

Investigating Stakeholder Engagement in Public-Private Partnership Projects in Zambia: An Empirical Study

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Abstract:

This study examined the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement in Public–Private Partnership (PPP) projects in Zambia, where empirical evidence on engagement practices remains limited. A case study design was adopted, drawing data from key public institutions, private concessionaires, and a consulting firm involved in PPP implementation. Using purposive sampling, a mixed-methods approach combined document analysis, four in-depth interviews, and a survey of 12 participants. Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings reveal that early and inclusive stakeholder engagement enhances project ownership, strengthens transparency, and supports long-term sustainability. Structured engagement mechanisms, such as stakeholder committees and liaison units, were found to improve risk-sharing and conflict resolution. However, institutional capacity constraints, weak communication strategies, and gaps in the legal framework limit consistent stakeholder involvement. The study concludes that effective stakeholder engagement is critical to PPP success in Zambia and recommends strengthening legal provisions, enhancing institutional capacity, and formalising national engagement guidelines to improve infrastructure delivery outcomes.

Key Word: *Public–Private Partnerships; Stakeholder Engagement; Governance; Institutional Capacity; Zambia; Sustainability*

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I. Introduction

Zambia's engagement in Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) dates back to the early 2000s, beginning with a Build–Operate–Transfer (BOT) joint venture between the Lusaka City Council and private entities for the construction of Luburma and ChaChaCha urban markets. During the same period, concession agreements were signed for Mauling Port and Zambia Railways. However, these early initiatives were widely perceived as unsuccessful, largely due to concerns regarding mismanagement, limited transparency, and weak institutional oversight.

In response, the Government of the Republic of Zambia enacted the Public–Private Partnership Act No. 14 of 2009 to establish a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for PPP implementation and regulation. The Act was intended to attract private sector investment, improve public service delivery, and ensure appropriate risk allocation and value for money in infrastructure development. In order to strengthen its provisions, the PPP Act was repealed and replaced in 2023.

Since its enactment, several PPP projects have been initiated across multiple sectors, with projects progressing through various stages of the PPP lifecycle. Infrastructure development remains central to Zambia's economic strategy, including participation in regional initiatives under the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to enhance cross-border connectivity and regional integration.

Despite these developments, stakeholder engagement in PPP projects remains inadequately defined and inconsistently applied. While the legal framework facilitates private sector participation, it is unclear whether systematic mechanisms exist to ensure inclusive, transparent, and sustained stakeholder involvement throughout the project lifecycle. This gap raises important concerns regarding accountability, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability, particularly within Zambia's constrained fiscal environment.

II. Material And Methods

An overview of existing literature relevant to stakeholder engagement in Public-Private Partnership (PPP) projects. It examines the conceptual background of project management and PPPs, discusses global and regional trends in stakeholder engagement, and focuses on the Zambian context. The review draws from scholarly articles, legal documents, and empirical studies to build a foundation for the research.

III. Empirical Literature

Project management is a multidisciplinary field with varying definitions. According to Kerzner (2009:4), project management involves planning, organizing, directing, and controlling organizational resources to achieve short-term goals and objectives. It adopts a systems approach by integrating vertical (functional) and horizontal (project-based) hierarchies. In recent years, PPPs have gained traction as a preferred mode of project delivery, particularly for infrastructure and public service projects. Governments are increasingly turning to PPPs to combine private sector efficiency, innovation, and capital with public sector oversight and regulatory functions. However, the complexity of PPPs, characterized by long-term contractual obligations and multi-stakeholder involvement, presents unique challenges—particularly in stakeholder management. In many developing countries, including Zambia, insufficient stakeholder engagement has contributed to poor project outcomes, underscoring the need for inclusive, structured, and responsive stakeholder strategies from project inception to closure.

Over the last two decades, PPPs have been widely adopted by governments as a mechanism for delivering public infrastructure and services. The World Bank (2020) defines a PPP as a long-term contract between a private party and a government entity for the provision of a public asset or service, wherein the private party bears significant risk and management responsibility, with compensation linked to performance. PPPs are attractive due to their potential for efficiency, risk-sharing, and mobilization of private capital and expertise.

Despite chronic infrastructure deficits, many African countries lack sufficient public financing for capital projects. Consequently, PPPs have emerged as a strategic tool to attract private investment in traditionally public sectors. However, the success of PPPs has been mixed, largely due to weak institutional capacity, insufficient stakeholder engagement, and regulatory challenges. According to The World Bank (2020), countries like Nigeria and South Africa have made strides in institutionalizing PPP frameworks, while others lag due to lack of policy coherence and participatory mechanisms.

The PPP Act No. 18 of 2023 defines a PPP as a contractual mechanism for private sector participation in delivering public functions or infrastructure. The Act outlines financial, technical, and operational risk-sharing arrangements between contracting authorities and private concessionaires. Despite this legal framework, Zambia continues to face challenges in stakeholder participation, transparency, and capacity. While the country recognizes PPPs as a development strategy, limited awareness and inconsistent engagement practices undermine their full potential.

