

Rethinking social value in projects: an objectivist framework for creating social outcomes through the social trifecta

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International
Journal of
Managing Projects
in Business

Received 30 December 2024

Revised 28 May 2025

16 August 2025

Accepted 11 September 2025

Abstract

Purpose – In line with the theme of this special issue: Rethinking the Creation of Social Value through Projects, this paper rethinks social value in projects by separating it from related terms such as social procurement and social reporting. The paper adopts an objectivist worldview, rendering social value a set of defined project requirements. From this perspective, this paper develops the social trifecta: a framework that connects social value, social procurement and social reporting as sequential and interdependent tools for creating measurable social outcomes. The aim is to give project teams a clear and accountable way to define, deliver and verify social value through projects.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper employs a systematic literature review, analysing peer-reviewed journal articles, books and reports from reliable databases, and then scoring the most relevant and impactful sources to extract information from. The systematic literature review focused on the themes of social value, social procurement and social reporting. It identified recurring gaps and conceptual inconsistencies. From this systematic literature review, the paper theorised the social trifecta framework to tie up social value with these social constructs and how they can all be used together in a project context to effectively define and deliver social outcomes.

Findings – The study reveals that social value, social procurement and social reporting are often treated as independent constructs and are insufficiently (and inconsistently) defined across the academic literature. This fragmentation limits their conceptual clarity and practicality in delivering measurable and meaningful social outcomes. By presenting them as interdependent and sequential elements that create social outcomes, and then tying them under one framework (i.e. the social trifecta), social value can be transformed from loosely defined and ambitious targets to clear and measurable social outcomes.

Originality/value – To provide a concise conceptual framework, the paper takes an objectivist view of social value. It introduces the social trifecta as a conceptual framework that connects social value, social procurement and social reporting as distinct but sequentially interdependent constructs. This paper helps project practitioners make sense of social value as a set of project requirements, definitions and targets that are interdependently achieved.

Keywords Social value, Social procurement, Social reporting, Social outcomes, Construction projects

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Projects play a fundamental role in creating social outcomes (Drouin and Turner, 2022; Kujala *et al.*, 2022). In the construction industry, social value, as well as social procurement, and social reporting are important for the successful delivery of projects and creation of social outcomes. Yet “social value” itself remains a concept that can be understood through multiple lenses notwithstanding: a subjective and context-specific perspective (i.e. the constructivist view) (Olander and Landin, 2008); an emergent process shaped by relationships (i.e. the relational view); a site of power and contestation (i.e. the critical view) (Bovaird, 2007); a strategic organisational aim (i.e. the strategic or organisational view) (Loosemoore, 2016); or a

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International Journal of Managing
Projects in Business
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1753-8396
p-ISSN: 1753-8378
DOI 10.1108/IJMPB-12-2024-0326

measurable project output (i.e. the objectivist view). Reconciling these different worldviews on social value is challenging, often hindering the alignment of project stakeholders with broader organisational and societal goals (Bondy and Charles, 2020; Miles, 2017). This has ultimately led to criticism of how project management contributes to social outcomes (Brunet and Aubry, 2018; Ninan *et al.*, 2019; Denicol *et al.*, 2020). To bring clarity to these numerous yet divergent worldviews, the following paper introduces the concept of a “social trifecta” as a unifying framework that addresses this conceptual fragmentation by connecting social value, social procurement and social reporting as interdependent constructs, collectively supporting the delivery of social outcomes. In addition, this paper explores how an objectivist view of social value, supported by the social trifecta framework it theorises, can help rethink and redefine the role of projects in the delivery of social outcomes, a focus elaborated through this paper’s research question: *to what extent is there a need to reconceptualise “social value” objectively alongside constructs such as social procurement and social reporting to sufficiently define and deliver social outcomes?*

As a consequence of this fragmentation and lack of conceptual clarity, an “implementation gap” prevails (Daniel and Pasquire, 2019), exacerbated by a lack of integrated strategies (El Daouk, 2023) and an abundance of ineffective socially-oriented procurement practices and insufficient social reporting mechanisms (El Daouk and Castro, 2025). Furthermore, complex and subjective stakeholder power dynamics in construction projects (Biesenthal *et al.*, 2017; Ninan *et al.*, 2019; Salet *et al.*, 2012) can jeopardise the project organisation’s ability to define and create social value. In practice, every project needs its own tailored approach to defining and achieving social outcomes. This makes sense and fits within the constructivist view of social value. However, *de facto*, this approach does not always work because construction projects often lack clear target-setting, operational strategies and tracing mechanism for social outcomes, regardless of the viewpoint adopted.

Therefore, to answer the research question aforementioned and convey its thesis, the following paper adopts an objectivist view of social value; and, as a result, emphasises and distinguishes the term “social outcomes” from it. Within this view, the paper’s understanding of social value is that of a set of project requirements that must be met to deliver net social outcomes or simply, *social outcomes*. The social trifecta embodies this viewpoint as a conceptual tool that aids project practitioners to navigate and make sense of social value by separating its intended deliverables (i.e. its definition and target-setting) from the actual achievement of such intended deliverables (i.e. the actual realisation of social outcomes). Before delving further, it is important to outline the theoretical framework behind this paper and the limitations in conceptual depth that such an objectivist framework creates in the process of rethinking social value through projects.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Defining social value, social trifecta and social outcomes

Social value admits of no easy definition. Many have attempted to define and illustrate the term with inconclusiveness from Emerson (2000) to Cook and Monk (2012), Raiden *et al.* (2019) and Walker *et al.* (2024). This paper will take a step back and rethink what is meant by “social value” from an objectivist viewpoint. A practical means to achieving this task is to provide two important starting points: a clear distinction between social value and other constructs that normally get caught in its orbit, and an objectivist theoretical framework that graphically demonstrates social value’s interdependence with such constructs. One prevalent problem pervading the literature is that other constructs, such as social procurement and social reporting, tend to either be separated from or subsumed completely by the term “social value”, where in fact, they are interdependently sequential (i.e. they occur in a specific order, but in that process, feedback loops can create mutual influences, even within such sequence).

Adding another layer of fog to the matter, “social value” has often been used interchangeably with “social value creation”. However, “social value creation” literally

denotes the process that results in the creation of something of positive value for society (Dietz and Porter, 2012), which is not social value *per se*. Within the academic literature, social value is taken to mean the non-economic gains that a project organisation or construction project generates for the society within which it is working, encompassing, *inter alia*, enhanced individual and community well-being, social capital and environmental results over and above immediate economic effect (Arvidson *et al.*, 2013). Both concepts have an essentially positive meaning, albeit that positivity is framed by the specific context in which each is defined and, thereby, comes to be understood (i.e. the worldview from which social value is being perceived). For example, social value, as defined in the previous sentence, is contextual and inherently positive, which is most aligned with the constructivist/interpretive and ethical/moral views. Social value creation, as previously defined, best fits a relational view focused on process and interaction, but it can also align with a constructivist view when shaped by stakeholder meaning. Regardless of the perspective adopted, both terms, as described, do not account for the possibility of loss, negative impact or simply no impact. Instead, they assume only a positive outcome and do not fully capture the idea of a net [gain, loss or zero] social outcome.

Thus, an impartial and straightforward term is required, and for that reason, the term “social outcomes” is more appropriate for the objectivist theoretical framework in which social value is being rethought in this paper. It offers a broader and more neutral basis for assessing social impact, emphasising the need for measurement and validation without the skewed presumption that social outcomes will always be positive. Social outcomes are the measurable results of social value, social procurement and social reporting efforts that affect societal well-being during and beyond a project’s lifecycle, particularly through inclusive stakeholder engagement (Caron *et al.*, 2024), accountability and long-term community assistance, whether those results are positive, neutral or otherwise. This paper takes this objectivist and measured view of social value to help project practitioners and organisations make sense of social value as a project instrument that can help define, and then, with social procurement and social reporting, execute and measure project objectives aimed at creating social outcomes. Before examining how social outcomes can be achieved within this theoretical framework, it is important to unpack further the social constructs that orbit the concept of social value and to outline their relationships with that term, and how all these constructs ultimately contribute to creating social outcomes. Undertaking this objectivist exercise and framing the social trifecta with a consistent role for social value helps avoid the need to repeatedly redefine the term in each publication cycle; a pattern that has, in part, prompted the need for this special issue to rethink and clarify what social value means in project contexts.

