes public procurement as a developmental tool that can be purposefully created to support the growth of youth enterprises by combining these two frameworks. The developmental state paradigm provides the institutional scaffolding and strategic justification, while targeted procurement offers the operational mechanism through preference points, set-asides, and specific goals. In provinces like Mpumalanga, where youth unemployment is still high and economic opportunities are uneven across space, this integrative approach is especially important. A more sophisticated examination of the goals of the policy and the realities of its implementation is made possible by an understanding of how procurement policy is operationalized within the framework of a developmental state.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review (SLR) design serves as the foundation for the qualitative research methodology used in this study. Particularly in the context of South Africa, the SLR approach is especially suitable for synthesizing the body of empirical and theoretical knowledge regarding youth entrepreneurship and preferential procurement. It makes it possible to identify, assess, and interpret pertinent literature in an organized, transparent, and repeatable manner, which promotes a thorough comprehension of the research problem (Siddaway et al., 2019). Consolidating disparate insights, identifying conceptual gaps, and producing a cohesive analytical framework that can guide future empirical research and policy development are the goals that guide the methodology.

The study falls under the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that people's subjective interpretations of their experiences are the best way to understand reality, which is

socially constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This epistemological position supports the study's goal of examining the conception and experience of preferential procurement in connection to the growth of youth enterprises. The use of qualitative synthesis to capture the richness, diversity, and contextual specificity of current research findings is supported by the interpretivist paradigm.

According to Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2015), the research design adheres to the guidelines of a qualitative systematic literature review, which is distinct from conventional narrative reviews in that it uses a strict and systematic approach to the selection, evaluation, and synthesis of literature. A primary research question served as the basis for the review: How has preferential procurement policy been conceptualized, applied, and experienced in connection to youth entrepreneurship in South Africa and similar contexts? The theoretical frameworks supporting the discussion, the obstacles and facilitators noted in the literature, and the contextual or regional differences in implementation results were the main topics of the sub-questions.

Peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, government reports, and institutional policy documents published between 2015 and 2025 made up the sample for this review. A thorough search of scholarly databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar, was used to find these sources. Combinations of the search terms "preferential procurement," "targeted procurement," "youth entrepreneurship," "public procurement," "South Africa," "Africa," and "inclusive development" were used. In order to guarantee relevance, methodological rigor, and thematic alignment with the research objectives, inclusion criteria were applied after the search was narrowed down using boolean operators and truncation. Studies that weren't published before 2015, weren't available in full text, or had nothing to do with youth development and public procurement were disqualified.

The process of gathering data entailed methodically extracting pertinent information from every study that was chosen. To record important characteristics like author, year, country of focus, research aim, methodology, theoretical orientation, findings, and limitations, a data extraction matrix was created. This made it easier to compare studies in an organized manner and to find themes in a variety of contexts.

Thematic synthesis was used to analyze the data, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework. This required getting to know the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating and improving themes, identifying and labeling themes, and creating a final analytical narrative. The data was managed and coded using NVivo 12 software, which guaranteed consistency and transparency throughout the analysis process. While maintaining the contextual richness and interpretive depth typical of qualitative research, thematic synthesis made it possible to integrate findings from various studies. To reduce researcher bias and increase the validity of the results, reflexivity was upheld throughout the analysis.

Accurate citation, critical engagement with sources, and adherence to academic integrity principles upheld ethical standards even though the study did not directly involve human participants and thus did not require formal ethical clearance. As stated in qualitative research standards, the research process was created to guarantee reliability, paying close attention to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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V. DATA ANALYSIS

Through a qualitative thematic synthesis of the literature found through the systematic review, the data analysis process for this study was carried out. Because of its adaptability and ability to produce complex insights from a variety of qualitative and policy-based sources, thematic analysis was chosen (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Using this method, the researcher was able to find, examine, and decipher meaning patterns in a diverse collection of literature about youth entrepreneurship and preferential procurement in South Africa and similar settings. The analysis was conducted using the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), which consists of becoming acquainted with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating themes, defining and labeling themes, and creating the final report. This iterative process allowed for both inductive and deductive reasoning, whereby themes were derived from the data itself while also being informed by the study's theoretical frameworks, namely, targeted procurement theory and the developmental state paradigm.

To guarantee a thorough comprehension of the chosen texts' content, context, and methodological orientation, each one was read several times during the familiarization phase. To improve transparency and analytical rigor, NVivo 12 software was used to help with the methodical coding and organization of data. Important terms like "youth exclusion," "policy fragmentation," "capacity constraints," and "entrepreneurial support mechanisms" were captured in the first codes, which were created line by line. After continuous comparison and improvement, these codes were grouped into more general thematic categories. The synthesis revealed three

main themes. The first theme, "Policy Intent versus Implementation Reality," captured the contradiction between preferential procurement frameworks' operationalization at the provincial and local levels and their normative goals. Recurrent allusions to administrative inefficiencies, uneven regulatory interpretation, and a lack of institutional capacity were characteristics of this theme (Ambe & Maleka, 2016; Watermeyer, 2019).