Stakeholder engagement is essential to the success of PPP projects. Globally, stakeholder opposition has been cited as a leading cause of project failure (El-Gohary et al., 2006). Effective stakeholder involvement ensures that project designs align with community needs, promote ownership, and mitigate risks. However, engagement is often ad hoc or reactive, rather than proactive and systematic. Scholars like Chakilam (2014) emphasize that stakeholders—ranging from project sponsors to community members—must be included throughout the project lifecycle to enhance legitimacy and outcomes.

In Africa, stakeholder engagement in PPPs remains inconsistent. Studies reveal that despite increasing adoption of PPP models, most countries lack a comprehensive framework for managing stakeholder relations. Amadi et al. (2019) advocate for inclusive, transparent stakeholder management systems that foster co-ownership and public trust. Jayasuriya et al. (2016) highlight the need for robust government-led engagement strategies to ensure successful project delivery. Similarly, Lokhande et al. (2017) call for a paradigm shift in how stakeholders are engaged, moving from tokenism to meaningful collaboration.

Wojewnik-Filipkowska et al. (2019) argue that sustainable development goals can be achieved through stakeholder-informed PPP processes. Nederhand et al. (2019) offer a nuanced view, noting that while stakeholder engagement enhances project innovation, it does not always correlate with improved performance due to the rigid contractual nature of PPPs. These studies underscore the importance of early-stage involvement, flexible agreements, and tailored engagement strategies based on project type and stakeholder group.

In Zambia, the legal definition of PPPs includes risk-sharing and performance-based agreements. Yet, studies indicate that stakeholder engagement remains a weak link. Baxter (2021) critiques the absence of a strategic approach to stakeholder inclusion in PPPs, noting that different groups—such as NGOs, civil society, and end-users—often have divergent interests and roles that are overlooked. Muleya et al. (2019) found that the PPP Act has had a limited impact on private sector participation due to governance gaps and a lack of engagement strategies. Empirical evidence from Mubiana & Phiri (2020) suggests that neglecting community input in road projects has led to resistance and implementation delays. Conversely, energy sector projects with better stakeholder coordination have yielded more positive results (Chileshe & Moonga, 2019).

IV. Discussion

In the study's investigation of stakeholder engagement in Public Private Partnership projects in Zambia, the respondents were asked about their perception of stakeholder engagement in PPPs. The majority

viewed stakeholder engagement as the involvement of all key stakeholders in PPP projects. Government institutions (Contracting Authorities) confirmed their awareness of the importance of this aspect to project management but noted a gap in the non-availability of a framework to guide stakeholder engagement in PPP projects. When questioned further regarding whether they had access to information on stakeholder engagement in PPP projects, the majority responded in the affirmative. This was backed by a long list of sources of information, ranging from the PPP Department to the Media, and inclusive of the sectors in which the institutions were operating. Further, the respondents were able to provide a list of four key stakeholders or more, which resounded the fact that they were aware of who the key PPP project stakeholders were. This is in line with the findings of Jayasuriya et. al. (2016) in their study on the Strategies for Successful Stakeholder analysis and stakeholder engagement in PPP Projects, who conclude that although the importance of stakeholder management (SM) to PPPs has been recognized by many scholars and professionals in the construction management field, their complexity and dynamism make the SM more difficult. Therefore, they note that it is crucial to develop a comprehensive set of strategies for successful SM for PPP projects. However, most of the strategies identified from the literature review were for general construction.

V. Conclusion

The study set out to investigate stakeholder engagement in PPP projects in Zambia. This study established that stakeholder engagement in PPP projects in Zambia is often characterized by limited participation, inadequate communication, and insufficient feedback mechanisms. While frameworks for engagement exist, their implementation is inconsistent, leading to mistrust and project inefficiencies. The findings underscore the need for structured and inclusive engagement processes to enhance project transparency, accountability, and sustainability. Further, strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, promoting early involvement of all key stakeholders, and ensuring continuous dialogue are critical for improving PPP outcomes in Zambia.

Early and Inclusive Engagement Enhances Sustainability: The research revealed that involving stakeholders, especially community members at early stages of project planning and design fosters ownership, mitigates resistance, and enhances long-term project sustainability. Comparative insights from countries like Uganda supported these findings. Inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders such as government bodies, private firms, civil society organizations, media, and local communities enhances legitimacy, fosters accountability, and facilitates transparency. Effective stakeholder engagement relies on strong institutional frameworks and clear communication. However, many implementing bodies in Zambia lack adequate staff, training, and resources, hampering consistent and meaningful engagement. The presence of formal stakeholder engagement structures such as committees, forums, and liaison offices enables strategic risk sharing, conflict resolution, and mutual accountability. Despite isolated successes, Zambia lacks a national, legally binding framework to institutionalize stakeholder engagement across PPP project lifecycles. This results in inconsistent practices and diminished impact.

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