

## Addressing Human Rights: A Strategic Lever to Upgrade Procurement – A Case Study from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

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### Introduction

On 10 June 2025, the Sustainable Procurement Pledge (SPP) Human Rights and DACH Chapters hosted a special webinar, “**Addressing Human Rights: a Strategic Lever to Upgrade Procurement – A Case Study from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.**” The session featured **Niamh Mercer** MCIPS and former Chief of Procurement & Contracting at the OSCE, and Dr **Alexander Trautrimis**, Associate Professor in Supply Chain and Procurement at the University of Nottingham’s Rights Lab. Together, they explored how tackling modern slavery, and human rights risks can transform procurement from a transactional function into a true strategic partner for the C-suite.

**The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)** is the world’s largest regional security organisation, working across 57 participating States to promote stability, peace, and democracy through political dialogue and practical action. Its procurement function is central to supporting a diverse range of activities, from field operations to major international projects, all underpinned by principles of fairness, transparency, and value for money. **The Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham** is a world-leading research centre focused on ending modern slavery and supporting organisations to embed human rights in their supply chains.

To ensure a safe and open environment, the session was not recorded. However, we are pleased to share the key takeaways and practical resources below for the SPP community.

### Key Takeaways: Practical Steps for Procurement Professionals

#### 1. Start Where You Are—Don’t Wait for Perfection

- You do not need advanced tools or a large budget to begin. Manual risk assessments—reviewing your procurement categories and contracts—can reveal where the greatest risks of exploitation may lie.

- Once risks are identified, set realistic goals and step-by-step start with the highest risk areas and build from there.
- Focus on areas with “commoditised labour” and services where people are easily replaced, as these are often the most vulnerable.
- Action is possible even with limited resources; the key is to begin and build confidence in the process. Seek to engage multiple stakeholders in your organization, for example your clients, your legal office or your contract committees or similar.

## **2. Local Ownership and Context Matter**

- Tailor your approach to each region or office. Local teams know their markets best and should develop their own annual action plans with realistic, relevant commitments.
- Headquarters should lead by example, piloting new approaches and sharing stories of what worked (and what did not) to “de-risk” the process for others. What worked best in OSCE was also the HQ designing resources / templates that could be used – it was about showing the procurement practitioners what the tools looked like and how to apply them.
- Ideally you are building a community of learning within the organization – learn from your successes as well as your failures.

## **3. Supplier Engagement is a Journey, Not a Checkbox**

- Open, honest conversations with suppliers—especially in pre-tender meetings—help clarify expectations and build trust.
- Not all suppliers will have perfect answers; what matters is their willingness to engage and improve over time. They can evidence current practices as well as planned practices within the life of the contract.
- In some markets, just raising the topic of human rights is a significant achievement.

## **4. Practical Tools and Guidance Make a Difference**

- Written policies, checklists, and templates aligned to the procurement cycle de-mystify the process and empower practitioners.
- Real case studies and examples help bring the topic to life and show what is possible.

## 5. Collaboration and Community are Powerful

- Sharing experiences—both successes and challenges—within your organisation and with peers in the SPP community fosters learning and courage.
- Working collectively, including with other organisations or agencies, increases leverage with suppliers and accelerates progress.
- Training sessions and workshops worked best in the OSCE context where case-studies were shared and discussed. An investment in training and a learning approach worked to build confidence.

## 6. Track Progress—Celebrate Steps Forward

- Use KPIs such as the number of action plans, supplier engagements, and training sessions to track your journey.
- Remember: progress is incremental. Every step counts.
- Report on your work and its impact to Management and importantly the work should be visible when you present a case to your contracts committees. If they don't know what you are doing, they don't understand the value achieved and that's where procurement practitioners can contribute significantly.

## Closing Remarks

**The message was clear: sustainable and ethical procurement is not about perfection—it is about progress, partnerships, and persistence.** Whether you are just starting out or refining an advanced approach, the time to act is now. As Ambassadors, we have the platform and the purpose to inspire meaningful change. Let us continue these conversations, share what works, and support one another in building resilient, ethical supply chains that serve both people and planet.

## Call to Action

- **Explore the OSCE Practitioner's Guide:** [Download the full guide here](#) for practical templates, checklists, and step-by-step advice.

- **Connect with the Experts:** Reach out to Niamh Mercer and Dr Alexander Trautrim directly to continue the conversation, ask questions, or share your own experiences:
  - Niamh Mercer: [LinkedIn Profile](#)
  - Dr Alexander Trautrim: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/trautrim/>
- **Join the Discussion:** Keep the momentum going on our [Human Rights SPP LinkedIn Group](#) and [DACH SPP LinkedIn Group](#)—share your questions, insights, and success stories.
- **Stay connected:** For more information visit the [Human Rights Chapter](#) and the [DACH Chapter](#) sites on the SPP website. And [join the SPP community](#) and stay on top of events, tools and resources for procurement, by procurement!

***Together, we can make sustainable and ethical procurement the norm—one practical step at a time.***

#### Recommended reading materials:

1. <https://www.osce.org>
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization\\_for\\_Security\\_and\\_Co-operation\\_in\\_Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization_for_Security_and_Co-operation_in_Europe)
3. <https://um.fi/-the-organization-for-security-and-co-operation-in-europe>
4. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/osce>
5. <https://procurement.osce.org>
6. <https://www.ungm.org/Shared/KnowledgeCenter/Pages/OSCE>
7. [https://en.parp.gov.pl/storage/publications/pdf/factsheet\\_pl\\_poland\\_en\\_international\\_public\\_procurement\\_-\\_osce.pdf](https://en.parp.gov.pl/storage/publications/pdf/factsheet_pl_poland_en_international_public_procurement_-_osce.pdf)
8. <https://elearning.osce.org/courses/course-v1:OSCE+ACC202+2022/about>
9. <https://www.osce.org/cthb/536527> - The Role of Public Procurement in Preventing Trafficking for Labour Exploitation in Supply Chains and Advancing Human Rights
10. [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework | OHCHR](#)