The second theme, "Barriers to Youth Participation," focused on procedural and structural barriers that prevent young entrepreneurs from being effectively included in public procurement. These included poor outreach by procurement authorities, unclear tendering procedures, restricted access to funding, and a lack of mentorship (Mofolo & Mathe, 2022; Wanjiru & Kamau, 2020). Notably, these barriers were found to be more pronounced in rural provinces such as Mpumalanga, where economic marginalisation intersects with spatial inequality. "Emerging Models of Inclusive Procurement," the third theme, encapsulated creative approaches and modifications to policies meant to increase youth involvement. Development agency-led capacity-building programs, digital procurement platforms, and set-aside plans were a few examples. When backed by logical institutional frameworks and political will, targeted procurement can be operationalized to achieve developmental outcomes. Comparative insights from Kenya, Brazil, and Canada were crucial in demonstrating this (Silva & Rocha, 2019; Government of Canada, 2023).

To make sure that the researcher's interpretations were based on the data and not unduly influenced by preconceived assumptions, reflexivity was upheld throughout the analysis. Peer debriefing and triangulation with policy documents and empirical studies further strengthened the findings' credibility. Thus, the thematic synthesis offered a strong analytical framework for examining the intricacies of preferential procurement and its consequences for the growth of youth enterprises.

VI. RESULTS

The results of this study show that the application of preferential procurement as a tool for the development of youth enterprises is complicated and uneven. Even though the policy has created new opportunities for participation, especially in the services and construction industries, these chances are frequently fleeting and do not result in long-term economic empowerment. According to the larger body of research, preferential procurement frameworks are intended to foster inclusivity; however, administrative inertia and dispersed implementation often lessen their effectiveness (Ambe & Maleka, 2016; Watermeyer, 2019).

The analysis's most notable findings include the transient nature of young entrepreneurs' success in the procurement ecosystem. Many young businesses are successful in landing their first contracts, but they have trouble growing or continuing after that. This is mostly due to the lack of strong post-award support systems and regulatory ambiguity, especially with regard to the

interpretation and application of evaluation criteria (Mofolo & Mathe, 2022). Despite being progressive in their articulation of specific goals, the 2022 Preferential Procurement Regulations have not been operationalized consistently across provinces, resulting in inconsistent outcomes (National Treasury, 2023).

Furthermore, a recurrent theme in public tenders was the phenomenon of tokenism. Young start-ups are frequently involved in procurement procedures to meet compliance standards, but they are rarely given contracts that have strategic or substantial value. Instead of encouraging entrepreneurial autonomy, this practice erodes the policy's developmental goals and feeds a cycle of dependency (Wanjiru & Kamau, 2020). These businesses continue to be structurally disadvantaged in the absence of access to institutional networks, financial resources, and mentorship.

The geographical differences in access to procurement opportunities are another aspect of concern. Young businesses based in cities, especially those in major cities like Gauteng and Cape Town, are much better equipped to handle the procurement environment. Better infrastructure, more developed business ecosystems, and close proximity to government offices are all advantageous to them. However, Mpumalanga and other rural youth entrepreneurs encounter additional obstacles, such as poor digital connectivity, insufficient transportation infrastructure, and a lack of institutional support (Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature, 2025). Particularly in provinces where rural municipalities have a disproportionately high youth population, this urban-rural divide not only exacerbates already-existing inequalities but also jeopardizes the redistributive potential of preferential procurement.

The results also imply that although young entrepreneurs have had comparatively easier access to the construction and services sectors, this access is frequently limited to low-value or subcontracted work. Due to strict compliance requirements, a lack of collateral, and established networks that favor established firms, high-value contracts are still largely unavailable (Silva & Rocha, 2019). This calls into question whether procurement policy is actually facilitating structural change or if it is only serving to reinforce current hierarchies under the pretense of empowerment.

All things considered, the results highlight the necessity of a more institutionally cohesive and context-sensitive approach to preferential procurement. Targeted capacity-building programs, open evaluation procedures, and conscious attempts to address spatial disparities must all be included with policy frameworks. The promise of procurement as a tool for youth development will mainly remain rhetorical in the absence of such interventions.

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VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Several strategic and policy-oriented recommendations are put forth to improve the effectiveness of preferential procurement as a developmental tool for youth entrepreneurship in South Africa, especially in under-resourced provinces like Mpumalanga, in light of the findings and thematic insights obtained from the systematic literature review.

