Project Stakeholder Management and Engagement: An Analysis of the Drivers of an Evolving Subject Discipline

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Project stakeholder management and engagement is now acknowledged as a critical success factor on virtually every project. Its importance and thematic popularity is self-evident from the voluminous body of literature which has been written on the subject, especially since the advent of the new millennium. Also by the increasing attention and consideration projects are according to their stakeholders, both primary and secondary, whose support is seen as critical for enhancing the performance of projects as well as for reducing threats, existential and other, to them. However, little to nothing appears to be known about the key underlying factors – or 'drivers' - which over time in academic and especially in practitioner circles have precipitated this tremendous surge in interest in project stakeholders and in seeking out ways and means of managing and engaging them in the best possible way.

This research attempts to bridge this knowledge vacuum. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the project stakeholder literature from academic and other sources, through several discussions and interviews with project managers and staffers, and drawing on their own years-long experience with projects, the authors have identified nine distinct fundamental 'drivers'. These drivers collectively are the reason why stakeholders have emerged as the prime force to be reckoned with on projects in the past few decades, especially in large and complex projects as in construction and civil infrastructure development. Though this research offers little in terms of practical guidance for project decision-makers and is actually more of historical interest it nevertheless clearly and convincingly shows why stakeholders have gradually become so crucial for projects and hence the need and justification for their effective management and engagement.

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Stakeholders lie at the core of each and every project regardless of category, complexity, location and time. Projects are conceived and conceptualized, defined, initiated, planned and designed, and executed, monitored, evaluated and controlled by stakeholders for stakeholders. At the same time, projects may affect as well as be affected by stakeholders who are not involved in performing any of their managerial or technical functions but whose interests, misgivings, expectations and so forth must nevertheless be carefully addressed. Shortcomings in the management or engagement of stakeholders may entail serious negative consequences and possibly existential danger for projects. Hence, a clear and thorough understanding of the importance of stakeholders on projects is essential for practitioners so that they can deal with them in a prudent, appropriate and fair manner and in doing so advance the interests of their projects.

This paper identifies and examines the key factors or 'drivers' which in recent decades have resulted in the subject of stakeholder management and engagement acquiring the universal

interest it presently evidently commands amongst project practitioners. The ideas presented in this paper are based on the authors' extensive years-long research on project stakeholders as well as their own practical insights stemming from their direct and indirect involvement in projects in diverse fields over time, especially in construction and civil infrastructure (CCID) projects under which transportation, dams, energy, mining, building and facility construction and development, and other schemes of economic significance normally fall. Several books and research articles, project performance surveys, project management websites and other informational sources available in the public domain were also reviewed specifically for this paper and discussions were conducted with practitioners with decades of managerial experience on projects. Though this paper has little to offer project owners, planners and executors in terms of practical guidance about how to, or how not to, manage and engage their stakeholders, it shows why stakeholders have over time become such a critically important factor on projects and from which the need for effective stakeholder management and engagement as a means for ensuring a higher likelihood of success of projects in the field of CCID as well as throughout the entire project category spectrum should be obvious.

The authors' research has identified nine subject 'drivers' whose salient aspects in terms of their relationship with project stakeholders are briefly discussed separately below. Their order of appearance does not necessarily reflect their degree of importance:

