

7th Current Business Issues in African Countries 2026

Africa as the Wellspring of Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Engineering

From 'Cost-Killing' Purchasing to the Value-Creating Procurement Function: Product Innovation at the Core of New Sourcing Practices in Morocco

ABSTRACT

Purpose : This research examines the strategic contribution of the purchasing function to product innovation processes, drawing on a systematic literature review and an analysis of sectoral dynamics in Morocco. It seeks to elucidate the mechanisms through which procurement practices sustain and drive New Product Development (NPD).

Methodology/approach : The methodology relies on a systematic and critical review of academic and professional literature dedicated to the purchasing-innovation dyad and Supplier Relationship Management (SRM). This conceptual framework is contextualized through an analysis of sectoral mutations in Morocco, supported by the rigorous exploitation of secondary data from institutional reports and pre-existing empirical studies.

Findings : The findings highlight the strategic metamorphosis of the purchasing function, which has become fully integrated into innovation and value co-creation processes. Four fundamental levers emerge as critical: Early Purchasing Involvement (EPI) in design projects, supplier co-innovation, the digital transformation of procurement practices (e-procurement), and the ecosystemic orchestration of the supplier network.

Research limitations/implications : Being predominantly grounded in secondary data and existing theoretical frameworks, this research underscores the need for further primary empirical investigation. Complementary mixed-method studies are required to measure the precise impact of these emerging purchasing practices on innovation performance across diverse industrial settings.

Originality : This article offers an integrated, contextualized perspective on the purchasing function's contribution to product innovation within an emerging economy. By articulating theoretical synthesis, digitalization imperatives, and collaborative supplier management, it sheds new light on the modernization trajectory of the procurement function in Morocco.

Keywords: Purchasing function; Product innovation; New Product Development (NPD); Supplier collaboration; Procurement digitalization; Emerging economy; Morocco.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations currently operate within an environment characterized by intense competition and perpetual transformation, compelling them to continuously rethink their sources of performance and sustainability. Among the primary strategic levers available, product innovation occupies a particularly paramount position. For firms, innovating represents an essential mechanism to differentiate themselves, sustain their competitive advantage, and drive long-term growth. Concurrently, the purchasing function is undergoing a significant paradigmatic shift in its role. Numerous studies indicate that suppliers can transition into key partners within the innovation process by providing complementary technological capabilities, novel ideas, and advanced market expertise. As several scholars point out, innovation is rarely the solitary output of an isolated firm; rather, it emerges from the synergistic combination of resources and knowledge drawn from a network of actors, within which the purchasing function occupies a natural interface position.

Product innovation is traditionally defined as the introduction of a good or service that is new or significantly improved with respect to its characteristics or intended applications. According to the Schumpeterian typology, innovation may be categorized as either radical or incremental. In both instances, innovation cannot be reduced to a mere invention; it entails a comprehensive organizational process spanning from idea generation to effective commercialization. This process necessitates the mobilization of resources that firms do not inherently possess internally. Consequently, seeking competencies and knowledge beyond the firm's boundaries becomes an indispensable strategy. Since the seminal works on open innovation, it has been widely acknowledged that integrating external ideas and resources with internal capabilities significantly enhances innovative performance. One of the principal levers of this open innovation is close collaboration with suppliers.

Substantial empirical research has established a positive correlation between supplier involvement and product innovation performance. A recent meta-analysis encompassing several thousand observations concludes that extensive supplier involvement yields positive effects on both development efficiency and its overall effectiveness. However, the precise mechanisms through which the purchasing function contributes to this process remain underexplored in the literature. The central question guiding our research is therefore formulated as follows: To what extent does the purchasing function contribute to product innovation?

To address this research question, the article is structured into three main sections. The first section provides an overview of the evolutionary trajectory of the purchasing function, its strategic missions, and its relational dynamics with suppliers. The second section proposes a theoretical framework for product innovation and its typologies, placing a strong emphasis on its processual dimension. Finally, drawing on the case of Morocco, the third section examines how purchasing practices can concretely foster product innovation. Particular attention is devoted to the automotive, healthcare, and construction sectors, as well as to the digital transformation of procurement.