Regurgitating the term “social value” without consolidating its meaning and role within the bigger picture of creating social outcomes can be seen in Raiden *et al.*’s (2019) comprehensive work on social value in the built environment. In that work, “social value” is mentioned over a thousand times, with “social procurement” and “social reporting” mentioned hundreds of times each. Raiden *et al.* (2019) implicitly link these concepts but offer no explicit framework for integration, leaving the reader without a solid idea of where social value belongs in the overall process of creating social outcomes. This is where the social trifecta comes into play, providing a conceptual framework (which can be seen in Figures 1–3). The social trifecta integrates social value, social procurement and social reporting to demonstrate the key factors that enable and/or prevent the creation of social outcomes in construction projects. For the purposes of this paper, the term *trifecta* denotes:

A set of three constructs that follow a sequence but are also interdependent in function, as later stages can affect how earlier ones are defined or delivered. While they work best together and can be achieved to a useful extent, it is rare for all three to be fully realised at a high standard in a single project.

The social trifecta merely illustrates the sequential interdependencies (and trade-offs) of social value, social procurement and social reporting, and their complex relationship in creating



Figure 1. The social trifecta. Source: Author’s own work

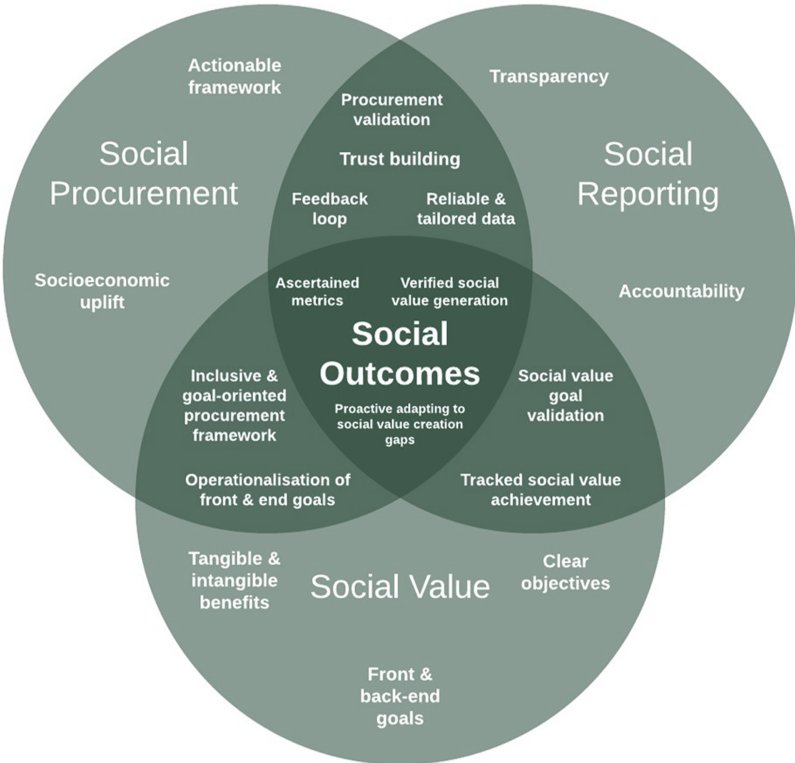


Figure 2. Interdependencies within the social trifecta. Source: Author’s own work

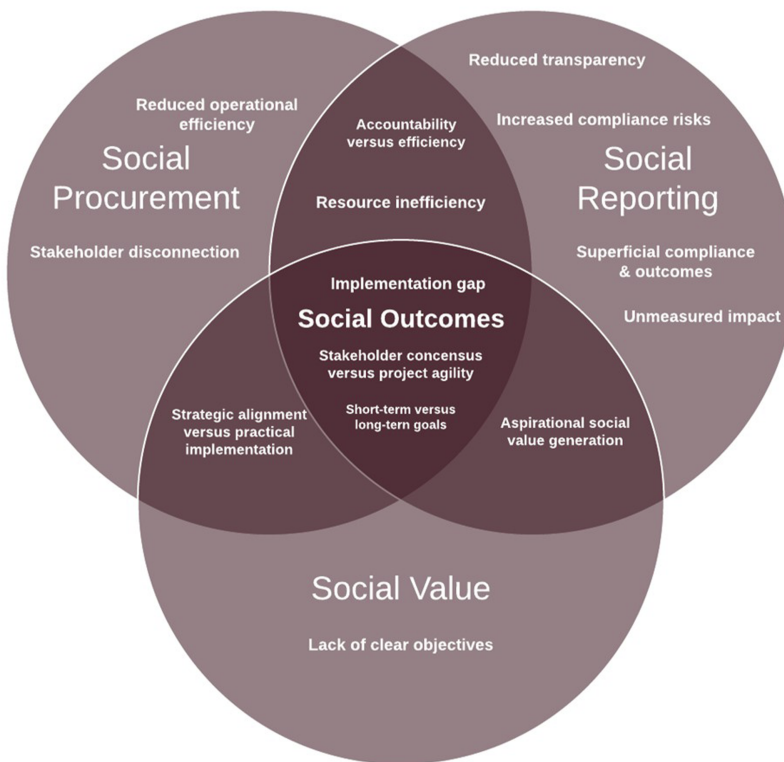


Figure 3. Trade-offs within the social trifecta. **Source:** Author's own work

social outcomes. The social trifecta is not a substitute to these three social constructs; it is a holistic reflection of what they all are within the greater picture of creating social outcomes. Social outcomes require sensible social considerations, reporting strategies, procurement routes and social value creation, all aligned with the execution and delivery of the project. While this paper focuses on social procurement and social reporting as key instruments within the social trifecta, they are not exhaustive of all possible means of achieving social outcomes. Other pathways and mechanisms may also play significant roles depending on the context, but these two were selected due to their prominence in the literature and operational clarity within the framework presented.

As for the three social constructs, it is also helpful to define them within the objectivist perspective adopted in this paper. *Social value* encapsulates “social [value] objectives”, in which the social outcomes, sought from successfully delivering the project, are clearly defined. It represents the measurable and verifiable social outcomes that the project seeks to create (such as influencing people’s well-being) by having well-defined objectives. *Social procurement* embodies the actioning mechanism. It ensures that procurement routes and supply chain practices are socially cognisant, such as being conscious about providing jobs to communities who are local or impacted by the project. *Social reporting* represents verifying the process of creating social outcomes, while enabling transparency and enforcing accountability mechanisms. From this granular scope, the respective roles of social value, social procurement and social reporting can be seen as key drivers in the pursuit of creating social outcomes.

2.2 Problem statement and research question

Going back to the question in the introduction asking about whether there is a need to rethink “social value” more objectively, alongside related constructs like social procurement and social reporting, to serve as tools to sufficiently define and deliver social outcomes, there are evident gaps that justify this objectivist view further. Currently, the term “social value” is often blurred with “social value creation”, even though the former refers to the actual benefits delivered to society *per se*, while the latter describes the process of generating those benefits. This semantic ambiguity reinforces the conceptual gap that the paper seeks to address through the social trifecta framework and its objectivist perspective. On an operational level, there is an operational gap stemming from the fact that both terms are usually framed as inherently positive, which limits validating and assessing social outcomes clearly. They don’t leave room for neutral or negative impacts, and this creates an inherent gap in how social outcomes are understood and measured. This leads to the practical relevance of the social trifecta. By approaching social value more objectively and aligning it with social procurement and social reporting as sequentially interdependent practical tools, decisions at the project level can finally be translated into measurable and actionable social outcomes for project stakeholders. This alignment also supports more effective stakeholder engagement, which is critical to project implementation; when stakeholder concerns are not addressed early in planning and governance processes, projects may face significant delays or disruptions (Olander and Landin, 2005). By addressing these gaps, this paper seeks to consolidate an understanding of creating social outcomes and social value’s position within that objectivist framework.

