SMART PROCUREMENT WORLD MARKS 20 YEARS AS AFRICA'S PROCUREMENT & SUPPLY CHAIN LEADERS REFLECT ON TWO DECADES OF TRANSFORMATION

Founders, sponsors and industry leaders gathered virtually to trace procurement's rise from a back-office afterthought to a boardroom priority, ahead of the 20th annual Smart Procurement World Indaba in September

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — Smart Procurement World marked the 20th anniversary of its founding with a virtual leadership roundtable on 29 July 2026, bringing together six of the profession's most influential figures in South Africa and across the continent to reflect on two decades of change and to look ahead to the future of African procurement and supply chain management.

The hour-long, unscripted conversation, streamed live to more than 1,200 registered viewers from across Africa and beyond, brought together Debbie Tagg, CEO of Smart Procurement; Bernie Van Niekerk Founder and Editor of Smart Procurement; Kgalaletso Tlhoaele Enterprise Development Executive at Absa; Yashodh Singh, Regional Vice President for Africa at Coupa; John Karani, Kenya-based supply chain leader and Secretary General of African Supply Chain Confederation (ASCON); and Melita Ntsane, Chief Procurement Officer at African Bank. The panel was hosted and moderated by Jimmy, broadcasting from Johannesburg.

From a newsletter to a continental community

The panelists traced Smart Procurement origins back to 2006, when Bernie Van Niekerk launched what began as a newsletter for around a thousand subscribers writing about strategic procurement — a concept he described as, at the time, "almost a bit of a dream" for the profession. Early gatherings drew just 100 to 150 people, some held during the load shedding of the mid-2000s. Two decades on, the platform has grown into a continent-spanning community, with Tagg — who joined the organisation 15 years ago — describing Smart Procurement World as "literally my third child."

> ***"If I could summaries it in one word, it's impact," said Bernie, reflecting on the organisation's growth. "I've progressed from an informal little network to a place of impact, which I'm really glad to see."***

COVID-19 as a turning point

Panelists agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning with South Africa's lockdown on 25 March 2020, was the moment the procurement profession proved its strategic value beyond doubt. From sourcing ventilators and personal protective equipment to holding supply chains together through crisis, procurement teams moved from being viewed as "work prevention managers" — a phrase Bernie recalled from the profession's earlier, less strategic years — to being recognised as central to organisational survival.

> ***"Procurement was evident in showing itself as a change agent, as a superpower, and as a catalyst or transformer," said Melita Ntsane of African Bank. "The profession came out stronger and more pronounced, both strategically and operationally."***

Yash Singh of Coupa illustrated the divide the pandemic exposed between digitally enabled organisations, which continued operating seamlessly from home, and those still reliant on paper-based processes, which struggled with physical signatures and manual documentation. That gap, he noted, has only widened as artificial intelligence adoption accelerates: "AI is nothing without data," he said, adding that companies with strong digital foundations are now best placed to benefit from AI-enabled procurement tools.

Technology, AI and the case for a strong foundation

The conversation turned to the growing role of artificial intelligence in procurement, with panelists cautioning against over-reliance on the technology at the expense of core professional expertise. Yash urged emerging professionals to master procurement fundamentals before turning to AI tools: "AI is only as good as the person who's wielding it," he said. "You are the spark, and then AI will execute. AI is not the spark — it's not going to create the magic or the strategy."

Melita Ntsane shared African Bank's own digital transformation journey, including its ongoing implementation of Coupa's procurement platform, describing the shift from "archaic, document-heavy" workflows towards agentic procurement capable of automatically connecting purchase orders, invoices and payment cycles.

A pan-African outlook

John, dialing in from Kenya, spoke to the founding in 2025 of ASCON, a new continental body for African supply chain professionals, describing it as "long overdue" after decades in which the continent's supply chain community remained fragmented along national lines. "We realised that we got to create local, regional and pan-African supply chains, because we can no longer depend on China," he said, linking the initiative to the wider ambitions of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Kgalaletso Tlhoaele of Absa, whose support of Smart Procurements enterprise and supplier development programme has supported an estimated 30,000 small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) over some 15 years of partnership, said commitment to supplier diversity and localisation varies by sector but is steadily strengthening across corporate South Africa. "More and more corporates are starting to see the benefit of diversity in their supply chain," Kgalaletso said. "It's not necessarily only about transformation or inclusion — it is about diversity. You never know what is out there."

Building the next generation

Looking ahead, panelists emphasised the importance of developing new talent for the profession. Tagg highlighted Smart Procurement World's Future Leaders initiative, designed to expose younger professionals to the profession's technology, opportunities and impact, and to counter negative media narratives around government procurement and corruption with positive, achievement-focused stories.

Asked to complete the sentence, "I hope the next generation of professionals never have to …," panelists offered a range of reflections: from Kgalaletso's hope that they "never have to worry about procurement," to Yash's wish that young professionals "won't spend 10 years arguing about a seat at the table, because it's done," and Melita's hope that they "never have to shy away from technology, because it's amazing."

Looking to September

The roundtable closed with an invitation to the wider industry to attend the 20th annual Smart Procurement World Indaba and the 15th annual Absa Enterprise and Supplier Development Expo, taking place in September 2026. Organisers noted that more than 3,500 people attended the in-person event last year and encouraged the industry — sponsors, suppliers and procurement professionals alike — to help identify past contributors to the platform's 20-year history ahead of the celebration.

> ***"What I witnessed in the past 40 or 50 minutes was very different — this wasn't a panel, I was just talking to my friends," said host Dumi Jere in his closing remarks. "If the last 20 years were about earning a seat at the table, then perhaps the next 20 are about building a bigger table — for Africa, for our suppliers, for our SMMEs, for the young person in this room who doesn't know yet that they are about to change this profession."***

About Smart Procurement World

Founded in 2006, Smart Procurement World is a community and events platform serving procurement, supply chain and enterprise and supplier development professionals across South Africa and the wider African continent. The organisation hosts the annual Smart Procurement World Indaba, in partnership with Absa's Enterprise and Supplier Development Expo, alongside training, master classes and networking initiatives supporting corporates, public sector entities and SMMEs. In 2026, Smart Procurement World celebrates its 20th anniversary.

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