This article is grounded in a systematic review of the academic and professional literature intersecting purchasing management, product innovation, and inter-organizational relations. Furthermore, it mobilizes an analysis of sectoral cases in Morocco, utilizing secondary data derived from published empirical studies, institutional reports, specialized press articles, and corporate case studies. This methodological approach enables the confrontation of theoretical insights with empirical realities, thereby identifying the specificities inherent to the Moroccan context.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

For several decades, management science research has investigated the determinants of organizational performance and sustainability. Among the primary strategic levers, product innovation occupies a central position. For firms, innovating constitutes an essential means to differentiate themselves, safeguard their competitive advantage, and ensure long-term growth (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010; Dangereux, 2016).

Concurrently, the purchasing function is experiencing a significant broadening of its role. Numerous studies demonstrate that suppliers can become key partners in the innovation process by contributing complementary technological capabilities, novel ideas, and advanced market expertise (Bonaccorsi & Lipparini, 1994; Handfield and al., 1999; Clark, 1989).

As Luzzini and al. (2015, p. 3) emphasize, «companies rarely innovate by themselves»; innovation is the output of a network rather than a single individual or a solitary firm. In this context, supplier collaboration and the involvement of the purchasing function in innovation processes have been recognized as a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage (Luzzini and al., 2015).

Product innovation is traditionally defined as the introduction of a good or service that is new or significantly improved with respect to its characteristics or intended uses (OECD/Eurostat,

2005). According to Schumpeter's (1934) typology, it can be radical or incremental. In both instances, innovation cannot be reduced to a mere invention, as it entails a comprehensive organizational process ranging from idea generation to effective commercialization.

This process necessitates the mobilization of resources that firms do not always possess internally (Kantaruk Pierre, 2021). Consequently, seeking skills and knowledge beyond the firm's boundaries becomes an indispensable strategy. Since the seminal work of Chesbrough (2003), the open innovation paradigm has underscored the importance of leveraging external ideas and resources in tandem with internal capabilities to achieve success.

The literature confirms that firms are increasingly pursuing open innovation strategies (Salter & Laursen, 2006; Dahlander & Gann, 2010), a major lever of which is close collaboration with suppliers (Un and al., 2010).

Substantial empirical research has established a positive correlation between supplier involvement and product innovation performance (Luzzini and al., 2015). A meta-analysis of the literature, encompassing 11,420 observations across 51 studies, concludes that extensive supplier involvement exerts positive effects on both development efficiency and effectiveness (Suurmond and al., 2020).

However, the precise mechanisms through which the purchasing function contributes to this process remain underexplored. As Luzzini and al. (2015, p. 109) note, «few papers empirically test the effect of supplier collaboration (meant as supplier involvement, development, and integration) on innovation performance and the contribution of strategic sourcing activities and purchasing knowledge.» It is precisely upon this gap that our research aims to shed light.

The purchasing function occupies a natural boundary-spanning position with suppliers. It is therefore uniquely positioned to detect and evaluate emerging innovations within supply markets (Luzzini and al., 2015). Drawing on a sample of 498 global firms, Luzzini and al. (2015) demonstrate that prioritizing innovation drives companies to emphasize supplier collaboration and strategic sourcing, which in turn enhances innovation performance. Their study further highlights that buyers' knowledge acts as a catalyst for both supplier collaboration and the strategic purchasing approach. In other words, the competencies developed within the purchasing function constitute an essential lever for transforming suppliers into innovation partners.

Other scholars have emphasized the crucial role of the purchasing function's «absorptive capacity», its ability to recognize, assimilate, and apply new external knowledge (Cohen &

Levinthal, 1990). Furthermore, recent literature insists on the importance of Early Purchasing Involvement (EPI) in the development process (Wynstra and al., 2022). Late involvement diminishes the leverage effect, whereas upstream integration allows for steering design choices toward more innovative solutions.

Several factors either facilitate or hinder the purchasing function's contribution to product innovation. The internal recognition of the purchasing function, its status within the organization, and the quality of cross-functional collaboration are key determinants (Luzzini and al., 2015). Buyers' training and expertise, their knowledge of markets and technologies, and their ability to orchestrate a supplier network are all critical competencies to cultivate. These elements align with the findings of Dangereux (2016) regarding organizational ambidexterity, asserting that firms successfully innovating are those capable of reconciling exploration and exploitation. Through its boundary-spanning nature, the purchasing function can play an essential interfacing role in achieving this reconciliation.

