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1 External Stakeholder Management in Projects

Taking Stock and Moving Forward

Johan Ninan

1.1 Introduction

Across diverse sectors, ranging from infrastructure and urban regeneration to healthcare, communication, and policy implementation, projects rarely exist in isolation. They are embedded in complex socio-political environments, where actors outside the contractual project organization wield considerable influence over outcomes (Ninan et al., 2020). These external stakeholders include users, community members, special interest groups, regulators, and others, who do not typically sign the project's contracts, yet they may be the most profoundly affected by its delivery and operation (Mok et al., 2015). Their concerns, often tied to environmental, social, cultural, or economic impacts, emerge at every stage of the project lifecycle: from land acquisition disputes during initiation, through disruption and protest in implementation, to long-term operational grievances around lifestyle, health, and wellbeing (Sturup, 2009). While internal stakeholders can be governed through contracts, standards, and formal reporting, external stakeholders often exist beyond such direct mechanisms (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022). Their relationships with the project are shaped by permeable boundaries, varying degrees of dependency, and asymmetric power (Viitanen et al., 2010). They may lack legal obligations to the project team, yet they can decisively influence project trajectories, thereby mobilizing public opinion, shaping political agendas, or altering the legitimacy of a project in the eyes of the community and media (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019).

The stakes are high. Failure to effectively manage external stakeholder relationships can result in project delays, cost overruns, scope changes, or even cancellation (Ninan et al., 2020). In extreme cases, such as the Melbourne East–West Link project in Australia, sustained opposition has contributed to shifts in government policy and leadership (Sergeeva & Ninan, 2023). Conversely, effective engagement can align diverse interests, build trust, and create enduring social value, turning potential adversaries into partners in delivery. The literature consistently shows that external stakeholders are both critical to project success and among the most challenging to manage (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020; Ninan et al., 2022). Unlike internal actors, whose incentives, deliverables, and communication channels are clearly defined, external

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stakeholders bring varied and often conflicting objectives (Miller et al., 2017). These differences may be rooted in: 1) Material impacts such as compulsory land acquisition, environmental degradation, or altered access to public spaces, 2) Perceptual and emotional responses, such as fear of disruption, distrust of institutions, and opposition based on identity or cultural heritage (Bernsteiner & Ninan, 2024), or 3) Political positioning where projects become symbols in broader ideological or electoral debates. Such pluralism means that project teams operate in a contested environment. As studies have shown (Mok et al., 2015; Matinheikki et al., 2018), external stakeholders may articulate divergent and sometimes irreconcilable demands. Their influence can be amplified by coalitions, advocacy networks, and digital platforms, making stakeholder dynamics fluid and difficult to predict (Aaltonen et al., 2008).

Ignoring these dynamics is not an option. Resistance can escalate into organised protest, litigation, or political intervention, with cascading effects on budgets, schedules, and even the feasibility of delivering the original objectives of the project (Van den Ende and Van Marrewijk, 2019). At the same time, excessive accommodation of stakeholder demands can cause scope creep, goal displacement, and erosion of the project's intended benefits. Navigating between these extremes requires strategic, context-sensitive approaches (Capka, 2004).

Currently, global investment in large-scale projects is set to increase dramatically over the coming decades. Estimates suggest that more than USD 97 trillion will be spent on infrastructure alone by 2040, as governments and private investors seek to stimulate economic growth, meet climate and energy targets, and improve quality of life (Global Infrastructure Hub & Oxford Economics, 2017). This expansion will intensify encounters between project organizations and diverse external stakeholders. Moreover, the tools, forums, and expectations of engagement have evolved. Social media, citizen journalism, and open-data platforms have given stakeholders new avenues to mobilise support, disseminate counter-narratives, and hold project teams accountable (Williams et al., 2024). Simultaneously, international policy frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals have increased pressure on projects to demonstrate social inclusivity, environmental stewardship, and participatory governance.