Awareness: Probably the most important subject driver identified through this research is awareness. Project practitioners have become universally cognizant over time of the enormous influence project stakeholders, both primary (i.e. those stakeholders who have a contractual obligation or legal responsibility towards the project and are directly involved in it) and secondary (those stakeholders who do not have contractual obligations or legal responsibilities towards the project but are affected by it in some way), can wield on projects. This is especially true in the case of large and complex CCID-projects whose stakeholders, especially secondary ones, typically are characterized by a great diversity, inter alia, of interests, needs, desires, concerns and so forth, making the task of engaging them effectively in favor of the project immensely challenging, difficult and costly to achieve. Research clearly indicates now that stakeholders are a paramount critical success factor on projects and several published project performance surveys undertaken across the globe from time to time in various project categories by and large indicate that stakeholder-related issues, challenges and complications, more so than technical ones, are the prime cause of project failure. A survey of high-performing and experienced project managers also backs this finding up as do the results of an interesting research study undertaken in 2008 by a consortium of organizations in the European Union called NETLIPSE (Network for Knowledge Dissemination on the Management and Organization of Large Infrastructure Projects in Europe*)*. The NETLIPSE study of 15 large European transportation projects revealed the criticality of stakeholder management and engagement and claimed that "sustaining the relationships and measuring the effectiveness of communication with stakeholders can yield strong benefits for a disproportionately low amount of time and expenditure ... the essential lesson learnt in the NETLIPSE project is that dialogue, communication and cooperation are as useful as focusing on technique, contracts and other internal concerns … When comparing the NETLIPSE projects, it seems that those projects which dealt with stakeholders on an ad hoc basis experienced far more problems with their stakeholders than those projects which developed a stakeholder strategy early on in the project". Formal interviews as well as informal discussions conducted by the authors with many project managers, owners, consultants and other key stakeholders for this paper and as part of their overall research into project stakeholder management and engagement clearly echo this conclusion. Long is the list of large projects

across the globe which were prematurely terminated or which failed to achieve the intended results mainly because they failed to deal effectively with their stakeholders.

Awareness about the importance of project stakeholders can moreover be found in numerous written mediums as the authors discovered, prominent of which are, inter alia, books, book chapters, articles published in research and non-scientific journals, master and doctoral theses, articles in newspapers and magazines and project management websites and blogs, the publications of development financing institutions and international development agencies, transnational organizations, research institutes, government bodies and consultants and, off course, current as well as past project documentation and archives.

Awareness of stakeholder management and engagement is increasingly finding its way into the curricula of project management degree programs across the globe and many short-term subject-specific courses are being offered on the subject in addition to frequent hosting of conferences, seminars, workshops, trainings and other such events. Field experience is a direct and personal source of awareness about the importance of stakeholders and the need for carefully and prudently managing and engaging them on projects. Tacit knowledge too is an important source of awareness and one which can be particularly useful when exchanged between project practitioners. The broadcasting media has also contributed towards increased awareness about stakeholders. Long-running popular television programs such as Megastructures, Extreme Engineering, and Modern Marvels, whose episodes usually feature very large and complex CCID-projects undertaken across the globe, often include content about the projects' stakeholder aspects. And importantly, major professional project management associations responsible for developing and popularizing project management standards and benchmarks, such as the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), the International Project Management Association's IPMA Competence Baseline (ICB) and the Association of Project Management's Body of Knowledge (APMOK) all – and in addition to the many standards and benchmarks developed separately by national project management associations in several countries – increasingly acknowledge the crucial importance of stakeholders for projects and the need for their effective management and engagement.

Complexification: That projects in our contemporary age tend to be characterized by a far higher degree of 'complexity' than projects undertaken in the past is an undeniable fact. This has become especially evident with the advent of globalization since the 1970s. The notion of complexification as it applies to projects encompasses in the view of the authors at least four distinct dimensions - environmental, transformational, associational, and project-specific complexity - all of which have come about largely because of stakeholder influence.

Environmental Complexity relates primarily to the external environment in which projects are undertaken. Many factors have contributed towards the growing level of complexity encountered here. In the context of commercial projects for instance these include the opening up of domestic markets to foreign competition through elimination of the barriers to trade and investment. Consequently, competition to provide consumers with goods and services has grown considerably and consumers have generally come to expect access to higher-quality offerings at lower cost. Rapidly changing consumer preferences and increasing demand for customized and superior products has also resulted in products becoming obsolete more rapidly than in the past, necessitating significant performance, functional, aesthetic and other product improvements which are effected through modification or new product development projects undertaken with increasing frequency and over shorter time horizons. For organizations this can be quite challenging and failure to satisfy their stakeholders' (i.e. existing &

prospective consumers') needs, wants and expectations can cost them their competitive edge and possibly endanger their survival as the high number of firm liquidations and insolvencies in recent years appears to indicate.