THE PURCHASING FUNCTION: EVOLUTION, STRATEGIC MISSIONS, AND RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

The purchasing function has undergone a profound transformation, transitioning from an administrative and peripheral role to a central strategic function within organizations. According to Van Weele (2010), the purchasing function consists of «managing the firm's external resources in such a way that the supply of all goods, services, capabilities, and knowledge which are necessary for running, maintaining, and managing the company's primary and support activities is secured at the most favorable conditions.» This broad conceptualization stands in stark contrast to earlier definitions that reduced purchasing to a momentary act of acquisition.

Tarondeau (1979) emphasized that the function was historically «confined to a passive role where it must weigh on costs without being invited to contribute to the myriad decisions regarding the firm's products.» Barreyre (1976) was among the first to demonstrate its strategic nature, and Trehan (2014) notes that the function's metamorphosis occurred over a single generation. In the retail sector, this significance is particularly exacerbated. The share of purchases in total turnover reaches 76 to 80%, while operational margins remain highly constrained, effectively rendering procurement a «core business» function.

As one expert indicates, «a retailer does not earn its living by selling, but by buying.» The buyer's missions are multifaceted. Primarily, they must reduce costs and enhance economic

performance. Perrotin (1999) points out that, since the selling price is dictated by the market, the only viable variable to increase profit is the cost price, of which purchases constitute over 50%. In mass retail, the «discount» model transforms the buyer into a «cost killer» consolidating volumes to secure optimal pricing.

This logic is encapsulated by the Kraljic matrix (1983), which categorizes purchases based on their strategic importance and supply risk. Furthermore, the buyer contributes to value creation beyond mere cost metrics. They are instrumental in risk management, supply chain operations, and supply marketing. Van Weele (2014) further insists that «buying for retail is much more than just buying products.» Thus, the purchasing function intervenes across numerous value-creating processes.

Buyers contribute to assortment construction (Amine, Fady, & Pontier, 1997), the development of private labels (Grandclément, 2006), and the management of logistical flows. The latter notably involves challenges related to just-in-time (JIT) delivery and stockout management (Emmelhainz, Emmelhainz, & Stock, 1991; Campo, Gijsbrechts, & Nisol, 2000). Consequently, the purchasing function participates directly in the operational and commercial performance of the firm.

The purchasing function is equally central to inter-organizational relations. Retailers' bargaining power has substantially increased, driven largely by industry consolidation and central purchasing bodies (Allain & Chambolle, 2003; Rey & Tirole, 2000). Applying French and Raven's (1959) theory of power bases, buyers possess coercive power through delisting threats, reward power via shelf space allocation, and expert power through logistical proficiency, all of which reinforce their influence within the commercial dyad.

From this perspective, Dahl (1957) defines power as «the ability of actor A to get actor B to do something that B would not otherwise do.» Nevertheless, suppliers are not devoid of countervailing power. Bonet and Pache (2004), as well as Abbad, Pache, and Bonet-Fernandez (2012), demonstrate that suppliers of strong brands can establish a relationship of interdependence with retailers.

Furthermore, the social exchange theory developed by Blau (1964) and Morgan and Hunt (1994) highlights the paramount importance of trust and commitment in buyer-supplier relationships. These relationships do not hinge solely on power dynamics but also on cooperative mechanisms that facilitate the construction of resilient and high-performing partnerships.

The Resource-Based View (RBV), pioneered by Penrose (1959) and popularized by Barney (1991), posits that internal resources constitute a source of sustained competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). This approach underscores the strategic role of the competencies and resources held by the firm in value creation and competitive differentiation.

The Relational View, proposed by Dyer and Singh (1998), complements this perspective by arguing that inter-organizational cooperation can generate a «relational rent.» This theoretical lens emphasizes the benefits derived from dyadic partnerships rather than exclusively from internal resources, thereby highlighting the critical nature of strategic collaborations between buyers and suppliers.

Today, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is fundamentally reshaping procurement practices. Carter and Jennings (2004) define responsible purchasing as the integration of environmental, social, and ethical criteria into sourcing decisions. The ISO 20400 standard provides critical guidelines enabling organizations to embed sustainable development principles within their procurement policies and practices.

Certification frameworks, such as the Supplier Relations and Responsible Purchasing (RFAR) label accompany this transformation. These initiatives incentivize organizations to adopt highly responsible practices and to elevate the quality of their supplier relationships.