Yet, as both academic literature and industry reports reveal, research on external stakeholder management remains fragmented (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020). Much of the project management canon still privileges internal governance mechanisms, leaving limited guidance for practitioners facing the messy realities of pluralistic, politically charged stakeholder environments. This book responds to that gap by taking stock of what we know about external stakeholder management in projects and charting a course for future research and practice. It positions external stakeholders not as peripheral actors to be 'handled,' but as evaluators and co-shapers of project legitimacy, value, and long-term success (Mathur et al., 2021). As Cornelissen (2004) emphasises, the viability of a project often hinges on how its deliverables are perceived by those who live with its consequences. Drawing on perspectives from multiple sectors,

geographies, and theoretical traditions, the chapters assembled here explore: 1) Practices, challenges, and opportunities for external stakeholder management across project phases, 2) Theories such as stakeholder management theory, sensemaking, and organizational power that illuminate stakeholder–project dynamics, 3) Emerging tools for engagement, including social media analytics, participatory modelling, and co-creation methods, and 4) Case-based insights into how governance frameworks, cultural contexts, and political landscapes shape stakeholder behaviour.

The remainder of this introduction chapter is organised as follows. Next, existing research on external stakeholder management, including sector-specific challenges and cross-cutting patterns, is presented. Following this, an overview of chapters in this book, situating each contribution within the broader conversation, showing how they collectively advance our understanding, is presented. Subsequently, the moving forward section focuses on identifying research gaps and emerging opportunities, drawing on insights from both literature and the cases presented in this book. Finally, the conclusion section summarises the key messages and outlines what readers can expect to gain from engaging with this edited book. In doing so, the chapter sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the strategies, frameworks, and tools needed to navigate the complex terrain of external stakeholder management in contemporary project environments.

1.2 Taking Stock

Efforts to manage external stakeholders in projects have advanced considerably over the past three decades, but our current understanding remains uneven, fragmented, and, in some areas, under-theorised. While there is broad consensus that such stakeholders can influence project success, the mechanisms through which their engagement should be designed, implemented, and sustained remain less clear (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020). This section takes stock of the state of knowledge across four interrelated dimensions: the nature of external stakeholder complexity, the theoretical lenses that have informed current research, the sectoral and lifecycle contexts in which engagement takes place, and the emerging methods and tools shaping contemporary practice. Each of these is described below.

1.2.1 The Complexity of External Stakeholder Environments

External stakeholders represent a heterogeneous set of actors, including directly affected individuals (e.g., residents facing compulsory acquisition), indirectly affected groups (e.g., businesses near a construction site), organised interest groups (e.g., environmental NGOs), and regulatory or policy bodies with indirect influence (Ninan et al., 2020). This heterogeneity brings challenges to pluralism and conflicting logics and power without contractual responsibility.

As highlighted in pluralism literature (Denis et al., 2001), these actors often embody conflicting institutional logics with differing views on what constitutes

legitimate ends and means. In megaproject contexts, such pluralism is amplified by scale, duration, and political salience (Gil & Pinto, 2016; Matinheikki et al., 2018). Stakeholders differ not only in their priorities but also in their interpretations of problems and solutions, making 'alignment' elusive. Additionally, unlike contractors or suppliers, external stakeholders are not bound by the Detailed Project Report, procurement clauses, or performance standards (Ninan et al., 2020). Yet they can mobilise influence through media campaigns, political lobbying, legal action, or disruptive protest (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2010; Ninan et al., 2022). This creates asymmetrical power relationships where the project team may depend on the cooperation of external stakeholders, while stakeholders have no reciprocal operational dependency. These dynamics contribute to the 'political work' of project management with orchestrating, negotiating, and sustaining legitimacy across shifting social terrains (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013; Söderlund et al., 2017).