Transformational Complexity differs from environmental complexity in that while the latter considers external factors and forces influencing projects, the former focusses on intra-organizational ones which significantly influence projects. Both complexity forms are related; environmental complexity stems in large measure from increasingly empowered and demanding stakeholders and competition and is mainly responsible for precipitating transformational complexity. Transformational complexity manifests itself in many ways for projects, inter alia, by attempting to reduce project cost and duration, increasing project adaptability, value and efficiency, focusing on quality, diversifying product and/or service offerings, and by effecting improvements in the organizations technological, process and institutional support infrastructure and frameworks for its projects. This in turn demands effective management of stakeholders by organizations in order to sensitize them to the need for such changes.

For its part, *Associational Complexity* relates to projects undertaken with substantive and sustained participation by two or more organizations. Projects under this category include (international) joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, strategic alliance initiatives, public-private-partnerships, and full or partial outsourcing of projects or project phases, activities or functions. Globally the investment in such undertakings has grown at an exponential level in the past few decades and annually runs into hundreds of billions of Dollars. Such projects pose numerous and significant challenges which makes the task of effectively managing and engaging their stakeholders especially hard to undertake. In particular, the difficulty of communication, trust and relationship-building between stakeholders across national borders, which necessarily involves dealing with multiple legal, public administrative and political systems, as well as handling the often significant differences in national, organizational and group cultures, mentality, attitude to work and time, business and social etiquettes, standards of professionalism, ethics and red-tape among many other stakeholder-salient considerations, constitute major hurdles. Empirically such undertakings have also been proven to be at a higher risk of project failure.

The fourth complexity dimension - *Project-specific Complexity* - relates to individual projects. It applies especially for CCID-projects being undertaken across the globe, which in our era of megaprojects and superlatives, are characterized increasingly by astronomical investment, long project durations, enormous technical complexities, quest for innovativeness, and specialized human, technological, material, knowledge and other resources and inputs provided by numerous stakeholders which often are based in several countries. Dealing with many and diverse primary (and secondary) stakeholders presents an enormous challenge and risk for projects and constitutes a compelling factor for practitioners to be more cognizant of the importance of their stakeholders and the need for managing and engaging them effectively.

Information & Communication Technology (ICT): Advances in ICT over the past twenty to thirty years have revolutionized the way we live, work and interact with each other. ICT has also immensely changed the way stakeholders interact with projects as well as the way stakeholders interact with each other. For projects this presents both opportunities and challenges. ICT has brought with it multifarious and very substantive benefits for projects

and, in particular, the way it manages its (primary) stakeholders. Project Management Information Systems, for example, enable storage of and simultaneous access by project stakeholders located in multiple project offices and sites everywhere to mammoth amounts of data and information in any digital format to an extent that was unimaginable when manual systems were previously used for this purpose. Project management software have evolved into highly sophisticated tools which are now indispensable on large and complex projects for project designing, planning, scheduling and monitoring as well as for performing other key functions, including program and project portfolio management. Groupware software allows non-collocated project teams to closely collaborate in performing complex design and other activities. CAD-software enables 3D visualizations of project facilities to be developed upfront giving project owners and clients a realistic feel of how their facilities will look on completion and the opportunity to push through design changes before construction commences. Virtual meetings conducted through video- und web-conferencing technologies have eliminated the need for personal meetings between project stakeholders and avoidance of the consequent high cost, hassle and time spent on travelling sometimes far distances for this purpose. And through ICT, projects can quickly and cheaply reach out to and inform stakeholders – both primary and secondary – about the projects in a favorable way.

At the same time, the application of ICT presents is accompanied by some major risks which can pose severe challenges for projects. Notably, these are the potential danger to the integrity of stored and shared information and exposure of confidential information, data loss in the event of inadequate or lacking system data backups, and an often observed tendency by users towards overreliance on such technology. The stakeholder communication process itself may be flawed resulting in the occurrence of communicational deficiencies, such as, over-, under- or miscommunication and an excess of or absence of communication on occasions. And even the best available ICT cannot guarantee the quality of information it contains and on which the efficiency, effectiveness and sometimes even the survivability of projects often hinges.