Finally, innovation currently stands as a major imperative for the purchasing function. Schiele (2010) demonstrates that the upstream integration of procurement into new product development, widely conceptualized as Early Purchasing Involvement (EPI), represents a critical performance driver. This early integration enables the prompt mobilization of suppliers' competencies and knowledge within innovation projects.

The research of Luzzini and al. (2015) corroborates that buyers' competencies positively moderate supplier collaboration and the success of innovative projects. Consequently, the contemporary purchasing function is neither confined to cost reduction nor characterized by a unilateral paradigm of domination. It constitutes an essential lever for value creation, risk management, corporate social responsibility, and collaborative innovation.

INNOVATION AND PRODUCT INNOVATION: DEFINITIONS, TYPOLOGIES, AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The concept of innovation occupies a central position in contemporary management science literature, from both strategic and organizational perspectives. The challenge for firms is no

longer simply to produce efficiently, but to innovate in order to differentiate themselves, safeguard their competitive position, and ensure their long-term survival.

As emphasized in the Oslo Manual, an economy's innovative capacity depends heavily on the enterprise; it is therefore critical to understand the characteristics that render firms more or less innovative, as well as the internal mechanisms through which innovation is generated (OECD/Eurostat, 2005). Understanding the precise scope of the innovation concept is consequently an indispensable prerequisite for any analysis of its relationships with other organizational dynamics.

One of the foundational definitions of innovation was articulated by Schumpeter (1961), who conceptualized it as the introduction of «new combinations» of production factors into the economic sphere. This concept encompasses five distinct scenarios: the introduction of a new good, a new method of production, the opening of a new market, the acquisition of a new source of raw materials, and the implementation of a new industrial organization (Schumpeter, 1961).

Schumpeter (1961) establishes a fundamental distinction between invention and innovation: invention corresponds to the mere emergence of a novel idea, whereas innovation resides in the effective implementation of this idea in practice. The author also introduces the premise that innovation emanates primarily from producers' activities, contradicting the traditional view that positions consumer demand as the primary driver. It is the entrepreneur who, through their capacity to execute new combinations, initiates economic change and, in doing so, triggers a process of «creative destruction.»

This Schumpeterian perspective has extensively influenced subsequent definitions. In this vein, Baregheh and al. (2009), following a comprehensive textual analysis of sixty multidisciplinary definitions, propose an integrative definition: «Innovation is the multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new/improved products, service or processes, in order to advance, compete and differentiate themselves successfully in their marketplace» (Baregheh and al., 2009, p. 1334). This definition reflects the core tenets of Schumpeter's conceptualization while emphasizing the processual nature of innovation.

Following a systematic review of twenty-seven years of literature, Crossan and Apaydin (2010) propose a now widely recognized definition: innovation is «production or adoption, assimilation, and exploitation of a value-added novelty in economic and social spheres; renewal and enlargement of products, services, and markets; development of new methods of production; and establishment of new management systems» (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010, p.

1155). This definition underscores that innovation can be both a process and an outcome, highlighting its dual potential origin: innovation may result from either internal generation or external adoption (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010, p. 1155).

In 2005, the OECD published the Oslo Manual, the foremost international reference for collecting and interpreting innovation data. According to this manual, innovation is defined as follows: «Technological product and process (TPP) innovations comprise implemented technologically new products and processes and significant technological improvements in products and processes. A TPP innovation has been implemented if it has been introduced on the market (product innovation) or used within a production process (process innovation)» (OECD/Eurostat, 2005, p. 36).

The 2018 edition of the Oslo Manual revised this definition to refocus on business innovation, now understood as «a new or improved product or process (or combination thereof) that differs significantly from the unit's previous products or processes and that has been made available to potential users (product) or brought into use by the unit (process)» (OECD/Eurostat, 2018, p. 20). This evolution highlights two pivotal points: the novelty criterion can be relative rather than absolute, and the notion of «significant difference» replaces mere «novelty» to prevent minor alterations from being unduly classified as innovations.

Beyond these general definitions, the literature commonly distinguishes four types of innovation based on their object. The Oslo Manual (2005) thus identifies product innovation, process innovation, marketing innovation, and organizational innovation. However, as noted by Damanpour and Aravind (2012), the majority of empirical studies have concentrated on the first two categories (product and process) to the detriment of non-technological innovations, namely marketing and organizational innovations.