3. Systematic literature review

3.1 Objective of the systematic literature review

The academic literature relating to social value’s predecessor concepts, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), dates back well over a hundred years. The objective of the systematic literature review was to uncover conceptual gaps and recurring patterns in how social value and related terms it encapsulates are understood and applied, in order to inductively develop the social trifecta as a theoretical framework for defining and delivering measurable social outcomes in project contexts. This paper’s research methodology employs a scoring log (logbook) devised by the author, but also adapts the principles of systematic literature review employed by Agudelo *et al.* (2019), Glass (2012) and Okoli and Schabram (2010). This method emphasises a systematic, explicit and reproducible method to summarise existing literature, identify theoretical gaps and propound the paper’s objectivist theoretical viewpoint. This approach was appropriate given the breadth of the topic, enabling an objective and thorough synthesis of diverse sources that justified the theorisation of the social trifecta in order to tie social value (as well as social procurement and social reporting) with creating social outcomes without blurring any of these concepts. Given the vast literature on all the themes aforementioned, this paper focused on thematic areas related to the evolution of social value and its associated constructs, drawing from historical and contemporary accounts from leading scholarly papers that were meticulously scored (see [Supplementary Material 2](#), [Supplementary Material 3](#) and [Supplementary Material 4](#)). Through this systematic and criteria-based synthesis, the review exposed recurring fragmentations and conceptual inconsistencies between social value, social procurement and social reporting (within the context of ESG), prompting the inductive emergence of the social trifecta and its subsequent development by the author as a theoretical framework to clarify the sequential interdependencies of these themes in creating measurable social outcomes.

3.2 Research strategy

3.2.1 Databases. The initial search involved sourcing relevant papers using reliable academic databases. The databases accessed were Emerald Insight, Web of Science, Scopus,

ScienceDirect, JSTOR, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis Online, SAGE Journals, Google Scholar and SpringerLink. The UCL academic repository was also accessed to obtain journal papers and government reports relating to the themes of social value, social procurement and ESG (not social reporting *per se*, as that construct tends to be subsumed by the ESG academic literature). This repository, which was formerly known as UCL Discovery, is the university's open-access platform, which hosts a wide range of academic and institutional outputs relevant to project management and the built environment.

3.2.2 Search strategy. The search strategy was aimed to match and trace the conceptual evolution of social value and identify adjacent constructs frequently associated with its application in project contexts over time. The inherent bias in this strategy is that the author had prior knowledge of social value's conceptual evolution, giving them a rough idea of what search terms to employ. After that, a set of Boolean search terms were selected around primary and secondary themes. The core terms included: "social value" OR "corporate social responsibility" OR "CSR", which were used to capture both contemporary and historical conceptualisations of social value. These were added to or combined with project-related terms using AND operators to ensure contextual relevance: ("project" OR "project management" OR "success"). To identify constructs commonly situated within or alongside social value, additional Boolean terms were included: "social procurement" OR "social reporting" OR "social assessment". To filter the academic literature covering the themes of social reporting, including sources where it appears under broader ESG terminology, the search used Boolean operators such as: "social reporting" OR "social disclosure" OR "non-financial reporting" OR "ESG reporting" OR ("ESG" AND ("reporting" OR "disclosure" OR "assessment" OR "metrics" OR "performance")). To ensure the results were contextually relevant to construction projects, the results were finally merged with project-related terms such as: "project" OR "project management" OR "infrastructure").

3.2.3 Inclusion/exclusion criteria. Sources were included if they originated from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, edited academic volumes, conference proceedings subject to peer review, reports published by accredited universities or policy documents issued by governmental or intergovernmental organisations. Sources were also included if they focused substantively on at least one of the following core domains (or demonstrated interconnectedness with them): corporate social responsibility, social value, social value creation, social procurement, social reporting, ESG, project success or social responsibility. Sources were excluded if they were duplicates; lacked relevance to project-based or built environment settings; failed to engage with or align to any identifiable worldview related to social value (e.g. objectivist, constructivist, relational, etc.); or did not offer substantive grounding for the paper's conceptual framing or rationale. While peer-reviewed journal articles were prioritised, selected conference papers were included where they addressed gaps in journal coverage and provided meaningful insight into practice or underexplored perspectives. Such sources were also included and emphasised where they engaged in the critique of a particular worldview or such worldview's fragmentation within the wider scope of social value.

3.2.4 Data set quality. To obtain a reliable data set, the impact factor of cited papers was considered during this research. The author identified the paper's academic journal or publisher's metrics, as well as citations and journal impact factors. The author included Scimago Journal and Country Rank (SJR), CiteScore by Scopus and Source Normalised Impact per Paper (SNIP). Following these steps, references from selected articles were reviewed for further sources, including reports from international bodies and non-governmental organisations.

3.2.5 Paper selection and retrieval. The author devised a logbook to classify and analyse the relevant data, based on the papers' conceptual focus, methodology, relevance to construction project management, and theoretical gaps and propositions. The logbook was devised in a way that would document the conceptual level and publication quality of the sources used. Main subcategories included "A1. Theme of Title", which set the general theme

of the research; “A2. Conceptual Framework”, which identified the theoretical basis used in each source or study; and “A3. Methodology”, which described the research approach employed. The logbook also recorded evaluative features. “B1. Findings” identified the end-output of each source. “B2. Research Gap” was used to identify empirical or theoretical shortcomings, thereby contributing to the originality and necessity of the current review. “B3. Practical Implications” was used to highlight the practical contribution and implications of the given publication. Publication-specific information was noted under “C1. Publication Details”. “C2. Citations” extracted the metrics relevant to the journal paper or academic source itself. Finally, “C3. Publisher Metrics” covered the academic rigour and dissemination effect of each source’s publisher by measuring indicators such as journal rankings and impact factors.

Regarding the scoring system and eligibility criteria, papers that satisfied all three subcategories in Category A received a score of 3/3. For a paper to be eligible for inclusion, it was required to score at least 2/3 in Category A, 2/3 in Category B and 2/3 in Category C. If a paper fell slightly short in one category but received a full score in another (e.g. 2/3 in Category A, 1/3 in Category B and 3/3 in Category C), it was still considered eligible. Yet, sources that did not pass (i.e. papers that scored below half) two out of the three categories were not eligible and were excluded from analysis (e.g. 1/3 in Category A, 1/3 in Category B and 3/3 in Category C). Following the application of the criteria outlined in [Subsections 3.2.1–3.2.6](#), the initial search yielded 980 documents. After removing duplicates and clearly irrelevant sources, approximately 243 remained for manual screening. Applying the logbook criteria, 75 core publications were selected for in-depth analysis (alongside, *inter alia*, additional reports, conference papers and other sources identified from reference lists and selected at the author’s discretion). [Supplementary Material 1](#) contains a simplified logbook covering the sources that were eligible and a few other sources that were deemed ineligible. A full exhibit of the logbooks for Categories A, B and C is contained in [Supplementary Material 2](#), [Supplementary Material 3](#) and [Supplementary Material 4](#).