For stakeholders opposed to projects, which typically fall in the category of the secondary stakeholders, ICT presents them with an excellent opportunity to express their hostility towards projects easily, quickly and cheaply to a large, sometimes even global, audience. Negative information about many projects, especially CCID-projects, often finds its way onto internet websites specifically set up to warn the public about the demerits of projects and galvanize resistance to them. ICT is often used by advocacy groups forming 'coalition alliances' to leverage their respective resources to actively oppose large projects. Social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are being used increasingly to quickly spread hostile information - and sometimes even gross disinformation - about projects which may subsequently be quite hard or impossible for the projects to dispel.

Advocacy Groups: In recent decades advocacy groups have emerged as a potent force with global outreach to be reckoned with. For projects involving spatial development, which is typical of CCID-projects, particularly large, complex and high-profile ones, advocacy groups may and in practice often do pose a direct and immense challenge. Advocacy groups' vehement and persisting opposition to these projects stems from what they expect or perceive to be often substantive and permanent damage inflicted on entities (i.e. stakeholders) whose involvement in the projects in question is often involuntary and who often lack the means or resources to resist them themselves. Stakeholders typically deemed at risk by CCID projects and thus protection-worthy by advocacy groups include the natural environment, especially rivers, forests and wetlands, the fauna and flora which exist in the natural environment, and indigenous or marginalized people who often tend to inhabit land or areas coinciding with

identified project locations. Presently numbering several thousand across the globe, some advocacy groups have a thematic focus, such as the environmentalists 'Greenpeace' and 'Friends of the Earth', the indigenous people defender 'Survival International' and the anti-mining group 'MAC: Mines and Communities'; others were formed to oppose certain specific projects (e.g. oil tar sands) or companies (protestbarrick.net). A small number operate globally and possess a significant resource base; most advocacy groups however are small and active only at the national or, more usually, at the local level. Advocacy groups often pool their resources, knowledge, experience and influence to form networks or coalitions to oppose specific projects. From project perspective their often much publicized intervention is usually viewed as negative and invasive and many large projects across the globe have been severely affected, some significantly delayed or even prematurely terminated, by advocacy group intervention over time. Hence, acknowledging the role of advocacy groups on projects and understanding the reasons for their opposition and properly engaging them and the entities whose interests they seek to protect – all of whom are (secondary) stakeholders - is imperative for these projects if they wish to avoid public controversy and all the negative ramifications which this may subsequently entail for the projects.

The Media: In its printed, broadcast and online variants, the media is an extremely powerful shaper of opinions - and project stakeholder. It is through the conventional media – and with the advent of the internet increasingly through social media - that people usually first get to know about the existence of a project and the media exposure a project gets over time largely determines how it is perceived by them. Often the media may have a commercial interest in projects, for instance, when newspapers allocate page space to inform readers about project employment and business opportunities. More often though the media constitutes a detailed source of information over time about projects and their activities and the public mood and sentiment displayed towards them. Controversial schemes – which many CCID projects frequently come to be seen as – usually pique public interest and often receive extensive and prolonged media coverage. The media, however, is not homogenous; it represents a possibly wide spectrum of political ideologies and reporting by individual media entities normally demonstrates their respective ideological or journalistic slant. For CCID projects this may sometimes result in quite disfavorable and obviously unwanted publicity which may or may not be warranted. Negative publicity courts critical attention towards projects and may breed suspicion of and hostility towards them on a large scale which possibly may result in the intervention by other entities who in the absence of adverse reporting may have been unaware of the project or its developments or who would be disinclined to act against it. The media, therefore, can be considered to be a very important project stakeholder and it essential for projects to understand its importance as a reputation maker or breaker and engage it prudently. Practice shows that CCID-Projects have increasingly come to realize the media's role as a powerful stakeholder and force to be reckoned with, and are becoming more amenable towards developing specific media engagement policies, strategies and plans and adopting proactive measures to safeguard the interests of their projects.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): In recent decades the theme of CSR has attracted much interest and attention among organizations. CSR epitomizes the principle of reciprocity, namely, that organizations, usually commercial ones, must give something back to the society in which they are existing, operating and financially benefitting. The 3P's (Profit-People-Planet) concept, which appeared in the development literature in the 1980s, is increasingly being acknowledged and followed by commercial organizations and reflected in their respective CSR programs whose collective value globally runs into tens of billions of Dollars every year. Organizations are expected to focus not only on commercial gain or profit (i.e.