The present research aligns with this predominant stream by selecting product innovation as its primary focus. Product innovation denotes «the introduction of a good or service that is new or significantly improved with respect to its characteristics or intended uses» (OECD/Eurostat, 2005, p. 56). This definition includes modifications to technical specifications, integrated software or components, user-friendliness, or other functional characteristics. Furthermore, contrary to a narrow interpretation that would restrict product innovation to major technological breakthroughs, product innovation encompasses a much broader spectrum, ranging from gradual incremental improvements to radical innovations that disrupt existing market offerings.

In this context, the literature classically distinguishes between radical and incremental innovation. Radical innovation introduces a major disruption in a product, service, or process, often driven by new technology or a novel market conceptualization (Dangereux, 2016). It corresponds to what Schumpeter termed «discontinuous» new combinations, capable of generating creative destruction and redefining the competitive boundaries of an industry. Conversely, incremental innovation is characterized by continuous, step-by-step enhancements to existing products or processes, aimed at extracting maximum value from current offerings without necessitating fundamental changes or massive capital investments (Davila and al., 2007).

Garcia and Calantone (2002) provide a more systematic framework for delineating new product typologies. According to these authors, two perspectives must be considered. The macro perspective defines the degree of novelty based on factors external to the firm, while the micro perspective defines the degree of novelty based on firm-specific factors. Furthermore, the marketing perspective posits that a new product may require new marketing skills, whereas the technological perspective posits that a new product may necessitate new R&D resources or a new production process.

Drawing on this, Garcia and Calantone (2002) classify product innovation into five types based on their degree of technological and commercial novelty for both the market and the firm: radical innovation, which creates a global market utilizing entirely unprecedented technology; «really new» innovation, which combines technological and market novelty at an intermediate level; discontinuous innovation, which disrupts existing consumption patterns; incremental innovation, which introduces minor improvements to a pre-existing product; and imitative innovation, which is new only to the firm replicating a concept already validated on the market.

Moving beyond the conceptualization of innovation as a mere outcome, a renewed approach entails understanding it as a process. Among the most influential processual models, Cooper and Kleinschmidt (1986) proposed a thirteen-step model describing the typical «sequential structure» of the product innovation process. These thirteen activities include: initial screening, preliminary market assessment, preliminary technical assessment, detailed market study, business and financial analysis, product development, in-house product testing, customer product testing, test marketing and trial selling, trial production, pre-commercialization business analysis, production start-up, and market launch (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1986). The authors observed that commercially successful projects adhered to a significantly higher

number of steps compared to failed projects, thereby underscoring the critical importance of structured management in the innovation process.

Davila and al. (2006) propose a complementary six-phase model: intelligence gathering, idea recognition, idea selection, execution, stage-gate processes, and value capture. This model highlights two salient features of the innovation process. First, it emphasizes the importance of upstream phases, which are often the most creative yet highly uncertain. Second, it insists on the necessity of regular control points (stage-gate processes) to validate the project's continuation at each stage and prevent resource dilution in unprofitable ventures. Crucially, these control points constitute a primary locus of intervention for management control systems, which perform essential evaluation, screening, and resource allocation functions.

The innovation process is inherently characterized by high levels of uncertainty and risk. According to Galbraith (1973), uncertainty corresponds to the difference between the amount of information required to perform a task and the amount of information already possessed by the organization. In the context of product innovation, this uncertainty is multidimensional, manifesting across technological, market, and organizational domains.

To navigate these uncertainties, firms require structured processes and information tools enabling them to evaluate, plan, and continuously realign their actions. As Dangereux (2016) notes, design and development activities are marked by particularly acute levels of uncertainty and risk.

THE PURCHASING FUNCTION'S CONTRIBUTION TO PRODUCT INNOVATION AND NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

The purchasing function now occupies a central position within innovation and New Product Development (NPD) processes, reflecting a profound evolution toward a strategic role fully integrated into value-creation dynamics. Schiele (2010) emphasizes that Early Purchasing Involvement (EPI) constitutes a key performance driver in innovation projects, particularly in sectors where innovation represents a major competitive advantage. This upstream involvement enables buyers to intervene from the nascent phases of the NPD process, influencing technological choices, participating in supplier selection, and contributing to the formulation of specifications, thereby reinforcing their role in the strategic orientation of innovation projects.