3.2.6 Data extraction and synthesis to develop the social trifecta theory. From this systematic literature review, the author critically reviewed and analysed a wide range of academic literature to identify conceptual inconsistencies and gaps surrounding the constructs of social value, social procurement and social reporting. By systematically coding and comparing the selected sources, the author identified recurring patterns of fragmentation; mainly, where these constructs were often addressed in isolation or conflated with overlapping terms like social value creation or ESG. This detailed comparative undertaking enabled the author to identify conceptual and operational gaps, such as the absence of clear distinctions between social value, social value creation and social outcomes. Additionally, the frequent absence of explicit reporting mechanisms tied to social value objectives, or the loose alignment of procurement practices with community-based outcomes, exposed weaknesses in translating policy goals into social outcomes. During this process, the author was able to pick up a recurring theme: social procurement and social reporting were not only influenced by social value objectives but also had reciprocal effects on how those objectives were framed and delivered. The results and findings obtained led to the inductive development of the social trifecta as a theoretical framework that captures the sequential yet interdependent relationship between social value (as target-setting), social procurement (as the mechanism of delivery) and social reporting (as the process of verification). While the specific visual representation of the social trifecta between [Figures 1 and 3](#) was not derived from the literature directly, the foundational idea of these constructs being interlinked in a sequential and feedback-based manner emerged clearly from the literature synthesis carried out during the research phase of this paper. As for the author taking an objectivist view, one recurring observation from the literature review was the low presence of explicit objectivist perspectives. Many sources adopted a constructivist or relational view of social value, leaving a gap in approaches that define social value as a measurable, pre-defined set of deliverables linked to created social outcomes.

4. Project success

4.1 Reconciling social value and project success: an objectivist perspective

Construction projects are temporary organisations that are involved in creating new value throughout and after their lifecycles (Bakker, 2010). In the construction industry, social outcomes are defined as substantial social impacts that extend beyond the project lifecycle. These begin with the involvement of external stakeholders, appraisal of key performance indicators (Toor and Ogulana, 2010), the incorporation of social value frameworks and the implementation of transparency and accountability measures. In this sense, social outcomes reflect whether a project successfully leaves a legacy of social impact. As such, achieving social outcomes depends on project teams undertaking activities that align the project's successful delivery with societal interests and needs (Lehtinen and Aaltonen, 2020).

As time passed, the academic literature of project management began to reflect these broader considerations in accordance with the evolving and nuanced functions of construction projects (Arto *et al.*, 2008; Kollveit *et al.*, 2007), compellingly conveying the extent to which they could deliver social outcomes and other benefits (Eweje *et al.*, 2012). This was a time-period when the notion of “project success” began to encapsulate other social constructs such as “social sustainability” (Ika and Pinto, 2022) and benefit-oriented paradigms (Blakegg *et al.*, 2008; Williams, 2016). Concurrently, “value creation” began to increasingly be perceived as a procedural undertaking (Winter and Szczepanek, 2008) for assuring project success, with external stakeholder influence at the centre of both delivering success and producing social value (Vuorinen and Martinsuo, 2019; van den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2019; Olander and Landin, 2005; Liu *et al.*, 2018; Cao *et al.*, 2021). Following Ika and Pinto's (2022) perspective, one could reasonably argue that project success can be considered as the extent to which a construction project generates societal impacts, such as social outcomes for both project and external stakeholders, as well as members of the local community (Caron *et al.*, 2024). Nevertheless, though social outcomes may be a key dimension of project success, they are not synonymous with social value and social value creation. These terms often reflect two different worldviews. On the one hand, project success, as used in this section, is anchored as an objectivist logic of delivery and evaluation. On the other hand, social value is often conceptualised in constructivist or ethical terms, shaped by shareholder perceptions and context.

This paper propounds that social value is a set of defined project deliverables that contribute to social outcomes when delivered via appropriate procurement and reporting mechanisms. To illustrate this distinction further, it helps putting all of the social trifecta's constructs (i.e. social value, procurement and reporting) into a hypothetical case. Take for example, the construction of a new multipurpose development. At the outset, social value is defined through clear targets: thirty local apprenticeships, a park, discounted units for community start-ups and reduced energy bills. Social procurement embeds these targets into contracts and supply chain sourcing. During construction, social value creation takes place as these deliverables are actioned. Concurrently, social reporting tracks these outputs in real time. However, these actions alone do not constitute social outcomes. Only after successful project completion and handover (i.e. when apprentices remain employed, the park ends up being used, shops begin thriving and energy savings are maintained and confirmed by the local community) can the project be said to have delivered social outcomes and potentially social success.

This hypothetical case reemphasises that project success, in its modern multidimensional (and reconceptualised) form (Shenhar *et al.*, 2001; Olsson *et al.*, 2008; Haass and Guzman, 2020), may include social outcomes as one dimension alongside more traditional ones such as time, cost, quality and business performance. Historically, however, success was primarily defined only through internal, target-setting, project parameters such as time, cost and quality (Atkinson, 1999; Miller and Lessard, 2000; Olsson and Samset, 2006; Henriksen and Røstad, 2010), with little regard for external impacts or long-term social outcome [benefit] realisation (Chih and Zwikael, 2015). Shenhar and Dvir (2007) recognised, and Liu *et al.* (2016) later

confirmed, that the traditional approach's narrow definitions have proven inadequate. Thus, even a technically successful construction project may still fail on a balance of social outcomes (Samset, 2009; Zwikaël and Smyrk, 2012) if it does not achieve the outcomes initially set out as part of its social value objectives via socially cognisant and transparent means, *ipso facto* making it socially unsuccessful.

From an objectivist worldview, it does not matter whether social outcomes are inherently positive or desirable. What is important is that they are clearly defined, actively pursued and empirically measured. Even when a project intentionally delivers neutral or negative social outcomes (e.g. the displacement of local communities to facilitate a redevelopment project), this still constitutes the creation of social outcomes in objective terms. What is more problematic within this traditional framework is the failure to achieve any defined outcomes at all. Projects are increasingly seen as vehicles for delivering both tangible outcomes and broader stakeholder value, which often demands navigating complex, dynamic and politically charged environments (Martinsuo *et al.*, 2019). In this view, clarity of definition and consistency in delivery are prioritised over aspirational intentions. A project that delivers what it sets out to achieve, even if controversial, is more coherent than one that aspires to do good but lacks defined targets or fails to realise them.

5. Social value

5.1 Social value origins

Social value is a concept which originated from early societal movements and the ethical considerations they employed in addressing systemic socioeconomic disparities, including social inequality, poverty and unemployment. Historically, people determined value based on financial gain and tangible economic output, which is why the term “value” comes before “social”. During the Industrial Revolution, emerging businesses focused on increasing the productivity of their workers (Carroll, 2008). In the 1800s, it was challenging to distinguish between actions driven by economic gains and those aimed at social betterment, as business motivations and social intentions were often mixed. Wren (2005) notes that several critics targeted the factory system, particularly because it employed women and children and because the wider industry was controversially linked to labour unrest, poverty and deplorably poor living conditions. During this period, early forms of corporate philanthropy emerged, such as companies supporting community welfare organisations like the British Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in the middle of the 1840s, with an aim to improve worker well-being and productivity. However, as Wren (2005) notes, there was ongoing tension between charitable intentions and profit motives, illustrated by legal cases of the time that questioned how far firms could use their resources for social causes.

5.2 Social value: a construct of corporate social responsibility

The 1930s saw the emergence of a veritable literature on social responsibility where corporations started to be seen as institutions with social responsibilities comparable to those of the government. Over the subsequent decades, the scope of CSR expanded. Bowen's (1953) seminal work formalised the idea of CSR as a business obligation to society, and by the 1970s, social and environmental concerns (e.g. the Club of Rome's Limits to Growth report (1972)) had further broadened this CSR agenda. Additionally, it was during this period that the concept of social value appeared in the academic literature, even though it was then conceptually vague. As Cıdık (2020) contends, such vagueness is not merely a weakness but an indication of the multidimensional and dynamic character of social value itself. This kind of ambiguity is not exclusive to social value but is also evident in CSR and in value theory more generally (Opoku and Guthrie, 2018; Ojuri *et al.*, 2023).

In the light of these events, the application of social value in construction projects has tended to follow a define–measure–manage rationale, seeking to align its meaning within

traditional and existing frameworks. This is what [Cıdık \(2020\)](#) has critiqued as “balancing rhetoric”, whereby social value is treated as an add-on to established practices instead of being regarded as a fundamental pillar of the project’s strategic purpose and offering. In reality, there was still no consensus on how to define or implement social value in projects. This problem persisted until the late twentieth century and led to the conceptual fragmentation, which justifies proposing a more integrated and critical objectivist framework as the one provided by the social trifecta.

