Tips for monitoring public procurement spending during the COVID-19 outbreak

You can learn a lot about how governments are confronting the coronavirus pandemic from their public contracts. Many governments have turned to emergency procedures, especially expedited processes or negotiated contracts. While a rapid and efficient response is paramount to ensure the well-being of all citizens, transparency is essential to maintain the quality, sustainability, and impact of these contracts, as our executive director Gavin Hayman has argued.

Beyond emergency procurement for essential items, it's also important to keep an eye on how public spending is managed generally in the midst of a crisis like this. There's a high risk of mismanagement, corruption, and fraud in public procurement at the best of times, let alone when public attention is diverted elsewhere.

We've put together some ideas for leads on investigating procurement spending in the midst of the crisis, but please bear in mind that public contracting data and documents probably only tell part of the story so you must build a more complete picture of the situation by talking to authorities and independent health and procurement experts. If you can, consult NGOs and researchers experienced in monitoring health procurement.

Where to find procurement information

Check your government's online procurement platform. This index by the Open Knowledge Foundation has a run-down of resources by country. You can also check aggregated data portals like OpenOpps, OpenTender.eu, the new World Bank Global Public Procurement Database, and where available, red flagging tools such as Tenders.Guru.

Some procurement authorities have set up dedicated COVID-19 search tools, such as those in Paraguay and Ukraine.

What to look for

We have a comprehensive guide of 150 indicators of suspicious behavior in procurement. Below are some you might want to look out for when examining the COVID-19 crisis.

- **Responsiveness —** Look at whether tenders are advertised and contracts are signed in a timely manner. For example, an Australian journalist found that a public education campaign was commissioned more than a month after the first local case of the disease was confirmed.
- **Preparedness —** What contracts were in place to mitigate the risk of pandemics before this outbreak took hold?
- **Inflated prices & unqualified suppliers —** How do prices compare? For example, Kyiv just bought coronavirus test kits for around US$12, according to Ukraine's open contracting platform ProZorro). And what is the suppliers' history in previous emergencies? One example is unresolved issues from dealing with emergency contracting in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in the US.
- **Rushed direct awards —** This Buzzfeed article examines the dozens of contracts awarded by the US in recent weeks, some without open competition. Although obviously urgent, this quick spending dramatically increases the risk of corruption and mismanagement.
- **Delivery/implementation —** Were the goods or services provided as promised? Cross-reference official data with interviews, photos and other materials from local civil society groups and community members who are the designated recipients.
- **Fixed services —** Many ongoing maintenance services will not be needed at full capacity in places where public offices, schools, and cultural venues are closed. It's worth checking these maintenance contracts in detail to see whether the terms agreed to require the government to still pay.

Think about how insights from procurement data could be compared with other datasets and sources. Numerous helpful resources for reporting on the outbreak have been produced by journalism organizations, including ProPublica, Global Investigative Journalism Network, the International Journalists' Network and the Associated Press.

Key words

Apart from COVID-19 and its variations, you could search for critical items as defined by the World Health Organization and local health authorities, such as personal protective equipment or PPE, masks, ventilators, test kits, gloves, alcohol, scrubs, body bags, aprons, respirators, and other common names for medicines, health supplies and equipment.

Some countries are using emergency funds to manage COVID-19 response spending, so you can search for budget lines related to those funds.

Look out for other goods and services that might be in demand as government services shift to remote work, and authorities introduce quarantine measures. These might include video-conferencing services, laptops, call center services, temp workers, public information

websites, apps and other telecommunication services. Support services for vulnerable populations and cleaning services are worth checking too.

Keeping your information organized

Structure your information to understand what details you have and what's missing. The Open Contracting Data Standard provides a global schema to structure the procurement information you gather throughout the investigation. Using a single identifier or ID code to bring together information on the different stages of procurement procedures -- that is planning, tender, award, contract and implementation (such as payments and amendments) -- enables you to track the process. The Data Standard is served by a free helpdesk and many tools to help facilitate your work.

Don't forget the good news stories

Finally, procuring essential services and goods such as testing kits and masks is an important service powered by many dedicated procurement professionals in the government, who are working under immense pressure to support everyone. So a big shout out where things are going well is an important part of the story too. Sharing solutions goes a long way to building trust in uncertain times and reminds readers that the actions we choose to take can make all difference.