In this perspective, McGinnis and Vallopra (1999) demonstrate that the involvement of purchasing in project teams constitutes a structuring lever for performance. Their measurement scale for Early Purchasing Involvement highlights the active participation of buyers in NPD

teams, their positioning as leaders or project managers, and their contribution to the identification of emerging technologies and strategic suppliers. This organizational integration enhances cross-functional coordination and fosters greater coherence in product development decisions, which in turn bolsters overall project performance.

Peterson and al. (2005) and Wagner (2012) complement this analysis by demonstrating that supplier collaboration spearheaded by the purchasing function improves component quality, reduces development lead times, and facilitates their integration into new products. Similarly, Luzzini and al. (2015) show that buyers' competencies directly influence the quality of supplier collaboration, which constitutes a decisive lever for the success of innovation projects. Cousins and al. (2006) reinforce this premise by identifying the organizational characteristics of the purchasing function as essential antecedents to NPD performance.

The recent work of Houssaïni (2024) provides a significant empirical deepening of these findings. Through a study of 135 buyers, he demonstrates that buyers' soft skills (relational competencies) positively influence supplier collaboration, whereas technical skills exert no significant effect on this collaborative dynamic. He also confirms that Early Purchasing Involvement has a direct positive effect on NPD project performance, while adopting a nuanced view of supplier collaboration, which does not systematically act as a mediator. This performance may equally stem from internal dynamics between purchasing and R&D, devoid of extensive interaction with suppliers. Houssaïni (2024) thus proposes a reconceptualization of collaboration, noting that it can also be supplier-initiated toward the buying firm, notably through mechanisms such as calls for projects or innovation days. Furthermore, he identifies eight core competencies for buyers in NPD projects and highlights an evolution of roles across the phases of the innovation process, ranging from exploration to commercialization.

In the retail sector, Simon (2019) asserts that the purchasing function can no longer be confined to a cost-reduction logic; rather, it must integrate marketing and supply chain dimensions to fully contribute to product innovation. Buyers participate in assortment construction, the development of Private Labels (PLs), and the management of promotions and product launches. This evolution transforms their role into that of a curator of differentiating or exclusive offerings, contributing directly to retailers' differentiation strategies. Simon (2019) also emphasizes that market orientation, as conceptualized by Narver and Slater (1990) and Kohli and Jaworski (1990), transcends mere customer orientation to encompass resource coordination and stakeholder management a mission to which the purchasing function makes a decisive contribution. Finally, he highlights that the buyer of tomorrow must be highly data-driven,

master digital tools, and adopt the role of a sourcer capable of scouting the supplier ecosystem to capture innovation.

Moreover, Poullié (2024) introduces an essential complementary dimension by integrating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) imperatives into the purchasing contribution to innovation. He demonstrates that sustainable procurement, as defined by the ISO 20400 standard and AFNOR, relies on the integration of environmental, social, and economic criteria into purchasing and supplier selection decisions. Certification, notably through the Supplier Relations and Responsible Purchasing (RFAR) label, plays a structuring role as a guideline, a guarantor, and a differentiation tool for purchasing practices. Poullié (2024) further underscores that the transition toward sustainable purchasing depends less on the label itself than on the associated managerial practices, such as training, the dissemination of a shared vision, and team involvement. This evolution fosters the embedding of CSR criteria within NPD processes and drives the development of more sustainable innovation.

Consequently, the collective works of Houssaïni (2024), Simon (2019), and Poullié (2024) converge upon a shared logic of profound transformation within the purchasing function. No longer restricted to an operational or cost-reduction role, it emerges as a strategic actor in product innovation, capable of intervening upstream in projects, structuring internal and external collaborations, curating differentiating offerings, and integrating sustainability imperatives. It simultaneously drives NPD project performance, distinctive value creation, and the transition toward responsible and sustainable innovation models.

Voici la traduction de cette section en anglais académique, dans le strict respect de la terminologie en sciences de gestion and des exigences de publication scientifique internationale.