5.3 Social value in contemporary academia

Social value emerged in the early 2000s as a distinct concept; however, the absence of a clear definition for it led to its conflation with related terms such as “social benefit”, “community benefit”, “social impact”, “social output” and “social outcomes” ([Raiden et al., 2019](#)). [Emerson \(2000\)](#) defines social value as the result of combining resources, inputs, processes or policies to bring about positive change in the lives of individuals, members of the local community or the wider society. [Cook and Monk \(2012\)](#) described social value as the extra value delivered to the community through a commissioning or procurement process, beyond the mere acquisition of goods or services. In the wider academic literature, social value has been linked to a variety of objectives ranging from creating employment opportunities ([Loosemore et al., 2021](#)), reducing inequality, improving well-being and contributing to environmental sustainability ([Ojuri et al., 2023](#)).

Yet, there remains confusion about what social value is, as demonstrated by [Burke and King \(2015\)](#) and [Farag et al. \(2016\)](#), much of which stems from its lack of established frameworks and its historically low prioritisation in practice. This confusion was exacerbated when academics and practitioners began applying social value within diverse domains such as stakeholder theory and project governance, *mutatis mutandis*, without giving due consideration to reconciling these paradigm shifts ([Martinsuo and Killen, 2014](#); [Eskeroð and Ang, 2017](#); [Doloi, 2018](#); [Martinsuo et al., 2019](#)). In other words, these project management domains were cross-applied with the assumption that social value would naturally fit in, yet the essential contextual modifications needed to make it truly fit were either incomplete or absent. Thus, [Raiden et al. \(2019\)](#) highlight inconsistencies even among the most cited definitions of social value, and the [Cabinet Office \(2015\)](#), in its review of the UK’s Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, ultimately confirmed that the difficulty of defining social value was a key impediment to its effective implementation.

Despite this ambiguity, or perhaps because of it, project organisations have sought creative and context-specific ways to define and deliver social value. But as [Cıdık \(2020\)](#) warns, this excessive flexibility risks eroding conceptual coherence, reducing social value to a malleable rhetorical term. This paper takes that constructivist critique seriously. While recognising the inherent subjectivity and fluidity of social value, the author of this paper nonetheless proposes a pragmatic and operational model, framed through the objectivist lens, to clarify how project teams can intentionally define, deliver and document social value in pursuit of measurable social outcomes.

5.4 Rational for the social trifecta framework

This brings the paper to the rationale behind the social trifecta theoretical framework. At the centre of this framework lies social outcomes, understood as the verifiable results of project actions that affect society. Beneath that are the three sequential interdependent constructs needed to achieve these social outcomes to the closest extent intended. Social value is the first construct and entails the definition of project-specific goals and targets; not the practice of delivering them nor the outcomes themselves. To operationalise and track these goals, projects rely on social procurement and social reporting as distinct yet interdependent constructs. By clearly distinguishing between social value definition, social value delivery and social value verification, the social trifecta offers a structured, outcome-focused model that avoids the

conceptual overlap between social value and its nuanced manifestations (Raiden *et al.*, 2019; Nalewaik *et al.*, 2025). However, this framework is not provided by this paper as a universal or exhaustive definition of social value. Instead, it serves as one practical and objectivist approach to integrating social value into project delivery, while recognising that other constructivist, interpretive, practice-based approaches may offer complementary insights. With all that considered, the academic literature has yet to define social value in a way that genuinely bridges the wide and varied perspectives surrounding it (Clegg *et al.*, 2024). The only clear point of agreement may be a broader critique that social value is often employed in a rhetorical manner; in other words, using the language of social value as a superficial addition to allow project practitioners or organisations to appear socially responsible without taking any real transformative action.

6. Social procurement

6.1 Inarticulate conceptions of social procurement

In construction projects, social procurement generally refers to the use of procurement routes and processes to deliver the project and achieve its social outcomes. It is commonplace for construction projects to aim for creating social outcomes such as employment opportunities for local or disadvantaged communities (Loosemore, 2016), apprenticeships and training schemes for young people, contracts for small- and medium-sized local businesses, supply chain opportunities for social enterprises and initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion within the workforce. As with social value, Furneaux and Barraket (2014) note that the term has no single agreed definition, although it broadly relates to sourcing decisions that prioritise social and community well-being. For example, they describe it as purchasing construction products, assets, goods and services from socially driven suppliers to create positive social outcomes. These definitions allude that social procurement is an operationalisation mechanism to create sustainable and positive social outcomes (Raiden *et al.*, 2019).

To add on top of this conceptualisation, the emergence of social procurement in the academic literature highlighted the potential of public procurement as a socio-industrial policy instrument not only to curb poverty and unemployment but also to foster social well-being through the redevelopment of neglected areas (McCrudden, 2004). It soon became clear that, without explicitly embedding broad strategic goals aimed at positive social outcomes, the transformative purpose of public procurement would remain unrealised. As a result, the theoretical underpinning for social procurement took shape in the academic literature that covered themes ranging from social value (Emerson, 2000; Farag and McDermott, 2015; Burke and King, 2015; Lonsdale and le Mesurier, 2024), public procurement (McCrudden, 2004; Thai and Piga, 2007; Georghiou *et al.*, 2014), corporate social responsibility (Zhao *et al.*, 2012; Frynas and Stephens, 2015; Loosemore and Lim, 2017; Murphy and Eadie, 2019), ethical and faith-based influences (Worthington *et al.*, 2008; El Daouk, 2023), employability (Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Greasley *et al.*, 2005) and skill shortages (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2000).

This vast range prompted the integration of corporate social responsibility principles into public procurement strategies because it offers a structured and policy-aligned context for operationalising social value, although the principles may be transferable to private, hybrid and *ad hoc* models. In the view of many of the authors above (except a few who disagree, such as the author of this paper), the integration of corporate social responsibility into public procurement strategies is often presented with the stated aim of ensuring that purchasing decisions deliver measurable community benefits and positive social outcomes. Given that this paper takes an objectivist view, it comes as no surprise that such argument is not convincing and is challengeable. As Wright *et al.* (2025) argue, the contemporary rhetoric of social procurement tends to exaggerate the novelty and transformative potential of socially driven schemes and initiatives, whilst overlooking a much longer history of public purchasing embedded in social justice and welfare traditions. Earlier procurement routes, particularly those from the mid-20th century, often delivered more grounded and enduring social value

without highly formalised and overcomplicated metrics or CSR branding. This historical insight challenges the constructivist narrative that social value must remain context-dependent, fluid and inherently resistant to fixed definitions. If social value can be embedded and operationalised without the inflated and hyperbolic language of social value, as these earlier practices suggest, then the constructivist emphasis on ambiguity is in direct contradiction to its own normative doctrine.

In this respect, the objectivist view does not replace or weaken the constructivist view. By defining social value as a specific set of objectives for each construction project and linking it with social procurement and social reporting practices, the social trifecta provides a way to deliver results that can be measured. The objectivist thesis of this paper does not negate the wider political and ethical debates around the term. Instead, it uses the objectivist perspective to support and work alongside other theories of social value. It also aims to ensure that the focus on achieving social outcomes is not lost in unclear concepts or empty statements but is based on a framework that can be put into practice and held to account. Although social procurement is more than a set of transactional decisions and instead represents a strategic approach that must be deliberately aligned with broader social objectives, its ability to deliver social outcomes is strongest when it is firmly embedded within the project's own actionable and accountable framework. This approach is more practical because it provides clear validation, measurable indicators and transparent reporting for the project team and stakeholders to compare the project's original social targets with its achieved social outcomes at the backend of the project lifecycle.