1.2.2 Theoretical Perspectives Informing the Field

Current scholarship draws on multiple theoretical streams, each illuminating different aspects of external stakeholder management. For example, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997) provides the foundational classification of stakeholders by interest, influence, and salience, but often treats engagement as a static categorisation exercise rather than a dynamic process. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) emphasise how project actors interpret stakeholder signals and how narratives can shape perceptions of legitimacy, risk, and value (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021). Organisational power theories (Clegg, 1989; Lukes, 2005) highlight overt and covert dimensions of influence, explaining why certain strategies such as persuasion, framing, and hegemonisation (Ninan et al., 2020) are deployed and how they interact over time. Governance and institutional theory (Orr & Scott, 2008) situate projects within broader regulatory, cultural, and policy contexts, showing how institutional alignment (or misalignment) affects stakeholder relationships. Despite this diversity, theory use remains uneven as most project stakeholder literature has focused on internal governance and has under-explored the fragmented communities of external actors. This signals an opportunity for deeper integration between project management scholarship and organisational sociology, political science, and communication studies.

1.2.3 Sectoral and Lifecycle Variations

External stakeholder challenges manifest differently across sectors and project phases. They are evident in infrastructure and transport projects where governance frameworks, cultural norms, and regulatory settings shape external stakeholder engagement. Here, transparent and participatory mechanisms are critical. Even in urban regeneration and construction sectors early-stage participation of external stakeholders is important, especially with the challenge of simply identifying the full roster of influential actors in fragmented urban environments.

Natural resource and sustainability projects that experience resource-specific crises require targeted awareness campaigns, industry coalitions, and collaborative leadership. Other sectors include international megaprojects where external stakeholder engagement must adapt to host-country institutions and societal expectations. Across these contexts, lifecycle timing matters as the influence of external stakeholders often peaks at different phases depending on the issue. For instance, land acquisition conflicts are most acute in initiation; service disruption protests during implementation; and operational legitimacy challenges, such as service boycotts, are more important during operation.

1.2.4 Methods and Tools in Contemporary Practice

The toolkit for engaging external stakeholders has expanded significantly, moving beyond public hearings and printed notices. Contemporary methods include digital engagement platforms such as social media channels, interactive project websites, and live-streamed consultations, which enable two-way communication at scale (Ninan, 2022). Additionally, participatory modelling and visualisation are gaining prominence with tools such as digital twins, BIM-enabled simulations, augmented reality, and community co-design workshops helping external stakeholders visualise impacts and contribute to option development. Further, data-driven monitoring, such as content analysis of news and social media, provides near-real-time insight into public sentiment and issue salience (Williams et al., 2024). The adoption of these tools varies by sector and region, often constrained by institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and resource availability. These tools are only as effective as the governance structures and policy alignments that underpin them.

A synthesis of existing literature reveals several recurring patterns. Firstly, engagement is often reactive rather than proactive. Many project teams respond to crises rather than embedding stakeholder strategies from the outset. Secondly, power dynamics between stakeholders are under-analysed. While influence is acknowledged, few studies dissect the interplay of overt and covert strategies over time, and what it means for the future. Thirdly, context matters, but is inconsistently addressed. Institutional, cultural, and political settings profoundly shape stakeholder behaviour, yet cross-contextual comparative work is limited. Finally, the measurement of effectiveness is still weak. Success is often judged by output metrics such as the number of meetings held, rather than outcome measures such as the shifts in trust, legitimacy, or alignment. These gaps point to a need for more longitudinal, comparative, and theory-informed research that captures the evolving nature of external stakeholder relationships.

In short, while the field has progressed from simplistic stakeholder lists toward richer accounts of engagement processes, the study and practice of external stakeholder management remain fragmented. The next section of this chapter introduces the contributions in this book, showing how each addresses specific aspects of these challenges and, collectively, advances our understanding of how projects can navigate their complex external environments.

1.3 Overview of Chapters in This Book

The chapters in this volume bring together research and practice perspectives from multiple countries, sectors, and methodological traditions. Collectively, they explore how external stakeholders can be identified, engaged, influenced, and integrated into project delivery and governance, while also recognising the challenges and tensions that arise in pluralistic, politically charged environments.