THE PURCHASING FUNCTION'S CONTRIBUTION TO PRODUCT INNOVATION IN MOROCCO: STRATEGIC EVOLUTIONS AND SECTORAL DYNAMICS

Over the past two decades, the purchasing function in Morocco has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a predominantly administrative and cost-reduction-oriented role to a recognized strategic function. This evolution is particularly significant given that purchases represent, on average, 70% of corporate turnover in industrial firms and approximately 50% across all sectors (Zghaida and al., 2022). Consequently, the capacity to mobilize suppliers as innovation partners constitutes a major lever for competitiveness, particularly within the context of industrial reshoring and economic sovereignty (El Maalmi and al., 2024).

Morocco has thus established structuring institutions such as the National Purchasing Council (CNA Maroc). This institutional and academic recognition enables the purchasing function to be perceived by top management as a strategic partner, thereby fostering supplier integration and development (Zghaida and al., 2022). According to these authors, top management's recognition of the purchasing function acts as a mediating variable between supplier integration and development, on the one hand, and cost-saving performance, on the other.

The most emblematic example of this transformation is the Moroccan automotive sector, which has experienced a spectacular metamorphosis since the early 2000s. While the automotive industry was virtually non-existent in the 1990s, Morocco currently boasts a production capacity of 700,000 vehicles per year, with a local integration rate reaching 65.5% in 2024, up from 40% in 2016 (Lechheb, 2024). This performance relies on a vast network of approximately 250 equipment manufacturers and suppliers, delivering parts to 75 destinations worldwide (*La Vie Eco*, May 15, 2025).

The Renault ecosystem set a local integration target of 65%, which has now been surpassed, establishing a new objective of 80% by 2030 (*La Vie Eco*, May 15, 2025). The purchasing function, by steering the selection, evaluation, and development of suppliers, has played a pivotal role in this ramp-up, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. Indeed, Moroccan SMEs are beginning to ascend the value chain, transitioning from simple subcontracting activities to more complex domains such as the design and manufacturing of parts with high technological value (Lechheb, 2024).

This evolution presupposes that buyers explicitly integrate innovation criteria into their selection processes, in accordance with the multi-criteria decision-making models proposed in the literature (El Maalmi and al., 2024). The Moroccan automotive sector thus illustrates how a strategic purchasing policy can become a powerful engine for product innovation.

The purchasing function's contribution to product innovation is not confined to the automotive industry. In the healthcare sector, strategic sourcing represents a crucial imperative for quality and safety. A study conducted in a Moroccan university hospital utilized the Kraljic matrix and the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method to map pharmaceutical purchases and define appropriate procurement strategies for each product category (Benazzouz & Auhmani, 2024). The findings highlight the concept of reverse marketing, wherein the buyer adopts a proactive posture to «establish the perfect match between the buying firm's needs and the supply market» (Benazzouz & Auhmani, 2024, p. 11). Within this context, product innovation can emerge not

solely from the research of new drugs or medical devices, but also from the redefinition of supplier relationships, or even from incentivizing local production to meet unfulfilled needs.

Similarly, in the construction sector, the application of the Kraljic matrix has facilitated the identification of highly strategic purchasing families and the subsequent adaptation of procurement policies (El Asri & El Moudden, 2024). This approach, which aims to mitigate supply risks while maximizing the impact on project profitability, creates an environment conducive to the introduction of new products and materials, provided that buyers are equipped to evaluate their technical and economic added value. Beyond traditional sectors, business aviation and the aerospace industry are also emerging in Morocco, necessitating a purchasing function capable of developing highly specialized competencies to select and integrate innovative suppliers (Delegation of the European Union to Morocco, 2025).

Digitalization constitutes another essential lever for the transformation of the purchasing function and its contribution to product innovation. In Morocco, 60% of SMEs still manage their procurement manually, resulting in time-consuming processes, repetitive errors, poor spend visibility, and eroded margins (Portail Achats, 2025, pp. 4-5). To rectify this situation, Moroccan firms, bolstered by incentivizing public policies, are increasingly turning toward digitalization and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

A recent chapter dedicated to the impact of AI and the digitalization of purchasing practices on the economic performance of Moroccan firms highlights that these technologies optimize procurement processes, improve visibility over product flows, strengthen supplier collaboration, and free up time for higher value-added activities, including innovation (Jouali & Jouali, 2025). The authors identify several key dimensions of technology adoption, namely operational efficiency, flexibility, and profitability. By automating repetitive tasks, these tools enable buyers to concentrate on more strategic missions, such as technological watch, the evaluation of innovative suppliers, and early participation in new product development projects. Thus, the digitalization of purchasing, by enhancing transparency and responsiveness, creates a virtuous cycle wherein the purchasing function can not only better manage costs but also actively contribute to product innovation.