what they take from society), but also to give something back to it in terms of investment and spending on people and the environment, the latter two of which are universally considered important secondary stakeholders. The people or social component encompasses persons outside the organization who may or may not be affected, directly or indirectly, by its operational activities and/or by its programs/projects while the environmental component typically relates to the natural environment and its fauna and flora. Organizations undertaking CCID-projects in particular can reasonably be expected to invest relatively more in people and environment-focused CSR program activities because these projects usually tend to have a more invasive and negative social and environmental impact than projects undertaken in other categories by organizations.

CSR has been the subject of extensive research and most commercial organizations and corporations now have well-established CSR programs in place. CSR offers immense space for creative possibilities and the spectrum of CSR program measures implemented by organizations in practice has been observed in practice to be very broad. As CSR is essentially a stakeholder-focused scheme, its emergence and rapid growth and near universal acceptance over time lucidly indicates the recognition and importance which organizations, some more enthusiastically and vigorously than others, are according their stakeholders.

International Development: Tens of billions of Dollars are directly invested by regional and international development financing institutions every year in sponsoring 'development interventions' - mainly programs and projects intended primarily to expand or improve the civil and social infrastructure of poorer, less developed nations. Key players financing development interventions include the World Bank, the Asian, African, Caribbean, Inter-American, Islamic and North American Development Banks and the European Bank for Reconstruction & Development. Good stakeholder management and engagement policies and practices by funding recipients has become an increasingly important prerequisite for institutional borrowing over time and this importance is reflected in many forms, for instance, in the mandatory requirement for undertaking thorough environmental and social impact assessments on proposed programs and projects, on whose outcomes of which often the decision to grant or deny funding to the program or project in question hinges.

In addition to the development financing institutions, many other organizations were established in developed states to sponsor development interventions and provide technical and other specialized forms of assistance to developing states. At the global level this assistance too amounts to tens of billions of Dollars every year. Major international development agencies include USAID (USA), CIDA (Canada), UKAID (United Kingdom), GIZ (Germany), AUSAID (Australia), JICA (Japan), in addition to the European Union, and the United Nations system. As with development financing institutions, stakeholders – or 'beneficiaries' - have assumed significant importance in projects and programs sponsored by these organizations. Stakeholder acceptance of development-oriented programs and projects is viewed as increasingly crucial because it ensures a more efficient use of available resources, satisfies needs more effectively, and achieves results which are more sustainable. Consequently, such organizations are placing greater emphasis on measures aimed at involving stakeholders in the programs and projects which target them, notably stakeholder dialogue and consultation, and stakeholder participation in project or program need assessments, design and planning, execution, and monitoring and appraisal.

Empowerment: The ability of the public to influence CCID-projects has grown noticeably over time in both developed and developing countries. This increased influence is attributable