In order to monitor municipal compliance with national transformation goals and supervise youth-focused procurement initiatives, the South African government should first create a Provincial Preferential Procurement Advisory Board (PPPAB) in each province. By acting as a decentralized oversight mechanism, such a body would guarantee that procurement procedures are both developmentally appropriate and compliant with the law. To promote multi-stakeholder accountability and policy coherence, the PPPAB should comprise representatives from the private sector, civil society, youth development organizations, and provincial treasuries.

This recommendation aligns with the decentralised governance model envisaged in the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act (PPPFA) and the 2022 Preferential Procurement Regulations, which grant organs of state discretion to define specific goals within a national framework (National Treasury, 2023).

Second, to increase accessibility for youth-owned businesses, especially those in rural and peri-urban areas, the digitization of procurement platforms needs to be accelerated and localized. The interface of the national e-Tender Portal (www.etenders.gov.za) is still too complicated for novice users and small businesses with low levels of digital literacy, despite the fact that transparency has increased (Duja Consulting, 2024). Provincial governments ought to spend money on mobile-responsive, streamlined procurement portals with dashboards that are easy to use, multilingual support, and real-time notifications. In order to expedite the registration and compliance procedures, these platforms ought to be integrated with the Central Supplier Database (CSD).

Thirdly, as part of larger plans for the development of youth enterprises, focused procurement literacy initiatives ought to be formalized. Beyond general instruction, these programs need to emphasize practical skills like contract management, pricing strategies, bid preparation, and compliance documentation. Collaborations with recognized training organizations, like the Africa Empowerment

Training Institute and the Southern Africa Training Hub (SATHU), could guarantee contextual relevance and quality control (SATHU, 2025). In order to promote knowledge transfer and confidence-building, procurement ecosystems should also incorporate structured mentorship programs that pair up aspiring young entrepreneurs with seasoned contractors and procurement officers.

Fourth, in order to address the fragmentation and discretionary inconsistencies that currently define the procurement landscape, policy recalibration is urgently needed. Although the PPPFA offers a legal and constitutional foundation for preferential procurement, its application has been inconsistent and frequently weakened by imprecise assessment standards and weak enforcement tools (Moore South Africa, 2023). Standardized evaluation metrics, uniform guidelines for the application of specific goals, and required reporting on youth participation should all be included in a revised national procurement policy. The upcoming Public Procurement Act ought to include these reforms, and the Office of the Chief Procurement Officer (OCPO) should oversee a nationwide monitoring and evaluation system to support them.

Lastly, it is suggested that departments and municipalities that show quantifiable progress in youth-inclusive procurement be given performance-based incentives. These could include preferential access to national infrastructure funding, public recognition, or conditional grants. In addition to promoting compliance, these incentives would support a local innovation and developmental procurement culture. All of these suggestions work together to reframe preferential procurement as a transformative tool for economic inclusion, youth empowerment, and spatial equity. Political will, institutional strength, and ongoing intergovernmental cooperation are necessary for their implementation.

In South Africa, preferential procurement was created as a means of addressing past economic marginalization. It has had a mixed impact on young start-ups in Mpumalanga, providing both systemic bottlenecks and hope and opportunity. Provincial and local governments must establish inclusive, accountable, and capacitated procurement ecosystems in order to maximize the effects of this revolutionary policy. Youth entrepreneurship won't be able to contribute to sustainable development and economic justice until then.

VIII. CONCLUSION

With an emphasis on the province of Mpumalanga, this study has critically investigated how preferential procurement can support youth entrepreneurship in South Africa. The results of a systematic synthesis of recent research show that although preferential procurement policies have opened up new opportunities for youth involvement, particularly in industries like construction and services, these opportunities are frequently thwarted by institutional, structural, and spatial disparities. The transformative potential of procurement as a developmental tool has been

limited by the misalignment of policy intent and implementation, regulatory ambiguity, and a lack of post-award support (Mofolo & Mathe, 2022; Watermeyer, 2019).

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the continued use of tokenistic practices, in which young businesses are involved in procurement procedures but are not given the necessary authority to grow or continue their businesses (Wanjiru & Kamau, 2020). Rural youth entrepreneurs face disproportionate access barriers, such as institutional neglect and infrastructural deficiencies, which are exacerbated by the urban-rural divide (Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature, 2025). These findings are consistent with more general criticisms of South Africa's public procurement reform, which emphasize the need for improved institutional capacity, policy coherence, and developmental alignment (Ambe & Maleka, 2016; National Treasury, 2023).

To sum up, preferential procurement is still a potentially effective tool for youth empowerment and socioeconomic justice. Its effectiveness, however, depends on the implementation of strong oversight procedures, the localization and simplification of digital procurement platforms, and the institutionalization of focused mentorship and training initiatives. In order to capture the specific realities that influence procurement outcomes, future research should use participatory methodologies to examine the lived experiences of young entrepreneurs in various provinces and industries. Procurement policy can only fulfill its constitutional and developmental mandate by using such context-sensitive and evidence-based approaches.

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