First, the broad conceptual and methodological foundations situate external stakeholder management within the wider project management landscape. Halder in Chapter 2 titled 'Analyzing the Locus and Modus of External Stakeholder Engagement in Projects: A Systematic Literature Review' provides a comprehensive synthesis of the field using PRISMA methodology and TCCM/ADO frameworks. This review maps the "where" (locus) and "how" (modus) of engagement, identifying gaps in theory, context, and methods. Roberts and colleagues in Chapter 3 titled 'Transforming the External Stakeholder Engagement Process within PPP Infrastructure Projects' explore the link between effective engagement and success in PPPs through six case studies. They highlight weaknesses in current PPP frameworks and propose strategies for embedding robust stakeholder processes. Peñaranda-Correa and colleagues in Chapter 4 titled 'External Stakeholder Engagement in Complex Infrastructure Projects: Structured Approaches and Contextual Insights' examine governance frameworks and cultural contexts shaping engagement in large infrastructure projects. They show how transparency, adaptability, and participation can reduce conflict and enhance legitimacy. Kvåle in Chapter 5 titled 'Critical External Governance in Transport Infrastructure Projects' focuses on the front-end phase of projects, introducing a stakeholder typology and governance design principles to address legitimacy and decision quality early in the project lifecycle.

Secondly, the next set of chapters aims to identify and understand stakeholders by mapping, understanding, and interpreting the diverse communities of external stakeholders. Curran & Spillane in Chapter 6 on 'External Stakeholder Identification on Urban Construction Projects in Ireland' use mixed methods to identify 26 types of external stakeholders in Irish urban projects. They underscore the importance and difficulty of comprehensive identification of external stakeholders. Siva and colleagues in Chapter 7 on 'Stories from the Margins: Uncovering the Covert and Overt in Stakeholder Engagement through Critical Realist Narrative Analysis' introduce a methodological framework for uncovering hidden stakeholder narratives and power dynamics beyond formal project boundaries.

Thirdly, the next set of chapters focuses on the mechanisms, tools, and adaptive strategies for engaging stakeholders in specific project environments. Gimhani and colleagues in Chapter 8 on 'External Stakeholder Management (ESM) in Australian Road Projects: A Social Procurement Policy Lens' analyse 14 SPP initiatives in a Victorian road project, showing how policy tools can (or cannot) meet stakeholder expectations. Watkins and colleagues in Chapter 9 'Bridging Perspectives: Effective Governance of External Stakeholders in Complex

Projects' provide a literature synthesis and case study of a complex airport project, illustrating the tension between standardisation and context-specific adaptation in engagement governance.

Fourthly, the next set of chapters extends stakeholder management into international, environmental, and systemic contexts. Ma and colleagues in Chapter 10 on 'Multinational Enterprises' Participation and External Stakeholder Management in Megaprojects' address the 'liability of foreignness' in AEC megaprojects, proposing ESG-oriented strategies to build legitimacy in host countries. Puffer & Zadeh in Chapter 11 titled 'Toward Sustainable Sand Management in the Construction Industry: Leveraging Stakeholder Awareness and Engagement,' identify key decision-makers in sustainable sand management and emphasises collaborative leadership to accelerate sustainable material adoption. Martinez-Avila & Olander in Chapter 12 titled 'Place-Making through Stakeholder Participation in the Regeneration of Urban Areas' show how early participation in planning a community urban garden fostered shared ownership, addressed local needs, and enhanced legitimacy.

Each chapter thus reflects the themes outlined in this introductory chapter, such as the challenges of pluralism, the influence of context, the interplay of overt and covert strategies, and the need for theory-informed, practice-ready tools.

1.4 Moving Forward

The contributions in this volume make it clear that external stakeholder management in projects is at a turning point. We now have a richer understanding of who external stakeholders are, how they interact with projects, and what governance frameworks can facilitate constructive engagement. Yet, as the 'Taking Stock' section underscored, persistent gaps remain in theory integration, cross-contextual comparison, power analysis, measurement, and proactive strategy development. This section synthesises those insights into directions for advancing both research and practice.