to several factors, in particular, democraticization and legislative and public administrative changes at the national or subnational level intended to enable citizens to have a greater say in schemes which affect them, and general reluctance at the political level to support projects which court and sustain a visibly high degree of public controversy and opposition. From project perspective, more community and citizen empowerment implies additional pressure on project owners, designers, planners and executors to take into consideration and adequately address the concerns and expectations of their secondary stakeholders. Failure to do so may possibly expose their projects to a higher risk of external intervention by other powerful stakeholders (public administration, courts, politicians) resulting in potential cost and schedule overruns, unwanted changes to the project scope, loss of image, or even existential threats in the event that permits, licenses or concessions granted are suspended, revoked or cancelled in the face of strong public hostility. The means through which secondary stakeholders can have their say in projects vary, depending on location. Oftentimes official permission for CCID-projects to go ahead goes hand in hand with the fulfillment of a gamut of conditions intended to compensate or benefit their secondary stakeholders financially, materially or in other ways. Mandatory Public hearings, for instance, give stakeholders the opportunity to air their general and specific concerns which the projects are expected or required to consider. In some places stakeholders can petition the public administration in support of or against projects and, when the number of petitions attains or exceeds a threshold level, even force unpopular projects to a halt or revision. Public referendums are a means which have in the recent past been used with success by local communities opposed to some major mining projects by large foreign corporations in Central and Latin America and, in the case of Switzerland, to prohibit the construction of mosque minarets. Legislation across the globe aimed in particular at protecting the environment has evolved substantially since the 1970s in response to universal concern at the environmental damage caused largely by CCID-projects. Independent Environmental and Social Impact Assessments are now virtually everywhere a prerequisite for launching CCID-projects. Other forms of assessment such as Cultural Impact Assessments, Health and Human Rights Impact Assessments, and Archeological Impact Assessments, which are being increasingly undertaken voluntarily or involuntarily in the feasibility phase of CCID-projects, also clearly reflect the growing importance and empowerment of the secondary stakeholders in relation to projects.

Stakeholder Theory: The term ‘stakeholder’ is relatively modern; it reportedly dates back to the early 1960s. As a body of academic knowledge Stakeholder Theory it even younger, having evolved extensively after the publication of Professor R. Edwards Freeman’s landmark book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* in 1984. Stakeholder theory commands much interest in the academic sphere. Many of the now numerous research articles discussing stakeholder theory are found in prestigious academic journals, such as, the *Journal of Business Ethics*. Though stakeholder theory is focused primarily on the corporate organizational context, its principles are equally relevant for managing as well as engaging stakeholders across the project category spectrum. Stakeholder theory encompasses three distinct dimensions: descriptive, instrumental, and normative. Descriptive stakeholder theory is basically concerned with identifying and analyzing an organization’s (or their projects/programs) stakeholders. Before formal identification can take place a definition of the term stakeholder is needed and in practice this is not a straightforward exercise because the definition chosen by a project can range from being very narrow to extremely broad and anything in between, with each variant having its respective advantages and limitations. Instrumental stakeholder theory views stakeholders as an ‘instrument’ which organizations (or their projects/programs) must attempt to effectively manage and engage, failing which negative

consequences may ensue such as reduced project efficiency and/or higher risk of project failure. Normative stakeholder theory constitutes the ethical and philosophical foundation of stakeholder theory. At focus here is why and to what extent organizations (or their projects/-programs) should manage and engage their stakeholders and whether there is justification in broadening the stakeholder concept to encompass non-human (such as fauna & flora) and inanimate entities (the natural environment). All three stakeholder theoretical dimensions are important because they make a solid case based on sound and logical reasoning and empirical observation for organizations (or their projects/programs) to deal with their stakeholders and which they convincingly show is not only an ethically desirable course of action but also brings practical and possibly quite substantive benefits to organizations (and their programs/projects) and helps pave the way for pursuit of win-win situations for organizations, their projects as well as their stakeholders.

Concluding Remarks

As the authors' research has shown, nine fundamental forces – or 'drivers' – collectively account for the phenomenal growth of interest which the subject of project stakeholder management and engagement has witnessed, in particular amongst project practitioners, over the past few decades. Though knowledge of these drivers per se offers little in terms of developing practical and robust strategies, solutions and measures essential for undertaking the highly complex and challenging task of effectively managing and engaging project stakeholders, educating practitioners about these drivers is nevertheless desirable in order to show them how critically important stakeholders have become over time as *the* main force to be reckoned with on projects, a fact which at the very least should ensure and sustain their interest in pursuing the best possible stakeholder management and engagement on their projects.

Recommended Reading

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Malcolm Orkar. *Stakeholder Engagement as Practiced in the UK Construction Industry: Investigating the Possibility for a Contingency Theory of Stakeholder Engagement in Construction*, VDM Verlag Dr. Mueller, Germany, 2009.