6.2 Intersection of social procurement and social value

Given the conceptual obscurity in social procurement and social value, it is necessary to examine their intersection with a degree of clarity. Only through a critical understanding of their distinct roles and interdependencies can academic discourse advance towards a structured and actionable framework for achieving social outcomes. Social procurement, as conceptualised in the social trifecta, must be seen as more than an extension of traditional corporate social responsibility. Yet the academic literature has often failed to distinguish between those lines, treating both social value and social procurement as proxies for CSR, public policy objectives or regulatory compliance (McCrudden, 2004; Loosemore and Lim, 2017; Worthington *et al.*, 2008). Such conflation has exacerbated the difficulty of distinguishing social procurement as a project delivery mechanism, and social value as a project-specific set of social targets; and, more importantly, the objectivist view, which considers each of these distinct from, yet reliant upon, the other for achieving what this paper terms: social outcomes.

To distinguish further, social procurement's operational framework contains two types of objectives: commercial procurement (i.e. commodities and services) and non-commercial procurement (i.e. social benefit creation) (Thai, 2001). The prioritisation of the latter in public frameworks such as the EU Procurement Directive and the UK Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 gave (policy-driven) impetus to embedding social considerations into procurement routes (Loosemore *et al.*, 2023). However, translating that into measurable outcomes remains elusive if social value continues to be treated as conceptually indistinct from procurement itself. In the light of that, it is not unreasonable for the social trifecta to render social [value] objectives as a key driver of setting social value targets but leaving the operational function and factual documentation to social procurement and social reporting.

Having said that, social procurement is the means through which social value objectives are integrated into the procurement process. It is not the social value itself, but the vehicle for its potential realisation, only after the project has completed successfully and upheld its intended social outcomes. Conflating the two constructs, *ipso facto*, undermines both. By clearly explaining that social value is about defining measurable goals, and social procurement is about embedding such goals into contractual and supply chain decisions, the objectivist

framework avoids this confusion. Social outcomes, then, become the measurable results of this process, assessed and validated through social reporting. Hence, the social trifecta is not just a conceptual tool, but a critique of the vagueness that continues to pervade the literature. As [Cıdık \(2020\)](#) observed, many social value discussions rely on rhetorical commitments to flexibility, which in the view of this paper's author, implies resistance to measurement and factuality. Yet these same discussions often fail to explain how context-specific meaning-making can result in consistent delivery or evaluation.

The objectivist model proposed here does not claim universality, but it insists on coherence: that if social value is to matter in projects, it must be defined, pursued and assessed by the very things that bring about the project's own delivery. As such, although social procurement can take different forms in application across public, private and hybrid projects, its function within the social trifecta is to deliver clearly defined social value objectives that are objectively viable; not subjectively sound. In this light, the objectivist framing helps project stakeholders avoid relying solely on moral aspiration or vague commitments and instead root social outcomes in a transparent, accountable and operational process. By doing so, the framework does not displace interpretive or practice-based insights but ensures that they are not used to excuse incoherence, evade accountability or sidestep the need to demonstrate real-world impact, be that positive, neutral or negative social outcomes.

7. Social reporting

Social reporting is the process of tracking, measuring and sharing information about a project's social outcomes. It shows and confirms whether the social value objectives that were set at the outset of the project (i.e. social value) and carried out through adequate and socially cognisant procurement routes (i.e. social procurement) ended up being achieved as anticipated and required. By making this information transparent to the project team and external stakeholders, social reporting promotes transparency, holding the project team accountable in the event where they fail to meet their social commitments. As the third construct of the social trifecta, subsequent to social procurement and social value, social reporting acts as the verification mechanism which confirms whether the project's intended results match the outcomes that end up being achieved. The origins of social reporting lie in CSR and sustainability movements. Most notably the "triple bottom line" in [Elkington \(1994\)](#) helped establish social reporting as a formalised organisational responsibility. By the early 2000s, social reporting became further institutionalised under ESG frameworks and gradually found its way into construction sector disclosures (i.e. social performance indicators). Its role was then reaffirmed by the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, and placed social reporting within global policy as a strategic objective rather than a symbolic or expendable duty.

In practice, social reporting and socially driven ESG considerations are still overshadowed by governance and environmental considerations ([Castro and El Daouk, 2024](#)). At the time of this article's writing, the construction industry pays more attention to environmental considerations and prioritises them over social ones, resulting in social initiatives being relatively underdeveloped. The construction sector tends to justify this on the grounds that social outcomes are intrinsically harder to determine and cannot be measured using standardised and transferable methods, as is the case with environmental ones. [Tamasiga et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasise this problem, highlighting the inherent ambiguity of the term "social", and rendering it a limiting factor that negatively impacts the ability to compare it with other ESG metrics, which ultimately limits its reporting credibility. As a result, even if one could argue that social reporting is capable of promoting transparency, accountability, as well as enhance the prospect of realising social outcomes ([Low et al., 2023](#)), it is still less institutionalised than its ESG counterparts. Given that the social element of ESG is still not clearly defined or fully developed, its practical use is limited for the time being, making it difficult to assess long-term impacts and reducing the likelihood that socially oriented initiatives will succeed. The very

strength of the “S” in ESG, which is its ethical and societal relevance, is ironically also its greatest operational vulnerability.

This weakness justifies the rationale and need for a theoretical framework such as the social trifacta. If no direct integration with project-specific definitions and procurement mechanisms happens, social reporting will remain disconnected, reactive and unverifiable. It becomes more symbolic than functional. By sequencing social reporting alongside the earlier constructs of social value and social procurement in a sequential and interdependent way, the social trifacta underlines its role as a tool of outcome verification as opposed to a rhetorical ideal. The social trifacta model serves to render social reporting a strategic, transparent and traceable tool for monitoring progress, identifying issues and demonstrating impact, rather than a mere box-ticking exercise to appear compliant with legislation or current ESG norms. It also gives much-needed strength to the social pillar of ESG by rooting it in concrete, project-defined objectives and processes. Having presented the foundational understanding and basis of the objectivist view on social value, social procurement, and social reporting, and how they collectively contribute to the creation of social outcomes, the paper can now turn to a detailed discussion and critical analysis of the social trifacta and the complex interplay between its components’ sequential interdependencies.

8. Discussion

8.1 Devising the social trifacta and its interdependencies

The social trifacta positions social outcomes as the result of three interdependent social constructs: social value (setting objectives), social procurement (operationalisation) and social reporting (verification and reporting). Unlike much of the existing literature that either conflates or separates these constructs without structure, the social trifacta proposes a functional relationship between them, though not necessarily a rigid sequence. Instead, what it offers is a practical logic of interdependence: social value must be clearly defined before it can be operationalised; and, its impact must be assessed and verified to ensure accountability before social outcomes can be said to have been achieved or not achieved. However, this is not a one-way linear path. It is recursive (cyclical) and adaptive, enabling feedback loops across all three constructs as seen in [Figure 1](#) which also illustrates the sequential yet interdependent relationship of social value, social procurement and social reporting.

At first glance, the social trifacta’s sequential interdependencies could discourage the reader and lead them to think that this is another vulnerable formal framework that can lose its purpose when operationalised; a real and contemporary critique of project management in the megaproject governance literature ([Brunet and Aubry, 2018](#)). For instance, the study by [Brunet and Aubry \(2018\)](#) on public infrastructure reveals that rigid institutional structures can be diluted as they pass through organisational and project-level realities, supporting the notion that implementation gaps are not anomalies but intrinsic to how value-related objectives translate across project phases. [Figure 1](#), in the light of that, shows how the social trifacta provides an idealised flow of implementation: social value defines intent to create social outcomes, social procurement puts that intent into action and social reporting provides evidence of whether those intentions were realised in terms of created social outcomes. Hence, at the centre is social outcomes, not as an abstract aspiration but as the cumulative, observable result of this combined effort.