1 Deepening theoretical integration: While stakeholder theory remains a useful starting point, the diversity of contexts represented in this book reveals its limitations when applied in isolation. Chapters such as Halder's (systematic review) and Siva et al.'s (covert/overt narratives) demonstrate that external stakeholder dynamics require a multi-theoretical approach combining institutional theory, governance theory, sensemaking, and power perspectives. Future research opportunities include integrating framing and sensemaking perspectives with governance models to explain how stakeholder perceptions evolve over the project lifecycle. Future research can also examine the interplay between overt governance mechanisms (formal consultation) and covert influence processes (agenda-setting, framing, network mobilisation). Additionally, future research can apply the concept of pluralism to better understand how conflicting logics, such as economic, environmental, and social, can be reconciled in project decision-making. There are also practical

takeaways here as project teams could draw on diverse theoretical frameworks when designing engagement strategies, ensuring they account for both structural and interpretive dynamics.

2 Expanding cross-contextual and comparative studies: This book includes projects in Australia, Norway, Sweden, India, Ireland, Singapore, and beyond, revealing strong geographical variation in stakeholder behaviour and governance frameworks. For example, Kvåle's governance design principles emerged from Norway's democratic planning culture, while Ma et al.'s strategies for MNEs address the challenges of operating in unfamiliar institutional landscapes. Future research opportunities include conducting cross-country comparative studies of external stakeholder engagement approaches in similar project types (e.g., PPPs in different political systems). Additionally, future research can investigate how cultural norms and institutional structures influence stakeholder salience and legitimacy assessments. Moreover, researchers can map how global trends such as de-globalisation, climate policy, and ESG reporting affect external stakeholder priorities. Practically, organizations should resist the 'one-size-fits-all' engagement templates and instead adapt strategies to local institutional and cultural realities.

3 Rethinking stakeholder identification: Curran & Spillane's mapping of 26 stakeholder types in urban projects, combined with Siva et al.'s attention to covert stakeholders, highlights the need for more comprehensive identification methods. Missing or misclassifying stakeholders early on can have cascading effects on engagement success. Future research opportunities include developing tools that integrate formal mapping exercises with digital monitoring of emergent stakeholders via news and social media. Additionally, future research can study how external stakeholder networks evolve over the lifecycle, and how 'late entrants' influence project trajectories. Future research can also explore predictive analytics for anticipating external stakeholder mobilisation before issues escalate. In practice, organizations should consider external stakeholder identification as an iterative process, with continual scanning for new actors rather than a one-off exercise at project inception.

4 Embedding adaptive governance: Several chapters (e.g., Peñaranda-Correa et al., Kvåle, Watkins et al.) emphasise the need for governance systems that can evolve as projects unfold. Adaptive governance acknowledges uncertainty, shifting priorities, and the potential for conflict escalation. Future research opportunities include testing governance design principles across sectors and project types. Future research can also investigate how adaptive governance interacts with contractual and regulatory constraints in PPPs and public projects. Moreover, researchers can study the trade-offs between procedural flexibility and accountability requirements. Practically, project organisations should institutionalise 'reflexive checkpoints' and 'parallel knowledge tracks' to keep decision-making responsive without undermining legitimacy.