These evolutions are inscribed within a broader movement to fortify Morocco's industrial and healthcare sovereignty. The Ministry of Industry and Trade has signed several partnership agreements with national retailers, such as BIM and Kitea, as well as professional associations, to develop local sourcing. These agreements aim to substitute imports with local manufacturing through a continuous process of qualifying and supporting local suppliers.

Within this framework, the purchasing function emerges as a central actor in industrial policy, tasked with detecting local capabilities, assisting SMEs in achieving required quality standards, and fostering the emergence of new product offerings. The development of an e-commerce platform dedicated to local products, encompassing over 250 producer groups and more than 500 cooperatives, further illustrates the purchasing function's role in promoting innovation within supply chains (Agricultural Development Agency, 2025).

In conclusion, the purchasing function in Morocco possesses considerable potential to become a strategic actor in product innovation. The evolutions observed in the automotive sector, advancements in digitalization, and growing recognition by top management pave the way for a more systematic and structured contribution. It is now incumbent upon researchers and practitioners to further investigate these dynamics by conducting quantitative and qualitative empirical studies to precisely measure the impact of strategic purchasing practices on innovation performance and to identify the key success factors.

CONCLUSION

This article highlights the gradual and profound transformation of the purchasing function within contemporary organizations, particularly regarding its articulation with product innovation dynamics and New Product Development (NPD). Long relegated to a predominantly operational role focused on cost reduction, administrative tasks, and supply chain security, the purchasing function is currently evolving into a strategic discipline. It is now embedded in a value-creation framework and actively contributes to innovation processes within the firm.

This evolution is manifested by the earlier involvement of buyers in NPD projects, their participation in the selection and structuring of supplier partnerships, and the strengthening of collaboration across the entire value chain. The purchasing function thus emerges as an interface between internal and external spheres, capable of contributing to the identification of innovative solutions, product improvement, and the optimization of development processes. Furthermore, the transformations driven by digitalization reinforce this dynamic by facilitating access to information, enhancing stakeholder coordination, and streamlining exchanges with suppliers.

The article also emphasizes that this shift is accompanied by a change in the professional posture of buyers, who must now mobilize a broader set of competencies beyond traditional

technical and economic proficiencies. The capacity to collaborate, communicate, anticipate needs, and operate within an open innovation paradigm has become essential for contributing effectively to development projects.

However, this research is subject to several limitations. It is primarily based on a literature review and secondary data, which restricts the generalizability of the findings and the empirical measurement of the actual impact of purchasing practices on innovation performance. Moreover, the analysis remains predominantly qualitative and conceptual, leaving limited scope for the statistical validation of the identified relationships.

In this perspective, several avenues for future research may be envisioned. It would be pertinent to conduct quantitative empirical studies to test the relationships between the purchasing function and product innovation performance. In-depth qualitative approaches, particularly through case studies, could also allow for a better understanding of the concrete mechanisms of collaboration between buyers, suppliers, and development teams. Furthermore, comparative research across different industries or national contexts would help to better delineate the influence of institutional and organizational factors. Finally, investigating the effects of digitalization, Artificial Intelligence, and emerging forms of purchasing governance represents a particularly promising avenue for understanding the future evolutions of this strategic function.

Furthermore, the results of this article present several significant managerial and organizational implications. From a managerial standpoint, they suggest that firms must rethink the positioning of the purchasing function, viewing it not as a support function centered on costs, but as a strategic lever for innovation and value creation. This implies integrating buyers earlier into NPD projects to foster coordination between internal teams and suppliers, thereby strengthening the organization's overall innovative capacity. Companies are also encouraged to develop new competencies within purchasing teams, particularly in areas such as collaboration, project management, technical literacy, and openness to the external ecosystem. Additionally, the digitalization of purchasing processes appears to be a key factor in improving information flow, accelerating decision-making, and enhancing responsiveness in innovation projects. Finally, from an organizational perspective, these developments necessitate greater cross-functionality, deeper integration of suppliers into development processes, and a culture more oriented toward collaborative innovation.

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