It is important to clarify that the social trifacta model does not reduce social outcomes to what is measurable, nor does it reject other ways of knowing or valuing. Rather, it asserts that for outcomes to be managed in practice, there must be at least some shared criteria for defining, delivering and validating them. The social trifacta’s ability to adapt over time, as shown by its recursive nature in [Figure 1](#), supports [Biesenthal et al. \(2017\)](#), where it is highlighted that projects are not just technical organisational undertakings but are social systems shaped by the rules, values and norms of the organisations and societies in which they operate. Thus, their argument supports the idea that interdependencies, such as those in the social trifacta, must

accommodate competing logics and shifting institutional pressures rather than assume a static, non-dynamic and neutral implementation context. Here, the social trifecta's objectivist worldview becomes both a strength and a point of contention. As some critiques will rightly highlight, being over consumed by project targets and verification processes may jeopardise elements of social value and creating social outcomes. This is because an overemphasis on quantifiable metrics inherently narrows the evaluative lens, prioritising outcomes that lend themselves to measurement while marginalising qualitative dimensions of social value that may be equally, if not more, significant in achieving meaningful social outcomes. As such it is inherently biased towards accounting for what can be measured over that which cannot.

Consequently, the social trifecta is prone to overlooking the relational and subjective aspects of social value that cannot easily be reduced to metrics. These critiques are valid. However, the position taken here is not that verification should exhaust the meaning of social value, but that it should anchor its realisation to the project's delivery especially where delivery, accountability and stakeholder expectations demand ascertainable clarity. [Figure 2](#) reinforces this point. It highlights how each social construct of the social trifecta overlaps with one another, showing that outcomes emerge not just from the definition or delivery of social [value] objectives, but from how effectively all three dimensions are aligned and assessed. The intersection of social value and procurement ensures that intent informs action. The intersection of procurement and reporting ensures that actions are trackable and transparent. The overlap between social value and reporting ensures that what gets measured is relevant to what was promised. At the centre, social outcomes emerge only when this triangulation is achieved not to a perfect degree, but insofar as the project's outlined targets go.

As shown in [Figure 2](#), the interdependencies between the social trifecta's three social constructs actively contribute to generating social outcomes. The intersection of social value and social procurement allows strategic objectives to be embedded directly into project practices. When social procurement and social reporting intersect, the diagram indicates that trust and transparency are strengthened because the project can track and evidence progress towards delivery. Similarly, the alignment of social value and social reporting enables outcomes to be assessed against the original objectives and targets that were set during the frontend of the project lifecycle, allowing adjustments to be made where gaps or shortcomings are identified. When all three work cohesively, social outcomes become a demonstrable state of alignment between what was promised, what was done and what was achieved. The objectivist position behind this entire illustration and theorisation is that while all social outcomes may be context-sensitive, their delivery must still rest on definable, operational and verifiable foundations. This does not imply a denial of subjectivity, symbolism or ethical considerations. It simply means that when dealing with real-world project structures, supply chains, contracts, deliverables and stakeholders: clarity, traceability and measurement are necessary to ensure that intent to create social outcomes does not dissolve into rhetoric.

8.2 Trade-offs and limitations within the social trifecta

The social trifecta's interdependencies are not without their inherent limitations. While [Figure 2](#) captures the constructive intersections of the social constructs, it is important to acknowledge that these same intersections can also jeopardise the very constructs that enable the creation of social outcomes within the objectivist view of the social trifecta. When one element of the social trifecta is overemphasised or another neglected, trade-offs emerge. [Figure 3](#) visualises these trade-offs through an inversed reading of their constructive interdependencies. [Figure 3](#) highlights that if these interdependencies are misaligned, they give rise to implementation risks, inefficiencies and loss of consistency. For example, when social value is defined ambitiously and the social procurement route is underdeveloped, gaps emerge in operationalising the project's initially set social [value] objectives, impeding the initial process towards the creation of social outcomes. Alternatively, strong social procurement and social reporting may deliver activity and metrics, but without clearly

defined social objectives, the project would lack any strategic direction, resulting in baseless, hollow or performative social outcomes.

Where social reporting and social value are prioritised without aligned procurement mechanisms, the outcome is bureaucratic deadlock. [Winter and Szczepanek \(2008\)](#) suggest that traditional performance criteria that are based on cost, time and scope/quality do not allow for ascertaining social value targets and achieving social outcomes, as they do not account for external stakeholder engagement (e.g. accounting for local communities impacted by the construction project). This is also criticised by [Atkinson \(1999\)](#) in his analysis of the “Iron Triangle” and attributes typical causes of project failure to an excessive focus on limited metrics such as time, cost and quality rather than broader socially driven ones. As a result, this bureaucratic inertia and trade-off demonstrate why traditional measures of success in project delivery are outdated and what must be done in order to generate social outcomes.

With this broadened social trifecta lens, the prospect of enhanced success in project execution and social outcomes becomes ever more achievable by adopting a more pragmatic, objectives-based approach. This development fits neatly with broader academic study of project management, which has moved over several decades from narrow conventional measurables (as those seen in the Iron Triangle) to broader, more integrated approaches wherein stakeholder satisfaction, long-term measurable outcomes ([Haass and Guzman, 2020](#)) and sustainability become prime focus points. This paradigm shift reflects the complexity of the successful implementation and attainment of social outcomes, stressing on the importance to be cognisant of the wider socio-economic and environmental contexts in which construction projects function (from the feasibility phases of their lifecycles to their delivery, operation and maintenance phases).

The tensions shown in [Figure 3](#) reflect deep dilemmas between strategic alignment and practical feasibility, stakeholder consensus and project agility, and short-term deliverables versus long-term impact. [Figure 3](#) shows that problems like reduced transparency, shallow results and unmeasured impacts happen when the wrong parts of the social trifecta are prioritised at the wrong time or within the wrong context. The central zone of the Venn diagram represents the culmination of such trade-offs, where project coherence disintegrates due to competing agendas or misaligned processes. Hence, this is why appreciating the sequential nature of the social trifecta’s interdependencies emphasises the importance of how social value is initially defined and targeted, and how subsequent social procurement and social reporting bring those defined objectives to life.

8.3 Navigating the social trifecta’s trade-offs and strategic implications

The social trifecta provides more than a conceptual model, demonstrating that it could even be used as a practical diagnostic tool. It enables the project team to identify when they are focusing on one or two elements of creating social outcomes at the expense of the other element(s). On the one hand, one can argue that this can aid in leading the project in its intended strategic direction by virtue of the nature of the problem that is pursuantly being solved (e.g. if the project team is faced with an accountability vs efficiency dichotomy, then one can deduce that their problem stems from a lack of clear and strategic setting of social value objectives) ([Cao et al., 2021](#)). With time and experience, these problems can be categorised under various types such as: strategic (e.g. misaligned social goals), operational (e.g. unviable procurement routes) or evaluative (e.g. overreliance on symbolic reporting) ones. It has been propounded that social value assessment practices today tend to ignore the complicated, interchangeable, and long-term character of determining social value and quantifying produced social outcomes within projects ([Nalewaik et al., 2025](#)), while the sequential and interdependent character of the social trifecta allows misalignment to be identified early and proactively work on the strategic aspects of delivering social outcomes to be promoted. From a project delivery perspective, the social trifecta emphasises a minimum baseline from which project practitioners need to at least account for all three elements of delivering social outcomes:

definite and project-specific social value goals; socially aligned procurement approaches; and socially respectful reporting approaches that surpass performative compliance and reactive learning.

The social trifecta does not dictate exactly how much focus each part should get. Different projects, or different stages of the same project, may need to emphasise certain parts more than others. What's non-negotiable is that none of the three parts can replace each other because they work in sequence and depend on each other. [Caron et al. \(2024\)](#) show that stakeholder engagement in infrastructure projects tends to evolve through three stages: building relationships, running operations and representing results. This also matches with the social trifecta's own flow and direction, which begins with setting social value goals, then delivering them through socially compatible procurement routes and finally reporting on them in a transparent and reliable manner. Each part should deliver not just measurable results but also substance that reflects agreement with stakeholders and other project practitioners. Similarly, [Bakker \(2010\)](#) points out that temporary setups like projects must balance stability with flexibility, especially when social issues are involved. The social trifecta helps in this dimension by giving a clear structure without locking projects into rigid systems, so they can still adapt to shifting community needs and outside pressures; hence, its recursive and cyclical nature.