5 Leveraging digital and participatory tools: The case studies in the book reveal a growing but uneven adoption of digital engagement tools ranging from participatory visualisation to social media sentiment analysis, to BIM-enabled co-design. These tools exist within a rapidly evolving technological landscape where, as Cunha et al. (2020) note, advances such as the Internet, metadata-generating digital systems, and pervasive social media have vastly expanded the scope and depth of 'constant observing' since Foucault's analyses in the 1970s and 1980s. Such capabilities offer both opportunities and risks: they can provide rich, real-time insights into stakeholder attitudes but also create arenas for misinformation, polarisation, or politically motivated mobilisation against projects. Future research opportunities include studying the effectiveness of different digital tools in building trust, not just awareness. Additionally, research can be conducted to understand the risks of digital platforms as arenas for misinformation or mobilisation against projects. Combining quantitative sentiment data with qualitative insights can build a fuller picture of stakeholder attitudes. Practically, these digital tools should be part of a multi-channel engagement strategy that also includes face-to-face dialogue and community co-creation spaces.
6 Addressing sustainability and systemic change: Puffer & Zadeh's chapter on sustainable sand management and Ma et al.'s focus on ESG in megaprojects point to a broader shift: external stakeholder engagement is increasingly about co-shaping systemic transitions, not just mitigating project-specific risks. Future research opportunities include investigating how engagement strategies can drive industry-wide sustainability adoption. Researchers can also explore the role of collaborative leadership in aligning diverse external stakeholder priorities for systemic change. Practically, projects should position external stakeholders as partners in co-creating sustainable futures, rather than as potential sources of opposition to be managed.
7 Measuring engagement effectiveness: As noted earlier in the 'Taking Stock' section, most evaluations still rely on activity-based metrics rather than outcome measures. Without clear indicators of success, it is difficult to learn from experience or justify investment in engagement. Future research opportunities include developing robust frameworks for evaluating engagement outcomes in terms of trust, legitimacy, alignment, and long-term relationships. Researchers can also design longitudinal studies to determine the persistence of stakeholder support post-project delivery. Future research can link engagement effectiveness to tangible project performance indicators. Practitioners need to shift from counting meetings to assessing whether stakeholder perceptions and relationships have measurably improved over time.
8 Building a forward-looking agenda: The contributions in this edited book show that effective external stakeholder management requires a multi-theoretical foundation, a context-sensitive and adaptive governance process, an iterative identification process, integration of digital and participatory tools, a commitment to sustainability and systemic transformation, and clear metrics for evaluating outcomes.

Moving forward, the challenge is not simply to refine existing practices but to reframe external stakeholder engagement as a strategic, value-creating capability in project delivery that is as integral to success as technical execution or financial management.

1.5 Conclusion

External stakeholder management in projects is no longer a peripheral concern; rather, it is a core determinant of project legitimacy, resilience, and long-term success. Projects across sectors inevitably generate social, environmental, and political ripples that affect communities beyond contractual boundaries. These external stakeholders, whether organised or diffuse, overt or covert, hold the capacity to enable, reshape, or derail project delivery. Their influence operates across the project lifecycle, from the initial framing of problems and solutions to the operational realities that persist long after formal handover. This chapter examines the state of the field, identifying significant progress in mapping engagement strategies, governance frameworks, and participatory practices, alongside persistent challenges such as limited theoretical integration, insufficient cross-contextual insights, incomplete stakeholder identification, and the need for adaptive governance and robust evaluation metrics. The section also underscored the potential of digital tools and sustainability-oriented engagement to transform the role of external stakeholders from passive consultees to active co-creators of project value.

The chapters in this edited book collectively address these gaps and opportunities. The chapters move from conceptual grounding and methodological mapping, through sector- and context-specific applications, to inspiring examples of collaborative place-making. This structure invites readers to navigate the field sequentially or to engage with particular themes most relevant to their interests. The book seeks to move research on external stakeholder management in projects forward by distilling cross-cutting insights from both the literature and the chapters into a forward-looking agenda. The way ahead involves embedding multi-theoretical perspectives into engagement design, conducting comparative research across diverse cultural and institutional settings, treating stakeholder identification as an iterative process, institutionalising adaptive governance mechanisms, harnessing digital and participatory tools within broader relational strategies, aligning engagement with sustainability imperatives and systemic transformation goals, and measuring outcomes in ways that capture trust, legitimacy, and enduring support. Together, these themes position external stakeholder management as a strategic capability that shapes not only the immediate success of projects but also their societal legacy.

What readers can expect from this book is a coherent, multi-voiced exploration of external stakeholder management that combines empirical case studies, theoretical development, methodological innovation, and actionable recommendations. Whether the reader is an academic seeking conceptual clarity, a policymaker designing engagement frameworks, or a practitioner navigating the

realities of project delivery, this volume offers tools, insights, and exemplars to inform and inspire. In bringing together contributions from different sectors, geographies, and disciplinary traditions, this book takes stock of where we are and charts a course for where we need to go. The task ahead is to ensure that external stakeholder management is not treated as a reactive function to be activated when conflict arises, but as a proactive, integral element of project strategy, which is capable of building trust, enabling collaboration, and co-creating value that endures beyond the official close of a project.

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