8.4 Theoretical contributions and implications

At the project delivery level, the social trifecta encourages early stakeholder and local community engagement and concise frontend project definition. Such project definition must identify the social outcomes a project aims to create and ensure that these outcomes are meaningful and acceptable to the project's stakeholders, be they internal or external. Project definition must also clearly stipulate how contractors, supply-chain actors and others are to be contracted and engaged, to ensure that they are capable of satisfying the requirements defined by the project, of which social value objectives constitute a critical factor. By harmonising social value, social procurement and social reporting as interdependent constructs within a single framework for creating social outcomes, the social trifecta makes three separate contributions to project management theory. The social trifecta first provides much-needed conceptual clarity through the clear definition and demarcation of the role of each social construct and by precluding their conflation. Second, it closes an operational gap by presenting a coherent model of how social target-setting, social procurement systems and social reporting conventions may be integrated in ways that can be applied sensibly and measured. Third, it delivers an evaluative framework within the objectivist worldview for considering how these three components interact to generate social outcomes. It shows how discrepancies between factors such as ambition without delivery, or compliance without strategy, can expose underlying project vulnerabilities; however, if dealt with proactively and early, they can be converted into points that can correct the project's path in succeeding rather than breaking down. This evaluative structure is much needed and has been advocated for in the academic literature's critique of project practice. A good example is seen in [Clegg et al. \(2024\)](#) who contend that megaproject practitioners tend to be influential, but also easily influenced actors, being able to shape and be shaped by the project and social environments they inhabit. By situating social value as a deliverable construct that contributes towards the creation of social outcomes, the social trifecta's structure allows practitioners to engage projects more strategically rather than reactively.

This paper's objectivist viewpoint is intentionally structured and clear in its assumptions, but it does not ignore or discredit constructivist or subjective perspectives. Rather, it provides a framework that requires operational definition, which does not negate or alienate such alternative perspectives. The objectivist worldview recognises that social value is often shaped by context, relationships and negotiation. However, it also argues that if such value is to lead to outcomes that can be communicated, defended or challenged, then it must be expressed in

terms that enable implementation, evaluation and accountability. Otherwise, project management theory risks rendering social value and its underlying goals as symbolic rhetoric that, in reality, offers nothing more than a limited ground to demonstrate performative compliance. The social trifecta prevents this by translating the intention to create social outcomes into a process that links social value definition, delivery and verification; and, by doing so, it connects socio-ethical ambitions to measurable actions. The strength of the social trifecta lies not in claiming to resolve every definitional ambiguity in social value theory, but in clarifying where tensions in creating social outcomes lie and how they can be managed and navigated by rethinking and perceiving social value, procurement and social reporting. Thus, from the objectivist viewpoint, social outcomes are neither incidental nor intangible, but rather a core dimension of social (and project) success. They result from deliberate choices, visible tensions and negotiated trade-offs that project practitioners and external stakeholders must confront and adjust throughout the project lifecycle.

In brief, the social trifecta does not offer a one-size-fits-all solution. It offers a coherent way to operationalise social value without jeopardising its conceptual complexity. It preserves the relevance of its subjective and contextual meanings, while insisting that these meanings produce consequences that can be tested, adjusted or held to account through the process provided by the social trifecta. The delicate balancing act between conceptual and operational clarity is what gives the social trifecta its practical (and also theoretical) utility in navigating the challenge of rethinking and understanding social value. Its utility also extends to playing a crucial role in ascertaining and understanding how to successfully deliver social outcomes through projects during and after their lifecycles, especially in contexts where infrastructure projects interact with long-term local community expectations. As [Caron *et al.* \(2024\)](#) expound, not only is social value created at the outset of the project lifecycle but also long after completion of the project's construction phase, emphasising the importance of having a framework for creating social outcomes that is responsive and adaptive to local community needs and changes in their demand. Indeed, such dual allegiance (i.e. to aspirational norms and operational delivery) has been noted with trepidation in broader socio-ethical debates within project contexts. For example, [Worthington *et al.* \(2008\)](#) argue that organisational and stakeholder trust will be broken when there is a disconnection between social commitments and action on such commitments. The social trifecta removes this trepidation by eliminating the disconnection between social commitments and action. It does so by creating an open and traceable line of sight from social value goal-setting to social outcomes that are traced and verified (using the reflective diagrams seen in [Figures 2 and 3](#)). [El Daouk \(2023\)](#) propounds this point in a very different context (in their case, halal construction supply chain management), in which they conclude that ethics- and faith-based targets will always need to be sustained by traceable, verifiable and certifiable systems. Such an argument supports the objectivist view, which rests on the argument that without robust and measurable frameworks, even the most ethical promises will be rejected as performative. The social trifecta works here in the same way: intent is no more credible than the structures put in place to carry it out.

9. Conclusion

This paper set out to answer a foundational question: the extent to which there is a need to rethink "social value" more objectively, alongside constructs like social procurement and social reporting, as tools to sufficiently define and deliver social outcomes through projects. As a response to that, the paper has argued that social value is not an umbrella term and should no longer be treated as one. Instead, it must be understood as a distinct and measurable set of project-specific objectives, situated within a holistic and sequential framework, such as the social trifecta propounded in this paper. By bringing together and synthesising the broad academic literature covering this topic, this research led to propounding the social trifecta as both a conceptual and practical framework. It integrates social value (as a target-setting mechanism), social procurement (as an actioning mechanism) and social reporting (as an

outcome verification mechanism), highlighting their sequential interdependencies and the inevitable trade-offs that arise when any of these elements are neglected or overemphasised.

At the centre of this framework are social outcomes, which are not assumed positives but measurable results that may be beneficial, neutral or even negative. This clarity helps overcome two persistent barriers identified in the paper: the sector's tendency to set superficial social goals without embedding them in procurement or reporting procedures; and, the broader conceptual conflation between social value and social value creation. These issues reflect a broader critique in the literature on success measures tending to concentrate on deliverables to the detriment of strategic alignment (Winter and Szczepanek, 2008). The social trifecta resolves this by defining the successful delivery of social outcomes as the extent to which value is defined, delivered and made accountable. Hence, the social trifecta theorised in this paper supports a broader rethinking of how project success criteria are determined. It also addresses long-standing and more recent calls within calls within the academic literature, such as those of Atkinson (1999) and Clegg *et al.* (2024), who argue that projects and the social (and overall) outcomes they deliver should be evaluated by the extent to which they can satisfy stakeholder expectations and not just technical outputs.

Going through such objectivist lens, this article has provided a grounded alternative to the inconsistency that pervades social value academic discourse. It does not reject subjective or relational understandings but positions them within an operational framework where value must be delivered, verified and held accountable. By addressing gaps in the academic literature, the social trifecta enables project practitioners to move away from aspirational commitments to actionable contemporary and future strategies. This concurs with structured approaches in the academic literature that set clear, measurable project targets to align strategic priorities with verifiable (social) outcomes (Henriksen and Røstad, 2010). Thus, the social trifecta is as much a diagnostic tool for risk and consistency as it is a roadmap for planning and implementation.

In conclusion, this paper makes a direct contribution to the aims set out by the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*' special issue on *Rethinking the creation of social value through projects*. It offers a novel theoretical approach grounded in an objectivist worldview that refrains from giving social value a loose definition and purpose. Instead, the paper theorises the social trifectas in order to tie up social value with social procurement and social reporting, anchoring it to the project lifecycle and project delivery. In doing so, project practitioners and other concerned stakeholders are encouraged to concisely define social value objectives at the outset of the project and track social outcomes systematically throughout and after the project lifecycle. Thus, this contribution responds to the special issue's call for new frameworks that better capture the processes and mechanisms through which social value is created, captured and retained, particularly in complex, stakeholder-rich environments like construction projects in the sustainable built environment. It also addresses the wider call for a more adaptable and process-oriented view of project governance (Brunet and Aubry, 2018; Frynas and Stephens, 2015), positioning the social trifecta as a tool not only for strategic planning but also for continuous stakeholder dialogue, feedback and adaptation across the project lifecycle and onto forthcoming projects in the future.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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